

Deathless 171

Chapter 171 (I) Breakout

It is a universal truth that every Martial Pathbearer has imagined themselves breaking free from prison at least once—if only for the novelty of doing so.

As someone who has escaped from multiple prisons, dungeons, and slaughterhouses, I strongly recommend against it. A common thing, as the prelude to breaking out, usually involves some amount of capture—and potentially torture, if you are unlucky. Even in the situations where you are deliberately trying to be placed in prison, you will suffer some harm, and that often marks you deeper than you think.

Such is where the fantasy dies and the true task of escape begins.

No prison is the same. I have been inside many. Some are easy to break free of, made from stone walls and guarded by feeble Adepts. Others are built personalized. I have departed no less than twelve dungeons designed specifically to cage me and only me. The acts of breaking free were ordeals like no other. But I also rose from them greater than ever before.

The main thing that will aid you in escape is breadth and depth. The more simplistic and straightforward your skills, the more vulnerable you are to containment. Legendary Physicality is tremendous for many things, but if you are locked in a sphere of shifting Dimensionality with no point of leverage, how does boundless might serve you?

That is the question. You must understand your cage—and master it well.

And if there are other prisoners present, it is best to recruit them as well.

If nothing else, you will be able to learn the prison's flaws and strengths from their failures.

-Valor Thann

It took six accumulated ripples for Shiv to finally peel the Orichalcum wall open. Once that was done, the insides of the crawlspace were revealed to the wolf-man and the Rebis. Shiv stepped aside and let out a breath. His muscles ached, but as another pulse of force vectors washed through him, his strength began to return and grow.

"There you go," Shiv breathed. "You wanted to take a look at the mithril supports." He quickly glanced around, preparing to leave context if the Ascendant showed up. Cripple remained absent, still handling the other Legendary-Tier prisoners.

While the Rebis twitched and shuddered, muttering things about not wanting to go back into the hole again, the wolf-man's mouth was slightly agape. He shot Shiv a look, and an awe-struck gleam lit his onyx eyes. "You are not lying, friend. You are a Legend in terms of strength. But that skill disrupted some of the magic as well. What is that skill?"

"Something most people won't ever get to have," Shiv replied.

The wolf-man gestured, and one of his drones whirled through the air. It pointed its crossbow at the nearest Orichalcum support, and Shiv noticed how some of the spell patterns infused within it had been severed along the middle. They bled mana into the air, like blood seeping out from a slit branch of veins, and Shiv wrinkled his nose. He resolved to be more controlled next time.

"This must be a blend of Physicality and Magical Resistance," the wolf-man muttered. "An odd fusion."

"Let's just say all the bad experiences I had with magic built up to a point of no return."

"And I am all the gladder for it," the wolf-man declared. "This is a skill that will aid us well." He took two steps closer to the mithril beam, and his drone's crossbow suddenly projected a beam of light.

Shiv narrowed his eyes as he observed the wolf-man's construct. It flapped its wings quickly, and flowing circuitry of mana danced along its chassis, infusing it with several mana types. Shiv counted the translucence of Psychomancy, the dense, rippling gravity that was common with Dynamancy, and the electricity that pulsed in sparks with the art of Aeromancy. The wolf-man was an accomplished mage. More than that, he was likely a magical engineer on top of that.

While the wolf-man examined the magic flowing through the mithril, Shiv studied him more closely. The automaton skulls lining the wolf-man's back were all well-preserved. Their optics were on, but they said nothing. Shiv listened quietly and heard the faint hum of electricity passing through each of the skulls into the wolf-man's armor.

And then all of a sudden, electricity sparked out from their eyes. A flash of forking bolts extended from the automata as they let out a unified drone. Shiv wasn't sure if the mechanical life forms were screaming, if they were still alive at all. But something told him that they were serving as conductors for one of the wolf-man's skills. The lupine prisoner had his hand against the mithril now, and a flowing chain of spells danced along his arms and down the length of his spine.

Soon, the spell patterns were circulating through each of the automaton's skulls. And as they flowed back into the mithril column, they returned changed somehow, with several spell shapes altered, and new extensions added to the overall pattern. Even the part that Shiv had accidentally split earlier had been repaired.

"What are you doing?" Shiv asked.

"I'm trying to analyze the spells infused within the overall architecture," the wolf-man said. "Now, please give me a moment. Talking is distracting."

Shiv fell silent, but he turned his attention to the Rebis. He studied the horrific amalgam of man and automaton from the corner of his left eye and found the Rebis glaring straight at his face. He might have a problem with other people looking at him, but he clearly didn't hold himself to the same standards, with how intensely he was glaring at Shiv's forehead.

The Deathless could see his own reflection along the middle half of the Rebis's face, and the experimental life form's human side was doing something between a grimace and a snarl. Shiv couldn't fully read his expressions, but he seemed well past the border of madness, as if he were always trying to capture where his thoughts were going, trying to catch up to what he was actually thinking in the moment.

"I am—sorry," the Rebis forced out. His voice was a sibilant whisper, and it ended with the faint hint of electronic distortion. Shiv almost met his eyes, but caught himself before he could make that mistake. He offered him an understanding nod instead.

"About what? You haven't done anything wrong to me."

"I pointed my wing. At you." The Rebis shook. His words were fragmented. His human side twitched, and he clenched his remaining teeth together. "That was rude, but you surprised me. I don't like to be surprised—surprised... surprised DON'T DO IT!"

"Neither do I," Shiv agreed, raising his hands placatingly as the Rebis's agitation suddenly surged. "So I can't blame you, especially considering our circumstances." His instincts and Psycho-Cartography guided him, commanding him to say the following words to scout out the Rebis's deeper nature. "We're both in the same hellhole anyway. If I can't understand you, who can?"

The Rebis didn't say anything at that. Instead, he stared even harder at Shiv before finally looking away. His movements were abrupt, as if he lost track of what his body was doing every few seconds. And with every motion he made, a flash of pain danced across his face. It might be because his human brain is partially fused with an automaton's processing system, Shiv guessed. He wasn't that versed in Practical Metabiology yet, but one thing he'd learned about most organic structures was that they were hellishly complex, with a great deal of variability between each individual, down to the cellular level.

Shiv wouldn't even know where to begin if given the task of melding flesh with metal to such an extent. Maybe if one were a vampire, and they had a Lineage Core to help cheat the harder parts, they could do it. But the odds of transplant rejection were far too high, along with the constant danger of infection. Prosthetic limbs weren't unheard of among Pathbearers, but a fusion this insidious...

Somehow, the Republic had managed it with the Rebis, but they clearly didn't succeed all the way.

Once again, Shiv found himself wondering what this poor bastard had done to deserve this fate. Or what these poor bastards did, he corrected himself. The Rebis had been two Pathbearers before, after all. At least that was what the vampire had claimed.

"I got it," the wolf-man declared, pulling Shiv from his contemplations. He took a few steps back and held up a hand. Atop his palm was a swirling, eight-sided pattern of Dimensionality. Shiv observed the pattern in detail and saw very specific symbols lining its length, and what looked to be a faint map of lines and dense clumps of mana forming micro constellations in between. "Alright," the wolf-man breathed. "Time to go through a few things."

First, he held up the dimensional spell he'd stolen from the mithril pillar. "I have the position of the nearest guard cube. There is a great deal of chatter flowing through the architecture. They managed to surround the Zenith Cube and the Zeroth Cube with supplemental units, meaning we're technically boxed in, but they still need to work their way through the surrounding blocks before they finally collapse in on us. However, one of the guard cubes, and that is the nearest one, is trapped out of position. Apparently, the Zenith Cube is lodged in place for some reason."

And that made Shiv grin. He folded his arms and shrugged nonchalantly. "Well, sometimes things just get stuck. Wear and tear and all that."

The wolf-man regarded him for a long moment before he barked a howling laugh. "Truly? Well, fortunate for us, then. So, here is my plan. I have usurped some of the magical spellwork connecting this section of the prison to the displaced Guard Cube. I will try to tap into the surrounding architecture once more and use the ambient Dimensionality mana stored within to help us transition directly to the guard cube. After that, we will try to seize it by force. I'll see us teleported directly outside so we're right next to one of its anchors." The wolf-man regarded Shiv and ran a long, red tongue across his pointed teeth. "I have a request."

Shiv had a feeling he knew what that request was. "You want me to go in first because of my Physicality?"

"That, and you strike me as someone with reasonably impressive Toughness as well. Our friend the Rebis here is blindingly fast and an absolute terror against any target he can see. However, he is exceedingly vulnerable to both Psychomancy and Technomantic attacks. And I wouldn't want the poor fellow to suffer an unjust demise after all the torment he's already survived."

Technomantic, huh? Shiv noted the wolf-man's affinity. He was starting to have a guess as to why the wolf-man and Rebis got along so well.

Shiv had no problem with going first, but a feeling of suspicion was beginning to build inside of him. He didn't know the wolf-man or the Rebis much at all, and this was still a prison. A lot of people could be here just because they were simply potentially dangerous, or because they'd offended the Ascendants somehow. However, not everyone was going to be that way, and Shiv would place good mithril on the odds of most people having done something to earn their imprisonment here.

Gotta tread carefully, keep as much of an eye on them as I do on the guards or Cripple. He found himself not quite as stressed as he thought he would be about the whole paranoia thing. Learning to wrangle the orcs had really helped with his anxiety, or simply given it a new standard no one else could meet.

"Fantastic," the wolf-man hissed, clapping his hands together. There came a clamor down to the right, and a series of shouts filled the air. Human shouts intermingled with sounds of battle. "No more time to waste," the wolf-man said. "Come then, let's see us away." He lashed his Dimensionality spell against the mithril pillar and immediately began weaving new shapes along its length.

"Hey, listen, you got a name?" Shiv asked. "Don't want to keep thinking of you as wolf-guy."

The wolf-man continued working, but he replied nonetheless. "You can call me Five. Five of Spades. As for the other details, you can think of me as a dabbler of many fields, but ultimately I am a thief, purveyor of rare goods and rarer individuals. And I only found myself trapped here because I went for the wrong score."

That gave Shiv something of a backstory to work with, but he still wasn't sure if he trusted him. Not until I have his full measure, Shiv decided internally.

"And if you're wondering why we simply cannot teleport out," Five added as he plucked at his dimensionality spell, "that's because we are caged by what I suspect to be among the greatest Chronomancy workings that exist on Integrated Earth. The prison itself is locked inside a massive sphere of recursive time. If we impact that without disabling the loop, we will simply find ourselves launched backward, with no way to break free."

At once, a pulsing waterfall of Dimensionality began spilling out from the mithril pillar as if the wolf-man had turned a series of faucets on. Static mana washed over Shiv and the Rebis, and Five was the last to be swallowed. A layer of pressure settled against Shiv, but he managed to keep it off of him using his pointed vectors. The Leviathan of Shapeless Tides cast his body alight. In seconds, the pointed stripes that lined him were black static as well, matching the Dimensionality.

A groan of effort came from the wolf-man. "Friend, just a request, but can you please let your skill recede for a moment? I don't think I can quite overcome your Magical Resistance."

Shiv winced as he realized he was instinctively resisting Five's skill. "There! There's something up there!" The voices of the wardens were close now. Shiv took a chance and let his vectors go slack. He continued cultivating more overflow, while also concentrating on building up his Toughness.

An Orichalcum pillar shot up from him and pushed through the ceiling of the Dimensionality. If that caused Five any difficulties, he didn't say. With a final clench of force, Shiv found himself drawn across space and surging upward.

Suddenly, he felt tighter, tighter than he'd ever been before. Shiv had never feared claustrophobia, but that didn't mean he enjoyed it much. And this teleportation was among the most claustrophobic

experiences he ever had. He was circulating along the insides of the mithril supports, and every few seconds, he found himself lurching at hard angles.

Despite the erratic movements, he had a faint sense of where he was. His recently gained Portomancy skill offered him another layer of spatial senses, and he felt at the dimensional pathways lining the mithril.

Portomancy 5 > 6

It was through this observation that he also understood why focus crystals were so efficient. They prevented any ambient mana loss. Every time someone cast, there was always a faint shimmer of magic, especially if they were channeling a lot of spellstuff. And that brightness wasn't a display of power, but a revelation of inefficiency. These focus crystals were like conductors and thresholds all at the same time. Mana didn't escape from them until a mage decided to finally unleash the spell.

And that had Shiv a little excited, for he had a new blade that needed to be tested as well. He hadn't even gotten to regard its status sheet yet. He tried holding it up to where his face was, doing his best not to stab himself with how turbulent this spatial transit was.

Equipment Obtained: [Bladewand of Fire's Path]

Tier: Heroic

Condition: Perfect

Composition: Focus Crystal; Orichalcum

Enchantments > Beamcast; Pyromancy 100; Dimensionality 100; Minor Plane of Fire; Will-Sharpener; Binding; Magic Amplification

Beamcast? Wonder what that does...

Minutes passed. Shiv found himself gliding from support to support, turning angle after angle, as he wondered how much longer it would take before they finally reached the guard cube. Without warning, a spatial pocket suddenly opened, and Shiv found himself dumped out within a new crawlspace.

As he landed in a crouch, he found himself staring at a dislocated gear that had been knocked out of place for some reason. Shiv guessed that was because he broke both the Zenith and Zeroth cubes. And so now this Guard Cube was lodged stuck here. A second thereafter, the Rebis arrived right beside Shiv. As he turned, he accidentally looked the man-machine hybrid in the eye, but only for a moment. He turned his gaze aside as soon as he could.

The Rebis twitched once.

His wings quivered slightly, and Shiv prepared to face the consequences. But no strike came. The Rebis turned away from Shiv, and he glided through the air, flicking his automaton wings more than his human ones. It seemed to prefer the right side more, and Shiv guessed that the mechanical part of him was probably more stable than the organic tissue.

Finally, Five arrived, and as soon as he did, he turned his head toward the Orichalcum walls separating them from the guard station proper. Before Shiv could say anything, Five's eyes flashed, and one of the automaton heads lodged upon his spine blared in tandem as well. Suddenly, the automaton head disappeared and fused over Five's vulpine skull. It was like the wolf-man had merged with the machine briefly, as a single, blood-red orb replaced its eyes while its teeth glinted, becoming pieces of pointed alloy.

That optical orb he'd stolen from the automaton projected a beam into the wall, but not a destructive one. Instead, Shiv saw life signs highlighted behind it, silhouettes of people standing in what looked to be a circular chamber.

"Six Pathbearers," Five said, "a full team of wardens. Looks like they just got back from a raid."

Shiv wanted to ask how the wolf-man knew that, but he decided to test his own Awareness more. He studied the postures and bodies of the Pathbearers, and he found some of them clutching their arms, one of them half bent over. He noticed how one had strings swaying from their limbs, strings that sparked. Wires, he realized. A damaged automaton.

Five directed his cybernetically enhanced gaze elsewhere and began to sweep the surrounding walls.

More silhouettes were revealed, but there were fewer wardens here than Shiv expected. Beyond those within the teleportation anchor, he counted four in a nearby room, equipping themselves with armor and weapons. And there were two more on the floor above. Shiv briefly thought they were sleeping, but when he saw the way that they writhed, he guessed that they were looking at an infirmary.

"We have a few options," Five said, sounding hesitant. "With this skill, I can also try a few other configurations. I have a skull capable of sonar-based detection, but it makes quite the loud noise. And once we use it, it will draw attention. Might you have any high-Tier Awareness abilities, perchance?"

"Farsight," Shiv said.

Five lowered his head. "I suppose we can't be good at everything," he muttered. "How about stealth?"

"You know what Creeping Void is?"

"Creeping Void?" Five said, surprised. "But that's..." He sniffed at Shiv, paused, and sniffed even harder. "I always knew there was a peculiar smell about you." A slight grin pulled at his bestial face. "Look at us. All three of us, somewhat human, but not quite. If we survive this, I must be bold and ask, how did one such as you come to gain the scent of a Tarrasque?"

"Seriously, you can smell that off of me?" Shiv asked, stunned.

The wolf-man flicked his middle finger against the tip of his alloy-fused nose. "I have special gifts, more than even most of my kind. But even without it, you stand out. You have been marked by the System in a most dire way, friend."

Chapter 171 (II) Breakout

The Deathless let out a grunt as he remembered that he was part of a hidden Quest, one which provided ample rewards to anyone that killed him. There was another reason why he was going to need to develop even worse trust issues.

"So, Sonar," the wolf-man began.

Shiv cut him off. "No, actually, tell Rebis here to hang back," he said. He didn't know if Rebis was even a name, but he felt that if he asked him, the amalgam might react badly. "Let me see if I can do this quietly and quickly. Maybe we can make this neat."

Five gave Shiv a look. "I know you are quite strong, my mysterious friend, but an entire team of Pathbearers is a considerable challenge, especially with most of the wardens here being High Masters or Low Heroes."

"Nah," Shiv replied with a smirk. "That just makes them interesting."

He tested his new blade then, pointing his wand-knife at the wall and channeling Beamcast. A narrow needle of flame splashed against the wall, and a building swell of Dimensionality expanded out from its center. A moment later, Shiv found himself injected across the space and emerging from the inside of the Dimensional threshold.

"Alright," Shiv said. "That's interesting." He placed a hand against the Orichalcum walls and prepared to breach.

But he didn't tell the wolf-man the other reason why he wanted to deal with them alone. It was Rebis. He had killed quite a few wardens in savage fashion, and though some might have deserved it, Shiv really didn't feel like making a larger body count than he needed to. Since his return from the Delve, he felt a burgeoning sense of responsibility that came with the power.

Perhaps not even responsibility. It was simply an urge not to break things when he could avoid it. In between my Unique Skills, Chronomancy, and Shapeless Tides, I should be able to put most of these Pathbearers to sleep.

He considered how he was going to insert himself into the guard cube. He knew that the Orichalcum would take him a while to breach, and if he stayed here too long, he might be due for a rendezvous with Cripple, whether he wanted to face the Ascendant or not. But Shiv's Legendary skill gave him new options as well. Options that allowed him to use his Chronomancy to the fullest extent.

Five and Rebis looked on as Shiv froze time, and to his surprise, a faint sheen of gold lit up over the wolf-man's eyes. More than just his eyes, the automaton heads lodged upon his spine were glowing with Chronomancy as well. Yet the wolf-man himself was frozen. A second surprise came in the form of Rebis.

The automaton half of the tortured experiment vanished, and the human portion of Rebis came alive with brilliant gold. He ceased being so humanoid and turned into a dense sphere of calcified time. Shiv could feel the radiating pressure pulsing out from Rebis. Rather than being able to move across time, he seemed to be purely shielded from it, encased in a barrier preventing Chronomancers from affecting him using their magic.

I guess everyone has to develop some defenses against Chronomancy if they live long enough, Shiv mused. The realization was why only a begrudging sigh escaped him as he noticed a series of Chronomantic auras lighting up the teleportation anchor through the Orichalcum wall.

In response, Shiv took things a step further.

While time was a weapon that many people in this prison shared, no one could leave the context of this world like he could. As soon as he did, he noticed how the Chronomantic shroud around Rebis dimmed, how the wolf-man's eyes flickered.

Confusion stuck to them as Shiv concentrated his force vectors along a single finger. He gathered eight full ripples and waited for a ninth before he drove his index finger through the Orichalcum wall. A hole was punched through. The metal screamed. Red and white essence exploded out of Shiv's body.

Seizing the moment of surprise, he jammed his blade through the opening and began channeling the Beamcast enchantment. A surge of fire splashed into the teleportation anchor. However, instead of spreading out like a plume to swallow all those present, it impacted the far wall as a needle-thin beam. As it did, the center of the flames ballooned outward, and while the outer layer of the magic was condensed by a rolling inferno, its core grew pregnant with the power of Dimensionality. Dimensionality that Shiv found himself being injected across.

In a sudden instant, he was teleported through the gap, just as a temporal warding ripple smashed into him. He anticipated this and drove his elbow up against the falling tide. A resounding crash followed, and Shiv twisted the crushing counter-magic aside. The wardens weren't expecting Shiv's sudden appearance. They were doubly not expecting him to shrug off the temporal warding.

Shiv found himself astonished that they were unaffected by the warding. The golden wave of time magic passed through them without damaging their Chronomancy fields at all. Shiv wondered if that had something to do with the magical frequencies. He could faintly feel these Chronomancers as well, though they were basically flickering in and out of place, as if throwing themselves across seconds of time.

The temporal wards slipped off Shiv and crashed through the rest of the structure at an angle.

Before any of the enemy Pathbearers could react, he was upon them, wrapping dense cords of Vitaemancy around their necks. He tightened his cords and hardened his Orichalcum, building his Toughness while circulating vectors along the red-white tendrils of mana. The wardens struggled, slashing and wrestling against Shiv's projected power, yet it was in vain. One of them fired a bolt of radiant mana at him—mana infused with fire and gravity.

Shiv activated his Nightswim Enchantment and splashed down into a puddle of shadows. The attacks missed, and he coiled more Vitae strands around them.

With every passing pulse of force that built inside Shiv, his grip grew tighter, and he cracked their Magical Resistances, allowing his Biomancy to be brought into the fray. A mana-hydra reared back and bit down on the wardens.

Once more, he pinched their arteries, preventing the flow of blood, and consciousness soon left them.

With them done, he directed more streams of vitae outward, choking the others in the room unconscious thereafter. The final Pathbearer was the hardest to deal with, though they were already injured. That was because they were an automaton. However, after years of living among automata at Blackedge, Shiv understood enough about their bodies to achieve a similar effect.

Humans, elves, and goblins could all be disabled in a relatively similar fashion, though elves were a little bit harder since they needed to be strangled longer. There was something about elves having twice the amount of veins as humans, and also a lack of need for prolonged sleep. Their unconsciousness usually didn't last that long, either, so it was better to keep an elf bound in the aftermath.

An automaton ran on power, and severing the cords of their power would usually prove fatal, same as a human. However, if one tightened the cords together and turned it into a knot, thus causing power flow inefficiency... Shiv did just that as he peeled the automaton's armor away with a wrench of force.

"Sorry about this," he whispered. "Probably not gonna be comfortable, or, if you're a piece of shit, I hope it feels really bad. Don't know which, don't have time to figure it out." He clenched the wiring and began tightening it into a bundle. When he was done, he broke a piece off the automaton's armor and lodged it through the messy knot. Soon, he could see sparks slamming into the underside of the knot where the electrical wiring ran from the reactor core at the automaton's heart to their head, where their processing unit worked.

With that done, he gathered the bodies together and released his Chronomancy field. Time resumed, and there came a rush of screaming wind that whistled its way into the anchor. Shiv looked to his right and then pointed his head down immediately as he found Rebis standing right next to him.

"You made them go to sleep?" Rebis asked.

"Yeah," Shiv replied. He turned the Pathbearers over, sweeping them using his Aegis of Assimilation to make sure none of them were dead yet. After that, he examined their armor. Most of them wore that standard prismatic plate. It was hard enough, Shiv supposed, but it wasn't harder than his personal Toughness Skill, and he had to break the magic powering the armor just so that he could choke the guards unconscious.

Besides, he already had a set. He was wearing it more to protect his modesty than to gain an additional layer of defense. As such, he looked around and finally settled on breaking the armor off the Pathbearer's bodies before deforming the pieces and turning them into mangled adamantine bands that held the wardens' arms, legs, and heads.

It would be an uncomfortable experience when they woke up to see nothing, since their helmets were now effectively collapsed over their faces, but Shiv left the organics with air holes and the automaton with their back pointing up, so whoever entered would notice the issue.

He directed a quick glance at the teleportation anchor's entrance. A dense set of Orichalcum doors revealed a sealed, vertical slit to Shiv. He began gathering new vectors of force, but Five strode past him. Once more, one of the automaton heads on his back flashed, and this time, instead of materializing a new cybernetic skull, the wolf-man's arm changed.

A swirling mass of Dimensionality turned around his limb, and his fingers elongated, with every claw becoming as if a fork, as trailing strands of static extended forth from his fingers. He traced the spell patterns dancing over the doors, and he began to turn his hand left and right.

Soon, the spell patterns inside the teleportation anchor revolved, twisting clockwise and then counter over and over again. Shiv observed what Five was doing and noticed how some spells were crashing into each other, patterns collapsing together, displacing mana into the air.

Finally, a few chains of flickering mana were extracted from the others, and they flowed over the door, sliding along the slit, whereupon they flashed. A second later, the door let out a loud hiss as it opened. The wolf-man took a step to his right and hid along the sides of the door. Shiv did the same and hissed as he realized Rebis was just standing there.

“Rebis, get out of the way, you’re going to be—”

But then Rebis was gone, blasting forward in a cloud of crackling static. This time, Shiv barely caught his movement, and he was fast. The Deathless barely tracked an indistinct blur as it left the room. The blur

cut out to the right, vanishing along the hallway, and a second later, Shiv heard the unmistakable sound of flesh being shredded and steel being sheared.

"Huh, what's this—ahhghghghghh!"

And then another ripping noise followed. A crunch punctuated the final gag, and the silence thereafter spoke of an ominous death. Shiv grimaced. He shot the Pathbearers he'd disabled non-lethally a brief look. "You bastards were lucky," he muttered under his breath.

"And he does not share your kindness," Five said. He regarded Shiv with a faint hint of appreciation. "Though I do like a neat operator. So much strength yet not so much urge to kill. How curious. But respectable."

"I have slaughtered people before," Shiv admitted. "I just don't think I want to get in the habit of killing people weaker than me or the ones who might not have it coming."

Five shot the captured pile of Pathbearers a brief look and simply shrugged. "Who am I to say? Some of them treated me quite well, proving to be my only subjects of conversation across these many years. Others were cruel bullies, but then again, I have done worse."

The wolf-man was proving an exceptionally hard individual to read. Even with Psycho-Cartography, Shiv had a hard time guessing the wolf-man's true ethical nature and the broader dimensions of his personality. A second later, a human head peeked out over the entrance and promptly dropped on the ground. It rolled to Shiv's feet, and Rebis suddenly materialized beside him.

"I killed the others," Rebis said quickly. "None of them saw me I didn't let them see me." The horrific mess of a merged Pathbearer twitched violently, and tears dripped down from his human eye.

Rebis, comparatively, was easier to understand, albeit in a psychotic kind of way. He was clearly unwell, constantly battling to control his own mind, and with a pathological need to go unnoticed. However, Five could look upon Rebis just fine, even touch him without any penalty. Shiv had a feeling he was building a sort of rapport with Rebis as well, but he wouldn't bet his life on staring the amalgamated Pathbearer directly in the face.

"Hey, Rebis," Shiv said, "I get you hate what most of these bastards did to you, but you know these are just wardens, right? Might just be a job to them. Maybe some of them don't have it coming."

Rebis's human side reacted negatively, his eye twitching. "They watched. They all watched me. They watched as I was cut away, as the rest of me was cut away. They watched. They watched. They did nothing. They knew and they did nothing and they watched."

Shiv pressed his lips together. What Rebis had was a grievance, one that he could somewhat understand. "Yeah, I know, I'd be pissed too, but..." Shiv trailed off as Rebis stomped on the head he'd just dropped. The skull cracked apart, and blood and brain matter spilled all over Shiv's ankles.

"You hate them too, you told me," Rebis breathed. "You said it earlier."

Shiv looked at the mangled puddle beneath the amalgamated Pathbearer's bare feet. Poor bastard, Shiv thought. The warden probably didn't even know what killed them.

"Yeah," Shiv replied, offering a slight lie. "I hate them too. But I want to get out. You want to get out of here, Rebis? You want to feel better?"

Rebis just stared at him for a long moment, and his automaton side briefly flickered with a faint glow. "Escape, I need to escape. We need to escape." He reached out for Five, grabbing him by the shoulder, clutching them more like a child would hold a security blanket rather than a Pathbearer would clasp the hand of an ally.

"Yes, yes, Rebis," Five said, patting the tortured Pathbearer on the hand. "Escape, that's what we all want, and that's what we're all going to get. So long as we stick together and try not to leave so much of a mess." The wolf-man offered Shiv a brief smirk, and the Deathless took advantage of that opening.

"I don't blame you for killing some of these people, but the bigger the mess we leave behind, the more they will keep coming after us." Shiv followed his Psycho-Cartography and used its guidance to formulate his following words. He knew one thing above all others about Rebis: the Pathbearer hated being stared at. And there was more than good odds that if he killed enough people, there would be warden after warden glaring at him as they tried to put him down. "The more you kill, the more noise we make, the more people they'll send after us. They'll all be pointing their eyes at you, Rebis, pointing their eyes, just staring over and over."

"No, no," Rebis whimpered, shaking his head. He clutched his skull, rubbing at the automaton side with his human fingers and scratching bloody gashes into his human face with his metallic claws. In a second, his human face healed, while his mercury-textured automaton skull was lined with oily fingerprints.

"Yeah, so we do this carefully, Rebis. You don't need to worry about doing it on your own, because I'm gonna help you. I'll make sure no one looks at you at all. But you need to listen to me and Five. Or things will get hard."

Rebis paused, and a flash of childlike innocence slipped through his twitching features. "You can do that?"

"Sure I can," Shiv said. "I can fuse their eyes shut, I can cast you in a blanket of shadow, I can keep their eyes on me while you slip away. You don't need to be doing all this on your own anymore. You're among friends."

"Yes," Five said, coordinating with Shiv to further calm Rebis, "among friends."

The unnatural Pathbearer shook a few moments longer before his shoulders finally sagged. His anxiety attack died down, and he stepped aside, revealing the doorway.

As they quickly swept the Guard Cube, Shiv took the opportunity to assimilate the biomass of the wardens Rebis had butchered. There had been 12 more Pathbearers within the cube, most of them trying to recover in the infirmary upstairs. There had been one Biomancer tending to their wounds. Said Biomancer had died when Rebis burst through the door and cleaved through their head at a 45-degree angle.

Rebis then stabbed them well over a few hundred times, so Shiv couldn't make out the details of the body. He didn't know what race or gender the Pathbearer was. The only thing he knew was that they were the team's Biomancer because they wore a diagnostic helmet. Shiv would have really liked having that piece of broken equipment.

Apparently, the helmet's enchanted visor allowed someone to gaze directly into an organic body to examine the organs, blood vessels, and cells on the inside. Shiv decided to keep that helmet with him for now.

When he found Can Hu again at some point, maybe it could be reforged with something else. That'd be useful for his own Biomancy.

With the upper level secured and all the bodies fed to his Aegis, Shiv came down to the primary living quarters of the cube. The layout of the place was economical. There were four rooms slotted in the corner of the cube, each with four double-deck beds. A total of 16 Pathbearers were intended to live inside this guard cube, and Shiv guessed there were probably a great many guard cubes sliding around this entire prison complex, especially considering how many guards he'd seen earlier. Connected to every other room and the upstairs by a long ladder was the primary living quarters.

It was a space that ran 40 meters by 40 meters, and there was a kitchenette here with a small pantry stocked with useful ingredients. They immediately began glowing in Shiv's eyes, and he felt the call of his Chef Unwavering skill demand he cook, demand he cook for months and months and simply not stop because he'd gone through so much bloodshed and conflict, and he hadn't had a chance to decompress all this time. His hands were shaking as he stared at the ingredients in the pantry.

He knew he didn't have time to linger; he knew that he needed to break out as soon as possible, but pulling himself away from the kitchen took more willpower than he thought he had.

Looking to his right, there were smears of blood painting the ground. A few Pathbearers had been debriefing at some of the living quarter benches when Rebis got to them. Their deaths had been quick, and Shiv had cleaned up their bodies quite well, but he guessed he'd missed a spot earlier. And then finally, there was the central mana control.

A large mithril pillar was lodged in the center of the room, and a concentric series of spell patterns swirled outward, forming something that anyone could manipulate. Five stood before these controls, and with a swipe of his claw, the ambiance of the cube changed, the light going from bright to a soft dimness. Rebis let out a shuddering gasp as the room grew darker. He appreciated that, and he offered a stuttered thanks to Five over and over again.

The wolf-man continued digging through the spell patterns. He moved different functions around and finally expanded on what looked to be a complex model of interlocking cubes. Shiv's eyes widened as he walked over immediately. "Is that the Well?" Shiv asked.

"Indeed it is," Five replied.

The structure of the Rubix Well comprised thousands of cubes. Their current cube was highlighted near the very bottom, and it blinked bright yellow at the edge of all the other cubes. It had been caught out of position when Shiv broke the Zenith Cube, and so it had been uniquely vulnerable to their intrusion. At the same time, there were strings of spellstuff extending out from other cubes as Shiv looked upon them. Online reports detailing casualties and requests for aid flickered and faded before his sight at rapid speed.

This prison was far more complex than he'd assumed. It was by far the most complex facility he'd ever been in, surpassing even the vast, sprawling structure that was Passage in Weave. Just the informational detail provided by a single guard station was more than anything possessed by Confriga's operation back at Gate Theborn.

Shiv took a few minutes to familiarize himself with the rest of the Rubix Well. The section of the prison he, Five, and Rebis were in was described as the Nadir. This was where they kept Legendary-Tier threats to the Republic, along with Zenith-tier prisoners, which included Shiv. "What's the difference between Zenith-tier and the rest of the Legendaries?" Shiv asked. "That's not a Skill-Tier."

Five blinked at him. "Zenith is a special circumstance. There is a substantial overlap between being Zenith and Legendary, but Zeniths usually also have Unique Skills or otherwise unique circumstances. They are for the Ascendants' personal attention, and thus our interactions with the Zenith prisoners are kept to a minimum." The wolf-man sighed. "And what a pity at that. So many of you are so very

interesting. I would have rather been in the Zenith Cube, to be honest. You made for a lot better conversation in your brief time here than most of my associates."

"That bad, huh?" Shiv asked.

"Worse than you can possibly imagine." Five let out a sad whimper. "I'm not particularly social for my kind, but still, I do like company. And when most of your company consists of hardened killers that yearn to butcher and maim but possess little else in the way of hobbies or culture, things can get rather droll."

Shiv couldn't imagine being cooped up in this prison for that long, and it only made him want to escape faster. But before he fled, he needed to find Bonk and his equipment, and that was going to be quite the challenge, considering how many cubes he had to sift through.

Furthermore, as he studied the Nadir, he found the Chronomantic loop that Five had spoken about earlier fused around it. The Nadir was connected to the rest of the well-shaped prison by a long, central spine. The structure extended through a brief empty space that was covered by an arcing wave of golden mana, until finally it threaded through the rest of the prison's architecture.

The levels above had larger cubes, but they, too, were surrounded by many smaller ones. Those were listed as guard stations from what Shiv could read, which meant that the lower-Tier prisoners were allowed to mingle together more with far wider spaces rather than these narrow valleys.

"Hey," Shiv asked, "you know if the prison up top is also made of Orichalcum?"

Five paused. "Parts of it I would assume yes, but for all of it to be made of Orichalcum..." He let out a chuff of doubt. "Orichalcum is a very rare metal, my Deathless friend. It's rare for any world, even ones

with a higher ambient mana threshold than yours. The fact that they spent so much Orichalcum to create this place reveals the staggering depth of your Republic's wealth."

"Alright, so there's a chance I could just punch straight through once I get to the top. It's just getting through that time loop that might be a bit of a challenge," Shiv said. He folded his arms as he considered his Legendary skill. He was strong, but a mana core was likely supplying the power to that time loop, and he knew that mana cores outputted more magic than any individual Pathbearer on average.

"I suspect that we might need to do something a bit risky," the wolf-man hummed. He pointed to a central cube and scattered the other cubes around it with a wave. "This should be the station that stores the mana core. We disable that, and it should be enough to halt the loop for a while. But it will be quite well-defended. We need a strategy..."

But Shiv wasn't just a Legend, he had Outside Context Problem, so he might not need to struggle through that either. He could just slip across. "Wait, we're on the edge," Shiv said as he regarded their guard cube once more. There looked like nothing to the left of his cube aside from the curving time-loop keeping them walled in. "What's out there?"

"I am not certain," Five admitted. "My knowledge of the prison has been put together by information that I overheard from the guards and gossip I gathered from other prisoners. If you're asking for my suspicions, I think we might be in a pocket dimension of some kind, but then again, maybe not. The amount of magic flowing through this place is substantial, and it taxes a core to sustain. If it were me, I might put this prison at the bottom of an ocean, or potentially even anchor it in the void somewhere in the local solar system, making sure that there's no way to reach civilization even if one were to break out of the facility."

Shiv nodded. It made sense to him too. He wanted to find out what kind of inhospitable place they were in before attempting to bust through. "Can you do me a favor, Five?" Shiv asked. "Can you find someone or something for me through this magical thing?"

"Spell Cortex," the wolf-man provided.

"Yeah, that. There's a certain big someone I want to locate, and the guards here took my stuff as well. I want my gear back."

Chapter 171 (III) Breakout

Five let out a wince. "Well, that will be difficult. There are a great many armories in this prison. Any number of guard cubes could have taken your equipment into their storage before transferring it to a specialized vault. I wouldn't be surprised if your equipment is already long gone."

That filled Shiv with a flare of brief anger. It wasn't that everything he had was irreplaceable, but good armor was hard to come by, but leaving here without his cape... That was going to be an arduous process. Shiv might need to do some mourning—

The insides of their Guard Cube flared red. A wailing alarm sounded as a voice droned through the room. "Unauthorized teleportation detected. Teleportation anchor compromised. Alerting nearby cubes." A string of mana circulated out from their current Guard Cube, and a few dozen others past the Zenith and Zeroth Cubes came alight as well.

Shiv grimaced. "What the hells just happened?"

But Five wasn't looking at him anymore. Instead, he was staring down the hall where the teleportation anchor was.

Dimensionality mana was spilling through the open door.

Shiv's insides tightened. "Rebis, wait—"

Rebis vanished from sight. Shiv halted time. The amalgam went still right at the doorway of the teleportation anchor. A dense dome of Chronomancy ballooned out from around him. Shiv was beside him a second later, and a whistling breath escaped the Deathless as he found his instincts rewarded.

There, standing within the teleportation anchor and looking like a lump of beaten meat, was Bonk. With Rebis just a meter away, Shiv wasn't sure how small a fraction of a second the orc had been away from death. His intervention had been nothing but timely.

The orc, meanwhile, had seen better days with how swollen his face was. More importantly, he was missing one of his legs, and his club had been replaced by someone's war axe instead.

But Shiv found a smile spreading across his face as he realized Bonk was wearing his cape, and if Bonk had his cape, he probably had his other stuff too, maybe even including his armor. Shiv shot the Chronomantically sealed Rebis a brief glance as he considered what to do. If he resumed time, he had little doubt that Bonk would be torn apart, and though the orcs cared little about dying, Shiv owed Bonk quite a few debts by this point.

He knew what the orc was and how he behaved, but still, Bonk had freed Shiv by causing a massive prison break. Without him doing that, Shiv might still be in an Orichalcum cell, facing down an Ascendant.

What's more, Bonk brought the cape back. The cape

. And it was with greedy delight that Shiv took the cape off the orc, and then promptly placed the orc in said cape. But before he did, he swept his Aegis of Assimilation through Bonk and consumed the orc's injuries. But upon doing so, he realized there was a problem.

The orc had multiple cancers building inside of him, likely from having consumed too many regeneration potions recently. That's not good, Shiv thought to himself. Not good at all. I can't fix those. He needs a proper Biomancer, or I need some more time figuring out how cancers work. At least I have my book back. Been a while since I had a one-sided chat with Ekkihurst...

With the orc stuffed inside his cape. Shiv felt his temporal shell crack apart as he quickly jumped to the left side of Rebis. A cleaving wing tore through the space where Bonk had been, and a long gash spread across the walls. Shiv winced as the Orichalcum screamed. It wasn't enough to split it clean through, but there was a deep scratch, and more than that, there was a lingering glow of bright-white mana that made Shiv wary of the Pathbearer's powers.

"Where?" Rebis cried out. "I felt them I heard them where are they! Where are they?"

"Right, Rebis." Shiv held out a hand. He spoke with authority but calmness in his voice as the tormented Pathbearer twitched. He looked at Shiv with an expectant expression, and the Deathless continued. "That was the person I was going to try and look for. He's the one that set you free! His name is Bonk. He's an orc. And you are not to talk with him."

And for the first time, as Rebis continued twitching, a glint of confusion showed in his human eye. "But why? Why can't I speak to him? Why can't I cut him down? Orc! Orc!"

"Exactly because he's an orc," Shiv said.

"What's this about an orc?" Five scrambled down the hall, looking at Shiv and Rebis.

"Ah, Insul," a loud voice sounded from the insides of Shiv's cape. "You found me, or more like I got lucky and found you. I'm surprised that you haven't left already. Could it be that you stayed here trying to find me first? You really didn't have to..."

Shiv didn't bother replying to the orc. "Alright, everyone, meet Bonk. Bonk, there are two other people out here. They're helping us get out."

"Making friends so quickly, I see," Bonk commented. He chuckled at the end, but Five now looked at Shiv with a wary expression.

"You said your friend is an orc?" The wolf-man let out a noise of discomfort. "You do know what orcs are like, right?"

"Yeah, I do," Shiv said. "Frankly, I'm probably more versed in their nature than you are. I'm, uh..." Shiv paused as he considered how much he wanted to tell. He decided he wanted to lay it all out in the open just to make things plain. "I am a Vaketh-Insul. I don't know if there's another one on Integrated Earth at the moment, but I know I am in charge of a good number of orcs. No, I don't intend to let him kill you. No, you probably shouldn't interact with him; otherwise, he might end up killing you anyway. No, Rebis, if you see the orc, you're probably going to kill him, because he's definitely going to stare at you."

"I will not," Bonk said, sounding like a petulant child. "I will not stare pointlessly unless there's a reason to stare."

"Oh, there's a reason for you not to stare," Shiv said.

"Now, why did you have to put it that way?" Bonk complained, sounding frustrated. "Now I really do want to stare."

"And that's why you're staying inside the cape for now."

"I break you out of prison, and this is the thanks I get?" Bonk spat.

"Yeah, it is the thanks you get," Shiv declared. "Because if I didn't give you this thanks, you'd be on the ground in several pieces right now. A Legendary Pathbearer nearly tore you in half."

"You would have fixed me, or I would have died, and then I would have gained a new nemesis."

"Bonk," Shiv hissed, clenching his fist in annoyance. "We don't have time for that right now. We need to break out." He turned back to Five. "Okay, I got my cape back and..." He paused. "Bonk, is my armor in there with you somewhere?"

"I tossed it in while I was escaping," Bonk called. "They didn't do a very good job confirming if I was alive or dead. That being said, I do have quite a good Play Dead Skill." The orc let out a sigh. "They didn't stop them from using my corpse as practice for their training, though. The guards here are extremely bored. I don't blame them. So I gave them something to do!"

"Explains your injuries," Shiv said. "Where did your tumors come from?"

"Ah, yes. I managed to get here by torturing a Pathbearer into teleporting to a nearby cube. It was a strange thing to torture someone for, but I was desperate, because beyond the cell I was using as a point of last stand were a dozen wardens that," Bonk coughed, "might have been a bit too much beyond my capability to contend with alone."

"Yeah, that's about as messy as I thought it would be," Shiv said. "Alright, well, at least you're still alive. And we're getting out of here. Rebis! Five! I got my stuff now, and I think I have a way to escape the time loop as well."

"Truly?" Five asked with incredulity. "Is that related to how you managed to slip out of my cell the first time? How I briefly forgot about your existence?"

Shiv's mouth fell open, but he didn't say anything. The wolf was strangely astute, and there was something about him that Shiv still couldn't place his finger on. "Something like that," Shiv said finally. "But anyway, I think we got our solution. We're right on the edge of the whole prison. I rip open the Orichalcum wall, and we go outside."

Shiv was interrupted by Bonk. "You do what?"

"I'll rip open the Orichalcum wall," Shiv said.

"You can do that now?" Bonk asked. "How?"

Shiv quirked an eyebrow. "With my Legendary-Tier skill, of course."

"You're a Legend now!" Bonk cried with a disbelieving laugh. "You're ridiculous, Insul! I lose track of you for a second, and now you're a proper monster."

"Yeah, I'll catch you up once we get out. So, the plan. I'm going to make for the loop and pass through it. It should work. After that, I'll either keep going up, or I'll just find a way to figure out where we are once we're outside of this cube." Shiv let out a breath. It seemed like a good plan to him. It saved him the trouble of trying to break out level after level or fight to the central mana core and disable it, as Five had suggested earlier.

"That sounds acceptable as a strategy," Five ventured, though he still seemed a little suspicious. "You are sure that you can avoid the Chronomancy? And we are to share a space with the orc?"

"Yeah," Shiv said. "Probably. Don't worry, Bonk will be uh...I can't say he'll behave, but he'll do what I tell him to—because he'll be rewarded after!" Shiv declared loudly.

"Oh, how wonderful!" Bonk said from within the cape. "What kind of reward?"

Shiv clicked his tongue. "I'll figure it out later. Five, I need you to keep Rebis's focus on you. Make sure he doesn't see the orc and try to avoid talking to him. I'll try to make the process quick once we get through the loo—"

A loud klaxon blared, and a psionic weight crashed against all of them. Rebis clutched his head and crashed down to his knees. He screamed in absolute agony, and Five flinched as if someone had struck him over the head with a hammer.

Shiv held the waves of Psychomancy back, but even then, he gritted his teeth. This was a substantial amount of power. More importantly, it was infused with faint motes of incandescence. This was divinely charged, and before he could do anything, a message was conveyed.

"Tanner Lowe of Blackedge."

Havel Van Stormhalt's voice ground against Shiv's mind like gravel.

"I understand that Cripple's words have gone unheeded, and that you've taken advantage of its kindness to escape. This is unwise, for we have returned. You are staying here in this prison. I see that you are on the verge of departing, judging from the cube that just had an uncontrolled Dimensional entry. You are staying here because Adam Arrow will be staying here, and if you leave, then you leave your comrade behind. It is a simple choice, a direct choice. I ask that you return to your cell and allow us to resume our interrogation. It will be..."

The City Lord let out a grunt of disgust.

"...conducted 'properly and ethically', this time. You have my word as well as the security offered by Cripple, if you so trust it over me. But should you try to run, and should you even manage to flee, then you will never see your companion again. Is this understood? I will not wait long for your reply. The Ascendants and the Auroral Council look forward to making your proper acquaintance, Deathless creature of Udrael's making."

And with that, the broadcast came to an end. By that point, Shiv had cracked a tooth by clenching his jaw so hard that his bones groaned, and the faintest traces of red were beginning to creep in from the

corner of his vision. His heart pounded inside his skull, and the ripples of force continued to build around him over and over.

Shiv breathed in. Shiv breathed out. Shiv used his anger on Psycho-Cartography as he considered what to do next. He was briefly startled by the noise of something impacting the wall, and as he turned, he found his partially regenerated Voidmantid armor crashing onto the ground.

"Well, looks like we're not leaving so soon, are we, Insul?" Bonk asked with a hint of mirth in his voice. "I think you're gonna need that for what's coming next."

Chapter 172 (I) Riot [I]

Alright. So. You've been captured. First thing about getting captured—tell no one you were a pupil of mine so I can be spared the shame, at least. There are Pathbearers that say getting captured is an inevitability if you live and fight long enough. They are full of shit.

Getting captured means one of a few things. The most likely thing it means is that you surrendered to the enemy, which is not ideal. If you're high-Tier, they might sell you back to your people or just kill you, depending on how existential the conflict is, so there is some room for negotiation.

Not so high-Tier? Well, things are going to get very ugly, and you probably want to think about escape or the other thing.

What do you mean, "what other thing", Harrison? What other thing could I be talking about? Yeah. I know no one wants to die, but if I give you a choice to finish yourself off or be kept alive by a group of psychotic Biomancers while they make leather coats from your skin, which will you pick?

It sounds ugly, but I'm going to put it plainly to you kids: Self-resolution is always an option. It's just a relatively unappealing one.

Now. Escape. If your enemy knows what they're doing, and you're high value, this is not likely. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but if I'm holding a Hero, I'm going to have my Biomancer disable their spine or other motor functions and then have a Psychomancer keep them trapped in a dream or something. If they're valuable enough to sell, they have good odds of being a nightmare to contain. Continued pacification is the way here.

If you're weaker, though, you might have a bit of a better shot. The main reason is that they'll probably not waste so much effort trying to keep you sedated. Most times, the reason a weaker Pathbearer is still alive is slavery. The Integration is a savage place, and if you got High Physicality, you make a good mule. Magic? Great. You're going to be made into a tutor or some kind of mana battery.

It's going to be hell, but it also gives you openings and opportunities. There is no perfect way to keep someone in bondage without dedicating a continuous amount of resources to the process. And in my experience, sooner or later, all systems tend to break down. Keep your eyes open and observe. Watch. Find the points of failure and use them to your advantage. I won't say your odds of getting out are good in these circumstances, but they aren't nothing.

Chaos opens a lot of doors. And chaos, you can always count on. The System loves it. And the System loves a good rebellion when one gets going. Just don't assume that this rebellion is guaranteed to end with you alive.

-Captain Harry Irons, TacStrat 101, Phoenix Academy

Shiv was going to do terrible things to City Lord Stormhalt's orifices with a knife. He wasn't sure how he intended to bring down the Avatar, but he would. He would find a way, and when he did, he would bring Stormhalt to the precipice of pain, and continue going until the Ascendants themselves came to beg on Stormhalt's behalf.

"Godsdamned felling false god—bastards, pieces of shit," Shiv growled as he slid his left arm deeper into his Voidmantid armor and tightened its unfolded architecture around himself.

The Voidmantid was still badly damaged. Parts of the midsection had yet to fully regenerate, and portions of its mycelial network were missing. As such, it wasn't as reactive as it was before, and Shiv felt like he was lugging a bit of weight. However, a few kilos were nothing to him now, since he was Legendary-Tier in terms of Physicality. The prismatic armor he stole from the wardens lay on the ground in crumpled pieces.

After a brief but violent stress release session that involved him crumpling the set of adamantine armor he wore into small balls, he found himself more capable of focusing in the aftermath. And now he moved on to the harder part, figuring out a way to extract Adam from wherever he was, while not getting recaptured by the Ascendants in the process.

"Need a new plan..." Shiv muttered. He strode up to the mana interface that Five was using earlier, and began swiping through the magical representation of the Rubix Well. The prison glittered before Shiv, and he located his cube once more. However, he frowned as he saw several other cubes closing in on them on the magically generated map. They were going to have company soon.

Frankly, Shiv expected an Ascendant to teleport in at any moment. He and the others couldn't stay. They needed a new direction—a place to go and regroup.

"New plan," Shiv repeated. He regarded Five and the Rebis. "I can help you get out. What I'm going to do is bring you in my cape, and then I'll take you beyond the boundary of the loop. I can probably drop you off somewhere safe, maybe in the lower security sections of this prison. After that, you should have an easier time breaking out, especially with me drawing the Ascendants' attention."

The wolfman tilted his head at Shiv and didn't say anything for a moment. "You would do that for us?" he finally asked. "I find that rather sweet, my good Pathbearer, but I think I'm going to have to decline."

That caught Shiv off guard. "What do you mean? It's the best I can do for you. I'm not leaving this place without Adam, and I don't think I can take you all the way out and get back before..."

Five held up a hand, cutting him off. "No, you misunderstand. I wish to follow through on this, just like you. I think Rebis would agree as well."

Slowly, Shiv began to understand what the wolf-man was implying. "You want to help me?" he said. He was more flabbergasted than touched. "But why? I'm practically going to commit suicide here. Well, maybe suicide for someone else. They want to recapture me for whatever felling twisted-shit experiments they have planned." Or maybe they'll eventually just mind-wipe or kill me to make a Legendary Avatar.

"Oh, I agree. It's terribly irrational," Five said, rubbing two of his claws together. "However, irrational is the very definition of being a Pathbearer. If we were rational, we would be scholars or stuffy magi hiding away in our fortresses, libraries, and towers. No, we left our homes. We left safety and ease, and we pursued our Paths. We are here for good or ill, and now I think it's time to make this our good and their ill."

"Here," Rebis said. His voice was a mix between a human snarl and a mechanical drone. "Here because, because Ascendants! We need to kill. We need to kill. Just kill and kill and kill." His wings were twitching. The air around him vibrated with that faint, white power, and Shiv was close enough that he tasted Rebis's capability for the first time.

Trails of sharpness flicked across Shiv as an oscillation of mana pulsed out from Rebis. The Deathless let out a grunt as his skin was opened and blood began to well. Instead of reacting violently, he was simply surprised. He hadn't been focusing on his Pillar of Orichalcum, but still, he was far tougher than he used to be. And Rebis had cut him open without even laying a wing on him. Just being near the amalgamated Pathbearer proved to be dangerous.

"Rebis, Rebis," Five said, trying to get him to calm down. "Compose yourself." He chastised the cybernetic Pathbearer and pointed a finger at him. The automaton skulls lining Five's back lit up, and a pulse of electricity jumped from the point of Five's digit into Rebis's skull. Just then, Rebis let out a crackle of discomfort, and he clutched his head. His automaton side was sparking and spasming, while his human parts twitched violently. His organic eye and his face expressed a moment of lucidity as his gaze cleared and his features softened.

"I, I'm sorry, I briefly..." he held out a shaking hand and stared into his palm.

"It's all right now, Rebis," Five said. "I know that they mutilated your mind, but I told you before, it's not impossible to control. The machine is bound to you, and you're bound to it. The more you fight its patterns, the more it will punish your brain chemistry. You need to try and maintain general alignment."

"It's hard," Rebis breathed, "very hard."

In that moment, Shiv saw Rebis for what he was. A man caged in his own body. An automaton caged by a man, but a man also caged by the machine-half he never asked for.

"It's hard," the automaton section of Rebis echoed. "We were once apart. We were never meant to be together. We made a mistake. We want to be apart again. We want to be apart again. We want to be apart again." And by the time Rebis repeated the third sentence, both the automaton and the man were speaking in unison, and the separation was lost once more. "Ascendants!" Rebis growled. "Need to kill... Need to split them. They did this... They did this..."

He stared straight at Shiv's face this time, and the Deathless looked back at him. But something told Shiv that it was the right thing to do. Though Rebis flinched, he studied Shiv and searched for something. Perhaps judgment, perhaps pity, perhaps any hint of emotion whatsoever. But underneath that helmet, Shiv stared on impassively. Life wounded everyone. Only Shiv emerged from death stronger. Everyone else paid a price. And whatever happened to the Pathbearers that made up Rebis was practically a half-death for each of them, coming together to make a full demise. "Ascendants. They must pay for this. They must pay for what they did to us, to all of us."

"Yeah," Shiv said, nodding at Rebis, "we all got a score to settle here." He shot Five a look, and the wolf-man's gaze was dangerous and predatory. He already knew that Five had spent a near-century in this place, languishing in that narrow cell when Shiv first arrived. Doubtless, the wolf-man desired his own retribution, and that made three of them.

Finally, there was Bonk, who really didn't want to be left out. "Since we're planning a new suicide mission, how about I volunteer to play the Vanguard?" the orc said cheerfully. "I think I need a new nemesis. With Sullain resolved, maybe a proper god will do. Yes, I do think that's superior to a Legend. Wouldn't you agree, Insul?"

"Makes sense to me," Shiv replied, "but I think we need a strategy or a plan. Just throwing ourselves at them probably won't go so well. I want to know where they're holding Adam..."

He trailed off as he tried to compile all the details that might be helpful for him. Planning an operation on the go was unwise, but he had Five of Spades, he had Bonk, and... Well, Rebis was likely not that useful in terms of the planning department, especially since he could barely control his own thoughts sometimes. But he was impossibly fast, and his glow-slashy skill might prove to be lethal against an unprepared Ascendant as well.

"Okay, let me lay out the things we might need, and you guys can add to it. I'll just be honest with you, I'm not the best at planning yet. Usually come up with a simple idea and go with my gut. If you got something better, just spit it out."

"Oh, don't worry, we will tear your worst laid plans apart," Five said, "and then we'll make them better."

Shiv offered the wolf man a nod. "So here's what we do know. We know that..." he paused. "Okay, we don't even know if Adam, my friend, by the way, is really here. Cripple said the same thing, but it said a lot of other shit as well. The Ascendants might just be lying to me, trying to lure me out so that I'll just surrender without offering any resistance." The Deathless sighed. "We need a way to make sure that Adam actually got transported into this place. Some kind of proof."

The wolf-man narrowed his eyes and tapped a claw against his snout. "I might have a suggestion there. We kidnap one of the wardens. They are tapped into the same psionic network. I tried to listen in, using the spell patterns flowing through the mithril earlier, but there was too much to sift through. Psychomancy is not my expertise."

"And automata are easier for you?" Shiv asked, trying to figure out Five's skills. "You got Biniaric Sovereign or something?"

The wolf-man gave Shiv a surprise look. "You're aware of it?"

"Yeah," Shiv said, thinking of Can Hu. "I have a friend that has that skill too."

"Interesting. And your friend is a specialized automaton built to compromise those of its same kind?"

"Kind of," Shiv replied. "But I'm wondering how you got the skill. My friend also told me only automata can get it, or at least its prior evolution."

The wolf-man gave a simple shrug. "When you dabble with machinery and get to fusing your internal biomatter with certain mechanical transplants, the System sometimes takes note and lets you proceed down an unusual set of evolutions."

Shiv didn't have time right now, but he wanted to ask Five how he'd managed to fuse his flesh with metal. Meat and foreign materials don't go together very well a lot of the time. Not without incurring some pretty nasty infections.

"Alright, some other things I need," Shiv continued. "If Adam's equipment is here, I might have a use for it. Mainly his Necromancy vambrace because I need—oh, shit, I can make a bomb!" At that thought, he began constructing a Vitae Golem. The white and red mana of his Unique magical skill began to swirl around him, and Five took a step back. Comparatively, Rebis leaned in closer, his human expression going from pained to fascinated in a scant second.

"Can I come out now, Insul?" Bonk said. "It's very awkward for me to be participating in this mock war cabinet while being hidden inside your cape. It also feels demeaning."

"Just a second," Shiv said. He took infusions from his Leviathan of the Shapeless Tides skill and then added Chronomancy, Vitality Drain, Inertial Overdrive, and Pillar of Orichalcum as well. With the final flourish, he detached the Vitae forged clone of himself and fought to keep his legs from shaking as a rush of weakness crawled through his body.

"What was that?" Five said. He stared upon the Vitae Golem and studied it with a rapt fascination, much as Rebis did. "The mana here, the composition of this clone of yours, I've never quite seen it."

"Yeah, there's a reason for that," Shiv said, but he didn't elaborate. "I have a surprise planned for whatever Ascendant comes to get us. Do you have a Necromancy Skill?" Shiv looked at Five first. The wolf-man shook his head, but he pointed toward Rebis, and just then, a flash of corrosive energy filled the air. The automaton half of the amalgamated Pathbearer came aglow with that decaying taint, and a spirit-tipped piece of its mechanical wings detached. A rush of green mana danced along the other wing, mutilating the propulsion with festering hues rather than bright white emissions. The fragment of Necromancy danced beside the amalgamated Pathbearer and trembled in the air, building up kinetic energy.

"Alright," Shiv said, holding his hand up slightly as he winced. "Don't release it yet, but if you can potentially prime it somehow or just keep it pinned to something—keep the Necromancy active inside of it—I'll have the golem slam into it when an Ascendant or some reinforcements arrive."

"What will that do?" Five asked.

"Make a pretty nasty bang. The kind that sets your soul on fire."

Five blinked. "You're jesting."

"Nope," Shiv replied with a vicious chuckle. "Orichalcum should be able to contain the explosion, or at least I hope it can."

"Only if there are people making contact with the soul-bronze," Five replied. "Orichalcum feeds off of willpower. Without it, it's scarcely harder than adamantite, and when given to someone with a weak will, often brittle."

"Good thing that one of the Ascendants will be standing in this room. Or several of them," Shiv said. It was a guess, but probably a good one. He couldn't see the Ascendants wasting wardens on him. Not unless they particularly liked killing their own soldiers. But by this point, who knew? They were already willing to do twisted experiments with Rebus and run what was effectively a nightmare prison. Wherever the hell this place was. He hoped it was at the bottom of an ocean rather than out in the void. The latter might prove a bigger issue.

I guess I really didn't know my own Republic at all, Shiv thought to himself. But that gave him another thought. He couldn't blame Roland for this, either. Roland probably had a better understanding of the Republic and the Ascendants than most Pathbearers or citizens. But Tran wouldn't have believed this, neither would Heather, nor most of the people at Blackedge, if he'd told them.

No, Shiv was firmly in the "knows too much about the Republic" category now. It didn't make him feel much better.

Just then, another warning klaxon sounded. "Unauthorized teleportation detected." Shiv saw motes of Dimensionality spilling out from the teleportation anchor, and a surge of incandescent mana followed.

And they're already here. Fuck.

"Shit. Figure the rest out later. Everyone inside my cape, now."

Rebis responded immediately, vanishing from sight. Shiv had assumed he was in the cape, but the floating shard of Necromancy remained in place, hovering where it was. By the time he turned to his Vitae Golem, Five dove into his cape as well. Bonk let out a loud cry of greetings, and Shiv had briefly heard Five call out to Rebis, telling him not to kill the orc. Shiv had ignored all that chaos for now. He activated Creeping Void to flood the room with darkness, just as an incandescent presence entered the room. The jingling of chains sounded aloud, and rather than Havel's reverberating basso, the gleeful laughter of a young girl greeted Shiv's hearing.

Chapter 172 (II) Riot [I]

He didn't spend any time questioning why a child was here. All he knew was that he was in grave danger, and he needed to leave now. He cast a telepathic command to his golem. "When the Ascendant gets close to you, touch the corrosive shard."

Shiv went out of context and stopped time. The world was cold. He didn't have that long before the last of his vitality was expended. But his Legendary Physicality flooded his Reflexes with more power than ever before, and Shiv found himself with plenty of time left before he dissolved down to nothing. He blasted toward a far wall, gathering ripples as he prepared to make an emergency exit. He considered directing his force vectors through his new blade, but realized that would likely just damage the enchantments.

Shiv was his own Magebreaker now, so he had to be careful with how he interacted with magic, but he could be far more aggressive when faced with enemy mages, and far more vicious when faced with any kind of spellwork.

Once more, he slammed his index finger against the Orichalcum, and a loud pop sounded as the red-gold metal was ruptured. White and red mana exploded off his body, and suddenly, a peculiar smell greeted him.

It was the smell of daisies and roses and strawberries mixed as one, and a burst of loud, childlike laughter filled the room. He looked over his shoulder, where he saw a human's silhouette burning through the dark of his Creeping Void as it strolled forward.

The figure resembled a young girl wearing what seemed to be a dress made of layered chainmail, and the way she moved was unnatural and quick. She was burning with divine power, so he couldn't get exact details from her, but the sight of her alone sent shivers down his spine. There was something deeply wrong about the girl, deeply wrong about the overflowing joy that escaped her in bursts of giggles.

"Oh, hello, Deathless," she said, as if a child greeting a personal playmate. She twirled a wicked-looking dagger between her fingers, one that was far larger than that Shiv carried right now. She pinched its tip between the index finger and thumb of her other hand as she skipped toward his Vitae golem. So far, she hadn't noticed him. He jammed the tip of his blade-wand against the hole he'd just made and projected his Beamcast out through the gap. He didn't want to find out what this Ascendant was capable of firsthand. Not just yet.

His golem had the same Vitae signature as he did, but even so, the masquerade didn't last long. His body pulsed, the notification marking him as the target of the hidden Quest flashing before his eyes once more.

Suddenly, the Ascendant was looking directly at him instead of his golem, and her eyes burned with violet mana.

"What's this?" she called out to Shiv. "Oh, are you trying to distract me with a clone? Very tricky, Shivy. Very, very tricky."

He channeled his Beamcast a bit longer, and the rest of his body was injected across the blade, flung into the crawlspace beyond. Just as he left, the insides of the guard station came ablaze with fire. Orichalcum was an interesting metal. True to Five's description, it hardened based on the willpower of the people connected to it. And it was then that Shiv remembered he'd left a group of wardens lying inside the teleportation anchor.

"Oh godsdammit!" Shiv growled at himself. "Fucking careless idiot!"

As he fully materialized in the crawlspace, a jetstream of soul flames slashed out toward him, and he dodged to his left. It still scored a hit on his helmet, ripping a clean gash through the outer chitin and bone-adamantine. Yet that stream of soulfire kept going. It sheared through the gears beside him, punching a hole into the next cube over.

A bright red hole was left through multiple layers of matter. It took a few seconds for the stream to punch a fist-sized gap into the Orichalcum of the next cube, and then the gears nearby started turning. A loud, screaming noise of straining metal filled the air, and the Deathless felt his inner ear begin to vibrate violently. That cube ground along the other side, but promptly dislodged as well as its gears were slashed in half by the persisting stream of soulfire.

As it derailed, another cube slammed into its side, or at least Shiv guessed that was what happened, considering the sheer force of the impact. More booms followed. The gears before him shattered and broke. One of the large mechanisms tumbled through the air, coming right at him. Shiv reached out with one hand and intercepted its kinetic energy. Pulsing vectors danced along his right arm, each rush of force spilling inside him as striped mana signatures.

A blossom of destruction erupted out of Shiv as he lost track of a few other overflow tides, and he cursed as he was suddenly launched to his left by the involuntary discharge. He crashed through an already damaged section of crawlspace before finally bouncing off a magically infused mithril pillar. As he recovered, he found most of the spell patterns lining the pillar fraying apart. Shiv's body had been like a falling axe head kissing a rope, and now only scant strands of mana clung together, unveiling the surface of the crystalline column.

"Whoa!" a voice came from Shiv's left. A small hand draped itself over his left shoulder, and the chubby face of a young, blond-haired girl leaned past him. "That was a pretty big gear you caught there with just one hand. And what was that trick you just pulled with that glowy clone thing of yours? You nearly cooked my skin." She rapidly breathed on a red patch splotching the top of her tiny hand.

The surrealism of the moment caught Shiv off guard, but he recovered with a sudden burst of force. He used his Shapeless Tides to pull himself away from the strange girl, and he laid eyes on her features for the first time. He knew her. Shiv had noticed her back when he was fighting for his life at Blackedge. She was one of the Avatars, appearing no older than eleven, hair styled in pigtails, and bearing a blade that had a strange darkness lining the length of the metal. She pouted at Shiv as he backed away from her.

"Well, that was kind of rude. We just met, and you're treating me like I'm a leper." She placed both hands on her hips, ignoring how she was driving her blade into her own thigh. "Stormhalt said you were a piece of hard meat, but I guess I just had to see it for myself."

Shiv looked on wordlessly at the Avatar as he prepared for battle. But before he launched himself at the girl, he spent a moment thinking. She managed to sneak up on me without me noticing at all, he thought frantically, before he caught a glint of Divination mana lighting her eyes. I don't think that my Outside Context Problem is quite the edge it normally is. But if I break contact with her, I still think I can get away.

The girl, meanwhile, ripped the knife out of her leg, and she twirled it between her hands again. "Oh, I know that look. Are you going to go for it?" She stared at his knife. "It's not a very good blade for someone who just became a legend, and you have to be a Legend. I know that skill." She covered her mouth and giggled. "I remember seeing these mana vectors on those mean old Void Leviathans that battered one of Cripple's better Avatars into scrap."

The girl sighed. "Poor Vendo. He was pretty fun. He always said he was ready to die at any moment. But I'll tell you a secret. I held him as he broke apart. I held him as he shook, and as the spark went out inside him." She slowly shook her head, and a faintly haunted look came over her. "The truth about Vendo is, he didn't want

to die. Not really. No one wants to die. No one. Except maybe for you. You come back, right? What does it feel like? Is it fun?"

By this point, Shiv was getting a terrible feeling about this girl, but something told him that he could use this moment to his advantage.

Psycho-Cartography: She's clearly interested in you, albeit she's interested in you the same way a cat is interested in batting a mouse to death. But keep her talking. Use your knife after you go out of context and cast yourself somewhere far away. We don't have much vitae left, but it should be sustainable if we dive in and out of our own soulstuff.

"So, you got a name?" Shiv started, keeping his posture defensive.

She threw her head back and laughed, and as she did, Shiv momentarily caught sight of her Ascendant. It was an ethereal figure looming tall over the knife-wielding child, and he felt his insides crawl as he saw the silhouette of the thing. The god had too many joints on their limbs, too many fingers to be natural, and their head was strangely deformed. Their body was overly thin, but still vaguely humanoid, and he found himself looking on and trying to figure out just what race the Ascendant used to be. It seemed like a mutated human or perhaps an extremely emaciated elf, but it was impossible to tell.

Then, the Ascendant faded, and the girl remained.

"I had a name," the girl finally answered, smiling. But only her lips curled. Her eyes remained cold and cruel, locked to him as if she was prepared to tear open his flesh at any moment. It made his skin crawl.

Psycho-Cartography: And that's not natural. You're being affected by an Intimidation Skill.

"I had a name," the girl repeated, and slowly her smile faded altogether. She frowned slightly. "You're not running away. You're no fun at all."

"You expect me to act like a rabbit?" Shiv asked. "Bounce off while you chase me?"

The girl nodded vigorously. "Yep. Can you do that for me?"

Despite everything, Shiv chuckled. "Yeah, no. Not much of a rabbit, and you're not much of a girl."

Once more, she pressed her lips together, and her expression turned inscrutable. "You know, it's very, very rude of you not to play along. You're a very rude boy, Shivy. Very rude." Slowly, she showed her teeth, and they reminded him of a shark's. They were the teeth of a carnivore. "I had a name, but most just call me the Waif these days. It's the only name I'll answer to. Just like you, Shiv

."

Psycho-Cartography: She knows about your history and that you refuse to answer to Tanner Lowe. Don't let her throw you off.

"Kathereine wants me to bring you back intact. Stormhalt, well, I think he wants you a bit hurt. You wounded his pride a little when you humiliated him in front of Hawgrave."

Shiv thought of what the Waif was talking about, and he remembered Stormhalt punching him and hurting his hand. "That's his fault," Shiv said. "If he had better Physicality..."

"I know, right?" the Waif interrupted him, suddenly standing right beside him, having moved between blinks. Shiv let out a gasp as a cold length of metal slid between his ribs, injecting a building agony that circulated within his flesh.

"Is something happening out there?" Five called out.

The Waif's head snapped to Shiv's cape, and her mouth opened slightly. "Oh, you're hiding some stowaways?"

This time, Shiv didn't turn away from the girl. He reached out and clutched her head. His force vector slammed against her throat as he caught her tiny arm as well. She tried to push against him, trying to force her blade deeper, but Shiv caught a slight twitch in her left eye as she found herself being driven back by his overwhelming force. He used his overflow tides all at once, and the girl's body let out several cracking noises. Her flesh parted, and her bones shattered.

Yet, as she bled, a crawling stream of darkness seeped out from her insides instead of blood. And rather than open wounds, the injuries he inflicted opened wider and became jaws—jaws that held rows of needle-thin teeth. Teeth that bit down on his arm and body, ground against his Orichalcum pillar, and tore all the way through. Shiv let out a cry of pain as chunks of his flesh were gouged away.

Between his Shapeless Tides and Orichalcum Toughness, he could only focus on one, and he chose the former. He didn't intend to fight this Ascendant. He needed to—

The Waif burst apart as his vectors tore through her. A flood of tangible darkness exploded out from her maws and swallowed him. It wasn't like his Creeping Void, though. Instead of this being a miasma, it was a tar-like darkness. Something that had weight. Something that flowed over him. That clung to him. That clenched him tight and refused to let him surface, like a black, ravenous ocean.

Everything went dark around Shiv, and he lashed out with his vectors. He could hear the others in his cape calling out, could feel a building heaviness pulling at him. But with every pulse of force he unleashed, he drove the thick darkness a bit back, and—

A blade flicked through Shiv's neck.

The suddenness of his end took him off guard, and so did the following two strikes.

Coldness swelled inside Shiv as his Vitae was instantly sheared down to a single fiber. He didn't even see the strikes coming. He didn't know where the Waif was, and she taunted him, her giggles ringing out from all directions, sounding like cascading bells that drowned the world in cruel mirth. Then he saw her in the darkness before him, features painted by radiating vitality, her shark-toothed maw stretching from ear to ear in a mad grin.

"You're a Legend now!" she cried aloud, bringing her blade high. "And you probably thought that made you special! But you want to know the thing about Legends? They DIE! They die just like every other Pathbearer! They die, because that's the difference between you and a GOD! And now, die for me again! DIE!"

Chapter 173 (I) Riot [II]

Ah! Dungeons and jails! My favorite places to socialize and meet new friends. Naturally, because I don't like being captured, I usually sneak in myself and hide in the walls.

You learn a lot of things when hiding in people's walls. You learn about their habits, what they like, at what times they touch themselves, how long they cry afterward, and also what they're good at.

It's how I recruit helpers for my heists these days. Because most people are in a dungeon for a reason, and some of them are actually more unlucky than incompetent.

If you can find those people, you can put together a pretty good crew.

Anyway, I just want to say thanks to all nation-states across Integration. Keep capturing the most dangerous, mentally deranged Pathbearers in existence. Saves me the trouble of hunting for them organically.

-Legendary Thief Velie Roberie, "Ms. Avarice"

Inertial Overdrive 130 > 132

Farsight 53 > 56

Strider of the Unbending Path 153 > 155

Golemancy 12 > 15

Outside Context Problem 88 > 92

Vitaemancy 95 > 97

And then she was upon him again, ripping into his Vitae with a primal howl. Shiv barely managed to follow the Waif's movements thanks to the aura of lifeforce painting her presence in the ocean of darkness. He projected a burst of tides out from his final fiber of white-red mana. A clash followed. The first of the Waif's blows was halted by his counterforce. A crack sounded as part of her blade fractured, and the Waif screamed.

Shiv couldn't tell if from pleasure or pain.

But then she was everywhere. A leash of vitality came aglow, connecting her to other spots in the crawlspace. A second thereafter, Shiv saw a dozen more life signatures coming at him through the chaotic darkness. With little vitality left, he couldn't dive out of context. I need to change things. This felling girl is a psychopath. I can't even tell if she just wants to put me down or take me alive anymore.

"Now this is getting fun! Fun! Fun!" the Waif shrieked. The other signatures rushed in, and the sheer speed at which they moved tore pockets in the tar-black substance still clinging to Shiv. He caught sight of more versions of the Waif. Yet, they were obvious replicas of her—made from straw and fabric, and leaking a pitch-black substance from their eyes and mouths.

Shiv halted time with his Strider of the Unbending Path. The straw replicas went still. The original Waif continued coming at him, slashing in wide and scything arcs. Yet, the Waif herself had changed. Her voice turned to an animalistic snarl, and he felt an inhuman hand burst out from the darkness and grip his Vitae tight.

The hand was too pale, too taut of skin to be human, and he could see the spasming veins underneath. He could see segmented bone greeting him, and through the dark, he caught sight of the Ascendant's face for the first time.

A golden aura veiled them, and the Waif was nested within their translucent body. The Ascendant's face was a splash of paleness amidst the choking blackness that held Shiv in place. The Ascendant was beyond deformed. One eye that was a little too large compared to the other, which seemed only half grown because part of the skull had been caved in or was simply pressed from the moment of birth. Its nose, missing cartilage, swung over its mouth, and between wide, drooping lips were pointed teeth that resembled needles more than anything else.

A foul odor assailed Shiv's nostrils. He thought his armor was feeding him pheromones, but then he realized he was dead. The Voidmantid armor wasn't on him right now. This smell was magical—and worse than that, it was a skill he couldn't ignore. The taste grew so foul that Shiv wanted to retch, but he lacked the organs to do so.

"You know how much it takes from me," the Ascendant whispered, their voice a ragged, haunting thing. They struck out twice more using the wicked dagger wielded by the Waif. Shiv noticed the cracks on the dagger were gone now. But more than that, he noticed a faint glimmer of divine mana radiating out from it. It took his full concentration to ward off the Ascendant's blows using his Shapeless Tides. With every flick, their blade vanished from sight, and cuts greeted his strand-thin body. Fragments of Vitae burst free from what remained of Shiv, but he kept himself alive by unleashing bursting vectors that halted and repelled the countless blows.

Shiv's concentration and speed were strained to the limit. With every burst of force he exerted, his Inertial Overdrive climbed—and that meant the strain on his body grew more severe as well. A Pillar of Orichalcum rose from the tendril that was Shiv, and soon the Ascendant's blade was carving shallow grooves into his Toughness Skill instead of him.

Even so, he was a breath away from true death, and he found himself trying not to plunge off a treacherous edge. If he failed to repel the Ascendant with his Reflexes and Physicality, then they would cut him down. If he didn't increase his Toughness, his Inertial Overdrive would see him destroyed.

Inertial Overdrive 132 > 133

Pillar of Orichalcum 231 > 232

Multi-Tasking 24 > 27

As the Ascendant flicked and slashed, bursting in and out of the darkness, Shiv felt his temporal shell begin to crack and knew his time was running out. A thrust came at him from the left—but vanished and materialized on his right. He had to revert himself a second in time to send his force vectors in the right direction.

A resounding clash shook the crawlspace. The Ascendant laughed. "You asked for a name earlier! So, I will greet you properly. I am Daughter the Deadly, and you are delectable prey. So resilient. So desperate to live. Ah, what struggle! What strength!"

As they spoke, Shiv caught sight of the girl, hiding inside the nightmarish Ascendant's transparent flesh. She was staring at him with malice and glee, swallowed by her possessing god, or wearing her god as if they were a suit of armor.

"Do you know how much I wish to just close my fist and end you?" the Ascendant continued.

The Deathless didn't reply. He didn't have the focus. Instead, he gathered more overflow tides to keep himself alive. The Ascendant was unrelenting, unceasing, unyielding. He needed to match them. More than that, he needed to turn this into an offense. If he could just touch them, he would be able to rip the vitality out of them and resurrect. But it was too much. His mind screamed with strain. There was just too much he had to do at once. His temporal shell was cracking; time was literally running out.

I need to counterattack, but the Ascendant's too fast. I'm not fast—wait, no, I'm a damned idiot.

Shiv was only relying on his own skills, but he had new shoes. Shoes that allowed him to sink into darkness. He didn't think it would help him hide from the Ascendant for long, but it should throw them off. The Ascendant's strikes grew frenzied—they were pushing him to the edge. Cuts lined his pillar. Shiv lost a few more pieces, and he shivered beneath the cold touch of impending oblivion.

He threaded a string of Vitae out through the blackness, groping for his corpse. As soon as he made contact with its feet, the equipment notification appeared before his eyes.

Equipment Obtained: [Nightwalkers]

Tier: Master

Condition: Stable

Composition: Shadeleather; Spatial Magic

Enchantments > Nightswim; Last Step of Midnight; Self-Mending

Shit... Please work...

He activated his Nightswim Enchantment just as his temporal shell broke. Time resumed. The straw-made Waifs came at him, trailing blackness from their screaming mouths. They tore through the air—and fell upon nothing as Shiv turned into a puddle of darkness. The Ascendant was gone. The Waif remained their place, but she was momentarily surprised by what Shiv just did—

And then doubly surprised as he used the shoe's Last Step of Midnight.

The tar-black substance unleashed by the Waif worked against her for the first time. It gave Shiv plenty of charge to perform a Nightswim, and it also gave him an instant teleportation option to further confuse his adversary. The Ascendant was fast—but Shiv's Inertial Overdrive sounded like tides of debris slamming together time and again. He was faster than he had ever been, and that was all it took.

The moment of surprise gave him a microsecond for an opening. His amplified Reflexes allowed him to seize the advantage.

He flung himself forward. His Orichalcum column slammed against the Waif's body. The moment of surprise ended. She cleaved—but he was already draining from her. A surge of vitality flowed from the Avatar into Shiv, and he went from a string to an explosion of spreading Vitae.

For the first time, the Waif cried out in genuine agony as she was sapped—and Shiv kept draining from her. He resurrected. Her cut went wide, and he seized her arm. Instead of crushing her body again, he used her as a shield against her straw replicas while draining her continuously.

"Not fair! Not fair!" the girl shrieked. "You surprised me!"

Shiv chose to drain more of her vitality in place of a response. She kicked and writhed, and though she was impossibly strong for her size, Shiv was beyond conventional strength. Shiv converted the force she exerted into overflow tides and used that to accelerate both of them through a horde of her straw replicas and into a mithril support beam.

A resounding crash followed. She tried cutting him again, but he had her knife hand in a vice grip. He pinned her against the mithril pillar and continued savaging her vitality. The Waif let out a weakening groan, and then it was Shiv's turn to grin viciously.

"Who's the prey now?" he snarled.

Her eyes snapped open, and as she grinned, her teeth fell out, replaced by the needle-thin teeth the Ascendant had. "Still you!"

Shiv's instincts screamed at him to flee. He left context just as the Ascendant's ethereal form ruptured out from her body and ripped through the space he once occupied. The Waif exploded into a blast of all-consuming blackness, and as Shiv tried to navigate his way out from the miasma, his pulse quickened as he realized the Ascendant had vanished without a trace.

Shit. Shiv grimaced as he tried to figure out his next steps. Getting out of here himself was a good idea, but something told him that Daughter the Deadly wouldn't be the easiest to shake. Regardless, he accelerated through the crawlspace and made for the next cube over. He couldn't stay in place.

As soon as he passed through the thick tar left behind by the Waif and a few gears, he surfaced from his soul to preserve vitality. His senses were screaming at him, and he used the enchantments on his Voidmantid armor to try and track the Ascendant and her Avatar. That immediately proved to be a mistake as the foul odor in the air made Shiv pull his helmet open and vomit.

System, it's like a dead rat took a wet shit down my throat, he thought, gagging. Just what kind of bullshit skill is this?

Shiv took a second to regain his bearings. He was fighting an elusive foe, one that hid and swam through the darkness around him. Seeing as he just threw up, he expected the Ascendant to be on him once more. He did have one edge, though: He used his Vitamancy to track their life force. Ascendants and Avatars had a pretty big weakness in that they were infused with so much vitality that it was impossible not to see them if they were—

A flash of pain spread across both of Shiv's hamstrings. He swiped his Aegis of Assimilation down, expecting to find his tendon split, but the truth was worse than that. He tried to assimilate the injury into his Biomancy field, but he couldn't.

Darkness was leaking from his wounds. As he looked down, he saw a small hand extend out from his injuries, wiggling its fingers at him in a casual taunt. Just then, another two cuts painted paths of pain across his torso and cheek. The blows cleaved through his Orichalcum pillar and armor like they weren't there at all.

A third attack came, but Shiv got lucky—noticed it coming. A rush of life force went from impossibly fast to a lesser but still possessed of a staggering velocity. He tried to intercept her slash but failed to turn in time. Yet, rather than slitting his throat, the dagger dug a few centimeters out of his Orichalcum pillar and went no further.

Understanding passed through Shiv. He realized her skills were amplified by stealth. If he didn't notice her, she was faster, stronger, and her cuts passed through his armor as if it wasn't there.

Unfortunately, this epiphany didn't mean he had a solution. Especially when she burst out from one of his tar-infested wounds. Shiv cried out in pain as the Waif drove her blade upward. A length of metal was digging chunks out of his pelvic bone in an instant. By the time he noticed her and allowed his Toughness to take true effect, her cut had glided halfway across his taint and was resting against the underside of his privates.

Shiv didn't wail in agony, but it was a near thing. He left context once more. As soon as he did, he found the Waif displaced from inside his body, and that made him feel a special kind of disturbed. Whatever that skill was, it allowed her to invade his flesh after cutting him.

"Come the felling fuck on! Of all the places you can stab me! Really?" He groaned as he bled from a variety of wounds. He examined his injuries to make sure he wasn't oozing blackness anymore. It seemed that he needed to be within context for that skill to work. That also meant he could feed these wounds into his Aegis of Assimilation to mend himself. "Can't let her keep cutting me. To hell with this, I don't want to be anywhere near her."

He pointed his Shapeless Tides toward the nearest Orichalcum wall. Part of him wanted to fight to show the Ascendant that he was no prey, that he was a Legendary Pathbearer who could contend with a god. But that was just pride talking. Pride and his ingrained need to brawl. I have to be smarter than that now. She's not going to let me drain her like earlier, and her skills are too godsdamned strange. I need to get out of this fight before she accidentally kills me for good.

Just then, the Waif blinked into existence right behind him. Shiv nearly jumped out of his Vitae.

The Waif's eyes burned bright violet, and she stared right at him. Her head was tilted, and it was only then that Shiv noticed he was looking at an entirely different girl. She was far gaunter than the last one and had an enduring frown instead of a cruel smirk lining her face.

Suddenly, a sick feeling came over him as he considered a few horrible possibilities: Just how many Avatars did Daughter have? And were these girls willing Avatars?

What the fuck even is the Yellowstone Republic...

If he didn't want to stick around before, it was doubly worse now. The Ascendant's Intimidation Skill was grinding against Shiv's psyche. He was probably more resistant than most, but that didn't make him immune either.

He pulled hard in the opposite direction of his Inertial Overdrive, and Shiv hissed as he felt part of his hip get wrenched out of place. He fed that into one of his Biomantic mana-hydras as well. Once more, he really needed to improve his Multi-Tasking Skill. He wasn't capable of fighting at maximum capacity if he couldn't improve both his Toughness, manage his Inertial Overdrive, and gather more overflow tides at once.

A Legend wasn't made a Legend by a single skill, but a concert of supporting skills allowing the Legendary Skill to operate at peak capacity. Every time he got stronger, the lack of these supporting skills grew more and more evident.

Multi-Tasking 27 > 28

His Vitae shuddered like a candle in a snowstorm. He was spending himself fast to stay unnoticed by the Waif, but she clung close to him with a curious expression on her face.

"What's that, my Ascendant?" the new Waif muttered. She didn't sound nearly as happy as the last one. "Oh. O-okay. I'll keep following them. Whoever they are." Her lip quivered, and Shiv felt the faintest connection form between him and the brown-haired girl. It was like wisps of air swirling between them, but the sensation was unmistakable. "I-if you're out there, c-come out! Daughter the Deadly demands it!" She bit her lip and clutched a new, even more wicked dagger, the blade shaped like a snake in motion, with two shaking hands.

She was afraid. She didn't want to be here. And she didn't have a say.

Immediately, Kathereine was dethroned as his least favorite Ascendant. Shiv was coming for Daughter's head for whatever sick, twisted shit they were doing to these girls. The last Waif might've been a little psycho, but the new one just seemed like a scared kid. She could be faking, but from the way her eyes darted about, like she was trying not to jump at every shadow, Shiv had a feeling she was genuinely terrified.

Psycho-Cartography: It's likely also a deliberate tactic used by the Ascendant against you. The last Waif didn't die, so they were swapped out for a reason. They're trying to figure out your moral limits. The last girl was more psychotic animal than human child. This one seems to be a victim, and we don't have it in

us to murder a kid with our own two hands. Or maybe that's just what we tell ourselves. Whatever the case, we need to get out of here before Daughter deepens her offense. Get into the next cube and find a place to break contact or create a mana storm inside here.

He looked around for an easy exit, and he noticed how the gap left in the neighboring cube from the stream of soulfire earlier was growing even larger. Bits of Orichalcum dripped down as bright white slag, and Shiv pointed his Bladewand of Fire's path in the direction of the opening, and a dense thread of Pyromancy speared out from its tip.

Right now, things get messy.

Chapter 173 (II) Riot [II]

Shiv exploded free from his Outside Context state. The new Waif flinched back in surprise. Shiv responded by halting time so he would end up facing the Ascendant instead. Once more, their disfigured form materialized over the girl in a splash of golden mana. They let out a scream of displeasure at the sight of Shiv and blurred out of sight in an instant. Shiv tried to follow where they were going, but he also had to continue projecting his Bladewand's teleportation, leaving him stuck in place.

"Godsdammit—"

"Here I am!" a cheerful voice rang out from behind. There was a flick of motion under his chin, and the Deathless gurgled as his neck was opened. Another cut bit into his vertebrae, but he went out of context before it could sink all the way in. His Bladewand flickered as his teleportation was interrupted. Darkness crept along the corners of his vision, but Shiv managed to have his Biomancy absorb his wounds first.

He surfaced a second later in a two-pronged attack. His Biomancy crashed hard against the Ascendant's Magical Resistance—and while they shrugged that off, he palmed their head and channeled every vector he had. He felt a satisfying crack pulse through their body, and inside their translucent form, the new Waif writhed in the Ascendant's stead.

"It hurts! Hurts so bad!" she screamed.

Shiv's stomach did a flip. Hurting the Ascendant was fine, but if he couldn't attack them directly even with time frozen—

Blind luck saved Shiv from another death. One of his overflow vectors was washing up along his head, and it crashed against a blade that descended on his crown. A spike of agony exploded atop his skull. The Deathless cried out in pain and horror as cold and slimy fingers curled around his face. He didn't know who was attacking him—how they got to him—but he felt a length of unnatural metal dig a deep groove along the curve of his skull.

A horrific rattling noise filled the insides of Shiv's head. His teeth clacked together in his mouth. He turned, trying to knock the girl aside, but his right arm stopped moving. Then he felt something wrong with his left leg as well. A half second thereafter, he realized a problem. Both his right arm and left leg had been taken from him, clean slices severing them free of his body. But that wasn't the worst of it.

While there was one Ascendant standing in the air before him, grinning happily, two others had joined her. Two others that looked exactly like them, wielding the same knives. And they were holding on to Shiv's limbs now, clutching them tight to their misshapen bodies as if they were trophies. And then they started chewing on his severed limbs, feasting on the blood with ravenous delight.

"What the fuck?" Shiv groaned. He was more disturbed by the cannibalism than bothered by the pain.

"Cute trick, little bull," the Daughter before him said. She pointed to her dagger, and Shiv noticed that a section of it was chipped. "Guess it serves me right to underestimate a Legend, even a baby Legend."

She blew a raspberry at him.

Shiv tried to activate Outside Context Problem again, but an unseen blow took him under the ribs. He managed to convert some of it, but the bulk of the force punctured one of his lungs and sent him slamming against an Orichalcum wall.

Shiv fought to recover. Another lashing strike to the temple brought an end to that. Whatever attack he couldn't perceive also ignored his defenses entirely. His vision doubled. A rush of bile climbed up his throat as he tried to keep his nausea down. He lashed out with two cuts of his own, but remembered he was missing the requisite limb.

He managed to sink into his Vitae again at the last minute. And it was barely enough to save his life. The Ascendant's dagger punched through where he was and left a deep hole in the Orichalcum wall behind him.

Shit. Not good. Not good at all. As he fed his mana hydras and restored his limbs, he saw a small army of Daughters with Waifs lodged inside them darting from place to place. Most flickered in and out of sight. They vanished behind mithril columns and failed to reappear. Shiv counted twenty of them at least, and they were faintly tied together by a shared chain of vitality.

He had no idea how Daughter functioned, but his odds against one were messy. Twenty? He was going to get massacred. He looked around, trying to find that soulfire-induced opening on the Orichalcum surface he lay against, but he found himself utterly lost. He was running out of Vitae fast too.

When he re-entered Integration again, he was probably going to die. And fast. After that—

Ideas. I need... I need...

Something exploded out from the Orichalcum five meters beside Shiv. It was around five meters in size and resembled a large, incredibly muscular humanoid with dozens of tentacles sticking out from its head. Shiv did a double-take. Is that a giant felling Vulteg?

“NO ONE CAN HOLD HIGH MARSHAL URRI TATTALO!” the Vulteg bellowed.

Around ten wardens clung to the large Vulteg’s body as he smashed through a mithril pillar. The wardens screamed out to each other, and a few were still shaping spells, trying to stop the octopus-headed brute from getting free.

“Hold him!”

“Prepare the net! Animancers on the ready!”

“Psychomancers on standby!”

Just then, Shiv noticed a dense weave of Animancy mana pulsing along Urri’s body. It was interesting seeing a faint blueness seep into the Vulteg, but Shiv decided to take this chance and escape through the massive rupture the Vulteg had made. Shiv promptly dropped a temporal anchor as well, not sure what was being prepared. His instincts screamed at him to give himself an out or an easy option to reposition later.

Okay, Shiv, breathe. New plan, new plan. What the hells is our new plan?

His thoughts were racing. He was almost out of vitality and being pursued by a multi-bodied cannibalistic Ascendant that used children as Avatars and meat-shields while prison went to hell around them.

In a strange way, Shiv was flattered. Back when he was Pathless, he would have been impressed if he managed to overcome a small group of lesser vampires in direct combat. Now it took the Avatar of a false god to send him on the run. That aside, Shiv was in some deep shit. He needed to figure out how to shake the Ascendant fast, because he didn't think he had many lucky breaks left. His Shapeless Tide, Vitality Drain, and Outside Context Problem were the only skills he had of use against her.

Maybe Vitality Drain as well, but he doubted she would make the same mistake again. Alright, think Shiv. What can we do? What do we got?

He considered calling for aid, but he didn't think Bonk would be particularly useful in this fight. But what about Rebis? He's a lot faster than me, and his cutting aura might be able to keep Daughter at bay. Still have no idea how her skills actually work, or how many bodies she even has, though.

He'd counted twenty of her earlier, and he wasn't even sure if those were her actual bodies. He'd broken her Avatars a few times, and all that did was leave him drowning in a dense, tar-black substance. So he couldn't attack her directly, and he couldn't evade her for long. Maybe Rebis could give him some help, but even with all that, the only means of attack he had left was draining her vitality, and that meant getting close over and over again.

Wait. Shiv blinked. Vitality Drain? I don't need to drain her. I just need to make things more chaotic down here. A mana storm might make it hard for her to track us at all. I can keep the magic at bay with my Legendary Skill.

And so he emerged from his Outside Context Problem state and called out to Rebis. "Rebis, come out. Need a hand here. We got an Ascendant on our ass."

And in an instant, the amalgamated Pathbearer was right beside him. He trembled. His wings were expanded wide. And for a moment, judging from the fury on his face, Shiv was worried that Rebis might cut him down first. But he maintained his self-control.

"Ascendant! Where?" Rebis choked out.

"Watch the gap," Shiv pointed behind at the opening they'd just slipped through. They were at the very top of a prison valley. Below, there were hundreds of wardens trying to contain dozens of prisoners, and things were going badly. Shiv could see a maelstrom of fire, one that reminded him of the Pyromancy Skill Confriga had possessed, tearing through the narrow channel below. Several wardens disintegrated outright.

There's no frying pan in this place at all. It's all fire by this point. Well. Time to add to it.

Shiv started draining from reality. If he couldn't lose the Ascendant in the crawlspace and the cube was a trap, then he needed to create his own chaos. Make things even more murky. Make things even more confusing. Shiv was about to order Rebis to do something, but then the Pathbearer burst into motion.

A loud ring of clashing metal sounded, and Daughter cried out in frustrated surprise. One of her bodies tumbled past, split into many parts. Blackness trailed out from her, but the blackness itself was severed, shredded with that radiant mana that infused Rebis's form.

“NO! Why! Why is he here?”

“He can’t be! Must be returned! You cannot be allowed to escape! You are Enoch’s toy!”

The Daughter screeched at Rebis from beyond the gap, and more copies of the Ascendant flooded in. Rebis was moving faster than Shiv could perceive, and a clash between blurring light and impossibly fast shadows began.

"Right, you got this," Shiv said, slightly awestruck by Rebis's Awareness and Speed. He continued draining, focusing all his power on ripping the veil of existence wide open.

The last time he'd sundered reality badly, a Legendary-Tier phoenix had slipped through, and something like that might just be what Shiv needed right now. With its radiating presence, it might be able to fight off Daughter, and with his own Shapeless Tides, he could keep himself alive in the meantime. However, he would settle for a mana storm if nothing else. He could dive into that and potentially lose contact with Daughter in the carnage.

A hiss of something made Shiv flinch to his right. A ringing clash of metal on metal deafened his ears. As he turned, he saw Rebis facing two Daughters. The amalgamated Pathbearer’s wings were extended, and both Ascendants were impaled. Yet, they bled away into black tar, and embedded on the edges of Rebis’s wings were dying children.

Shiv looked at the faces of the Waifs—at the fear and the tears.

He turned away and tried to keep his Berserk under control. What the Daughter did to these Avatars, how they used the children, was beyond what Shiv could accept. We'll deal with that later. We have to—

The wall beside Shiv exploded again. The massive Vulteg returned. "NO ONE STOPS URRI! NO ONE!"

Shiv's eyes widened as he stopped draining from the world's vitality and intercepted Urri with two outstretched hands. A rush of vectors passed through Shiv as he did, in fact, briefly stop Urri by draining all the Vulteg's strength. However, the Vulteg just kept crashing forward, and with each passing second, more kinetic energy flooded into Shiv. One influx of striped overflow tides became five, and soon, Shiv found himself on the verge of losing control.

He was promptly sent over that verge as a cold length of metal was plunged deep into his heart. Shiv gave a choked gasp as all the overflow tides he was juggling discharged at once. His body was violently pulled in several directions, and his Orichalcum pillar crumbled. Shiv's uncontrolled Legendary Skill ripped his body apart.

He unlatched from his falling corpse and—

Teleported himself back outside the cube before he could be cut down fully. Shiv blinked back to where he'd placed his temporal anchor.

Only to find himself faced with another problem: Cripple's broken Avatar accelerating toward him. Oh, come the fuck on, just give me a moment to—

The automaton Avatar manifested an incandescent fist. But rather than pointing it at Shiv, he lifted it high, and a wall of burning fists crashed over the Orichalcum surface of the cube Shin was within in a thunderous clash, sealing it tight.

“Deathless,” Cripple said, speaking through his broken Avatar. “I wish to have proper words with you. You, and Young Lord Arrow as well.”

Chapter 174 (II) Riot [III]

“That makes two of us,” Shiv muttered. Still, this was a glimpse of power beyond his. With his Legendary Skill, Shiv possessed unmatched control and power compared to his prior Skill Evolutions. Yet, he was still limited in many ways. Without evolving more supporting skills, his Legendary Skill wouldn’t reach its full potential. But more than that, a divine domain was something Shiv had no comprehension of at all. He'd never heard Valor or anyone else speak of such a thing. “What is a divine domain anyway?”

Cripple hesitated before answering. “It is when a skill becomes a dimension unto itself. It is when you go beyond the bounds of ordinary power and begin to set your own rules.”

“Does a Delve eventually become this?” Shiv asked.

The Ascendant didn’t answer that question; instead, it spoke to another concern. “I am keeping you safe here, but I cannot hold you for long. Our time to speak is short, and the dangers facing us are many. I intervened on your behalf because I knew Daughter would be tempted to claim your life for one of her Avatars.”

“Well, that explains it felt like she was trying to kill me instead of taking me alive,” Shiv grumbled. “And the other Ascendants just let her, huh?”

“No. She was not supposed to act this way, but she listens to few people aside from her mother, Maiden the Genius. And as you have hurt Maiden’s child, there will be consequences. Know this, Deathless. Prepare yourself.”

“There are already consequences,” Shiv shot back. “Putting me in this prison is a consequence. Ripping me away from Blackedge is a consequence. Using Adam as bait to lure and threaten me is going to be a felling consequence. I know damned well the cost of my actions. Do you know the weight behind yours?”

“I grow increasingly doubtful by the minute,” Cripple responded. “Stormhalt has returned—and he is not in chains. This is unacceptable.”

“And you’re surprised?” Shiv said, frowning at how naive Cripple seemed. “He’s an Avatar and a City Lord.”

“He is but a citizen of the Republic. And we have laws. Rules. Edicts. An Avatar is a vessel for the divine to inflict their judgment and mete justice upon the land. Yet, Halsur and Kathereine have found a questionable pawn.”

“Really? That’s how we’re describing all this?” Shiv shook his head in disgust. “Look. Cripple, you pulled my ass out of the fire just now, so let me help you pull your head out of your ass as thanks: Stormhalt despises Roland. He hates Roland so much that his hatred is probably a fourth of the size of mine.”

The divine mana around Shiv shook. “Was that a joke?”

“No,” Shiv replied, dead serious.

Cripple let out a single chuckle anyway. Then grunted in grim acceptance. “I understand that there are points of contention between my siblings. It is an ill thing to accept. Kathereine and Halsur are beyond my ability to punish. The former, especially. I... There is much I owe her. Things I cannot repay.”

Shiv was about to open his mouth, but the deity leveled its gaze at him. “You may ask, but I will not answer.”

Shiv wanted to push, but his Psycho-Cartography Skill warned against it. He was getting a much better understanding of Cripple. The automaton Ascendant was an honorable Pathbearer—perhaps a little too rigid. From everything that Kathereine and Halsur had done, they seemed to be on the other side of the honor spectrum. But when Cripple spoke of Kathereine, Shiv detected a hint of fear and regret in its voice. Cripple wanted to do something, but it couldn’t act. Not openly.

Hence, it came to Shiv. The Deathless was getting a faint understanding of the unseen games being played between the Ascendants even now.

And he found it a bit exciting.

Maybe I really should consider politics at some point, Shiv thought to himself. If I manage to live that long. The System really wants me dead. But... Well, come and get me.

“Fine, keep your secrets,” Shiv finally said. “I’ll dig them out some other way. But let’s get to the point that matters. You wanted to speak with Adam as well, right? Well, the only way we’re going to be able to do that is if I know where he is and if I can get him out.”

"I have a guess as to where they are keeping him in detention," Cripple said. "He is near the mana core, in the White Rooms."

Shiv really didn't like the sound of White Rooms. "Alright. So can you teleport me there or something? Give a shortcut through your Domain?"

"This is not how my Domain functions. More importantly, I cannot allow the other Ascendants to know that I have openly aided you. Right now, Daughter's story will only account for the fact that you bested my Avatar and that the destabilization of its body caused her banishment. Anything more overt will have the others too suspicious."

"Which is why we don't have long to talk in the first place," Shiv said, connecting another set of dots. "I'm going to have to go after Adam alone, then?"

"That is the case," Cripple said, though it sounded slightly ashamed. "It will not be easy. Stormhalt and the other Avatars will be waiting for you there. They know about your Outside Context Problem Skill."

Shiv clenched his fists as a rage born of worry welled up inside him. "Shit. How—wait. Adam... They must've reached into his mind. Fuck. Are they going to do something to his mind? Make him a mind-slave or something?"

"I don't know," Cripple said. "They have enclosed a section of the prison, and the rest of my companions are at odds with each other. Halsur and Kathereine are holding to a narrative. But it is clear that a narrative is all it is. With the Starhawk absent, the only ones that might be able to speak in his stead are you and Young Lord Adam. Right now, he is in Stormhalt's custody."

"I heard enough," Shiv said. "Tell me where he is and let me out of this place."

"Beware. Divided though the others are about what to do with Adam Arrow, there is no contention about what must be done with you." Cripple paused. "Little to no contention. Daughter is unpredictable."

"She's an insane child that became a god," Shiv spat back. "And I don't care if every last Pathbearer in Integration is preparing to ambush me alongside the Ascendants. I'm getting Adam back, and we're getting out—"

"Use the prisoners," Cripple interrupted.

"What?" Shiv asked.

"The Legendary-Tier prisoners of the Nadir," Cripple continued, sounding more than a little uncomfortable with what it was telling Shiv. "Many of them feel wronged by us. And many will do anything to get their way. Alone, you are certain to fail, but should you be able to gather and direct the other Legends imprisoned in the Well, there might be a way. You might be able to create an opening to save your friend. I am calling back my wardens. The other Ascendants have decided to use the prison break as an excuse to decide Adam's fate while I am absent. I know this. They will never admit this. Just as I will never admit to calling back my wardens and letting the prisoners run rampant."

Shiv updated his opinion of Cripple. The automaton was only a certain kind of honorable. When the moment called for it, Cripple was more than capable of being downright dirty. The Deathless smirked. "I

understand. I'll see what I can do with the prisoners. Don't exactly have a Leadership Skill, but I did get a Feat from hurting Daughter. Let's see how well fear works as a motivator."

A hum of agreement came from Cripple. "But as I do this, I need a promise from you. The fact that you are returning for your friend has revealed to me who you are—so I will demand your honor and word as a Pathbearer that you allow none of them to escape when this is done."

Shiv considered that for a moment. He considered lying, but his nature was direct and truthful. Cripple hadn't bullshitted him so far, and if the Ascendant was trying to do him a good turn, Shiv didn't want to make a mess of things even if it would make freeing Adam harder. "Not sure if I can promise that, Cripple. I got a few of them with me right now. A wolf-man called Five and Rebis. Rebis is—"

"I know of them," Cripple said, voice hard. "The Lupine is not who he says he is. He is an agent of Aviary. He has been here for ten years, and here he must stay until he surrenders his cell. Only after will I consider returning him to the Stolen Throne."

"What?" Cripple's claim caught Shiv entirely off guard. "He's what?"

"Rebis... The Pathbearers used to create him should have been executed. One was Ivar Locke—mass murderer and mind-defiler. Preference for mentally mutilating and enslaving the young and defenseless. The other was Helium-3. Traitor to the Republic and the one responsible for the collapse of Washpoint Fortress."

"What's a Washpoint Fortress?"

"You do not know?" Cripple asked, surprised. "How? Even children know about this."

“Yeah, well, Roland Arrow was big on everyone’s education but mine.” Shiv sighed. “Alright. So. Rebis is made from two utter bastards. But he's just confused right now.”

“Which is why I said he should have died,” Cripple echoed. “But Enoch has needs, and just as you have loyalty to your own, so too do I have loyalty to mine. I need your promise here. I do not need you to pacify the other prisoners. I simply ask that you leave them behind should you succeed in rescuing Young Lord Arrow. The prisoners here are a danger to the Republic, the Legends especially. They cannot be allowed to roam free.”

“And I’m safe?” Shiv said, slightly sarcastically.

“Absolutely not. But I wish to know why the System is so determined to see you dead. Moreover, I will need your aid to reach Matthew. I think... I wish to speak with him about the Great One, and the ritual we are to perform.”

Brightness.

That was the first thing Adam noticed as consciousness slowly returned to him. His mind throbbed with pulsing pain, and his body felt like it had been broken into pieces, ground beneath a giant's heel, before finally being pasted back together. The parts of him that didn't hurt were utterly numb, and worse, his bladder was screaming at him, begging him to relieve himself.

Low, droning voices pounded against his skull, like war drums going off beside his ears. The Gate Lord tried to speak, but all that came out of his throat was a hoarse whisper. He tried to move, yet felt his body bound tight. Worse, his muscle fibers were on fire. Even the slightest twitch sent waves of pain radiating through him. This time, he didn't give a hoarse cry; a loud hiss escaped him. He tried to writhe in pain, but that only made everything worse.

Adam was caught in a cycle of agony.

When he finally finished shuddering, he heard someone speak for the first time, their voice pounding through his ears, like he was breaking out from underwater. "He's waking up. Finish with him."

Before Adam could say anything else, a burst of thunderous pain circulated through his nerves. He tried to arc his back, but he was held tight in place, and the bands that clutched him refused to budge at all. His sinews no longer felt like they were on fire. Instead, they itched as never before, and were promptly drawn taut. It was like his body was trying to stretch itself apart, and no matter how much he tried to fight it, it wouldn't stop. Adam had never had a whole-body cramp before, but now that he did, he never wanted to experience it again.

Flashing memories pulsed before his eyes. He remembered flickers of what happened just hours before. He remembered arriving too late to save Shiv from the Ascendants. He remembered the Tarrasque retaliating, driving its body deep into the underside of Blackedge. He remembered a battle that followed, flashes of impossible violence, immense devastation. And then he remembered being struck by something he couldn't quite recall. But he remembered being struck so hard that everything inside him broke, even with the protection of his Legendary armor.

Adam felt weightless, weightless in the present, and weightless in the past. He was floating, his body was light, and soon he couldn't feel his body at all. His experience became one of utter depersonalization, and soon, he found himself staring at his own form from the third person. He was over the skies of Los Angeles again, twirling, blood spilling out from his mouth, from his eyes, from his every orifice.

The Tarrasque hung high in the sky, usurping the position of the sun, and its form was bathed in incandescent fire. Divine mana clawed at the beast's magnificent body, but it wouldn't come asunder. It refused to die.

Without Shiv present, no one could rip the vitality free from the Tarrasque, and it fought on. Yet the Ascendants kept it controlled, wreathed in nets of awesome flame. With a blast of world-shaking force, they flung it skyward.

At some point, Adam struck the ground, and he found himself blasting through debris. A curtain of dust rose high into the air and settled over his broken body as a blanket, and through the haze, he saw Blackedge, damaged, crumbling, on the verge of falling apart. But then there came a flash, a flash of color, a flash of incandescence, a flash guided by thick streams of translucence.

Some part of Adam's mind, what little of him still remained in that moment, recognized Uva's power for what it was. Her Psychomancy threads were now as large as buildings, and from them leaked both the impossible colors of the outside and the Starhawk's blessing.

A twitch of jealousy passed through Adam. He would have loved to serve in his father's stead. He would have done anything the Starhawk demanded if it meant saving his town, if it meant protecting his friends. But it wasn't to be. He wasn't to be. In that very moment, he knew he was dying, knew there were things inside him broken, almost certainly beyond repair.

And unlike when he fought the Recollector, he wasn't scared. Not scared at all. Instead, he felt a sense of peace, as if he were an empty vessel. He had done everything he could, strained himself beyond what anyone could ask for, and now he'd fallen—fallen, but not been beaten.

Blackedge was swallowed by brighter and brighter colors as a massive fissure opened over it. The town rose, and just as it did, Adam noticed a massive shape descending from on high. The Tarrasque returned, and trails of frayed incandescence clung to its body. It screamed out, bellowing the Starhawk's name, bellowing vengeance against Roland Arrow. But just as it was about to tear through the town, just as a tidal wave of devastation was dragged in its wake, Blackedge vanished entirely, passing into that eldritch outside that bordered reality.

Adam laughed weakly. Laughed as, even though the fate of his town was uncertain, for even though he didn't know what was going to happen to his friends, to his family, Blackedge would not fall at the hands of the Tarrasque, nor would it be destroyed by the Ascendants. No, for a little while longer, his home would endure.

And then the Tarrasque struck the ground, and Adam exhaled. The world shook. The surface upon which he lay was sundered utterly and completely. Adam found himself flung away, and once more he was weightless. He surrendered himself to the sensations. Yet, a moment before a massive piece of debris descended to greet him, a cloud of static shadow clashed over his form and clenched him tight, drawing him across space itself.

And somewhere during the teleportation process, the darkness of Dimensionality became the darkness of unconsciousness.

Now he was back, still alive, but wishing he wasn't. The pain was bad. "Broken Felling Moon!" Adam cried out as a rush of fire seared through his every nerve. His eyes snapped open fully, and he found himself staring up at a brightly lit ceiling. The Gate Lord blinked a few times, trying to clear the blurriness from his vision. His ears were ringing as well, and his heart hammered inside his chest, threatening to burst from his ribcage.

He was still severely disoriented, but he saw spell patterns dancing around him. He was inside a teleportation anchor of some kind. Adam shook his head. No, not a teleportation anchor.

This resembled a medical chamber. He saw a strange, twirling mechanism hanging over him, and it had dangling blades and small fingers twitching on its underside. As it drew back, a cube-like face looked down at Adam, and the many eyes that dotted it flickered.

Automaton, Adam thought. His mind felt sluggish, but he recognized the mechanical entity for what it was.

"A pair of clusters reconnected," the mechanical Pathbearer declared, and it leaned back. A whirling, whirring sound followed, and Adam tried to turn his head. It was a considerable struggle for him to do even that. To his right, he saw a tall, elven woman clad in a white coat.

She wore a transparent face shield made from glass, and specks of Adam's blood dotted its oblong surface. She regarded him without expression, and a faint hint of red mana seeped out from her fingers. That was the color of Biomancy, and if he could see it right now...

Adam took a look at his notifications, and his eyes widened. He hadn't gained Biomancy, but most of his skills had taken a massive leap.

Skybearer's Strength 100 (Skill Evolution Imminent)

Hydromancy 50 (Skill Evolution Imminent)

Repulsion Shroud 100 (Skill Evolution Imminent)

Tactical Overseer 100 (Skill Evolution Imminent)

My Toughness leveled over ten times, Adam thought to himself. How hard did that damn Tarrasque bloody hit me? And how am I even still alive? Broken Moon, why am I alive... Gods, the pain...

"Is he stabilized?"

The elven Biomancer looked away from Adam and gave the unseen speaker a nod. "He is, Master-Avatar."

"Good. Leave us."

"Master-Avatar," Adam muttered. The room around him darkened momentarily, and Adam thought they were turning off the lights. But then he realized he was on the verge of blacking out again. He shook his head, forced himself to stay awake. Though fatigue and agony gripped his body, he wanted to face whoever held him prisoner and tell them to sit on a knife.

Three thumping steps sounded in the now-empty room. Three thumping steps that made Adam's pulse climb and his anxiety worsen as he looked up at his captor for the first time.

Adam let out a miserable sigh—which turned into a vicious sneer.

"City Lord Stormhalt," Adam slurred. He tried not to, but part of his mouth wasn't working right. "I should have called you father-in-law by now, but alas, some unforeseen problems interrupted my wedding. You wouldn't happen to know who caused them, would you?"

Chapter 174 (III) Riot [III]

Adam might have gotten crushed by a Tarrasque, but Stormhalt had seen better days himself. Most of his body was burned. He had been healed to some extent, but his restored flesh still resembled badly grilled beef that was still raw in certain places. Patches marred his face, and inflamed bulges of pink protruded in disgusting ways. Stormhalt looked down at Adam as one would an intractable problem. The City Lord's eyes were tired and spent.

"She wasn't meant to be a part of this," Stormhalt muttered. "She was meant to stay home and—"

"And... what?" Adam forced through his uncooperative lips. "Stay home and listen to your every command. Stay home and stay ignorant of what you promised. Sullain... The deal you struck with the Jealousy. You vermin traitor..."

With each statement Adam spat, Stormhalt's gaze darkened. "Everything I did, I did for the good of the Republic."

Something inside Adam snapped. And what came out from him thereafter wasn't a roar of anger, but a loud, scornful laugh. Laughing hurt, but he couldn't stop himself. "For the good of the Republic? You were going to give the Animancy Core to Sullain. He was going to use it on the Republic, on one of our towns."

Stormhalt's features twisted into a snarl. "We were going to intercept him! We were going to stop him before—"

"Oh, shut the hells up," Adam groaned. "If it weren't for me and Shiv—"

Adam swallowed, refusing to say anything further.

"I know about the Umbral," Stormhalt said. "You don't need to try to hide her from me. I know about everything you've done over the past month or so. The things you've achieved are impressive, but I fear I'm not here for you. I wish to know about your companions."

Adam fixed Stormhalt with an unimpressed stare. "You just said you knew everything. So why the conversation?" Stormhalt fell silent, and Adam just shook his head. "You don't think before you act very often, do you, City Lord? You're a little too old to be this way."

"How?" Stormhalt began. "How did he gain his Path? And why are you in league with a creature created by Udrael Thann? How can you claim to be a loyal son of the Republic when you belong to his father, Valor Thann?"

And it was then that Adam realized Stormhalt didn't know much of anything at all. He might have had a Psychomancer peek into Adam's unconscious mind, but it would take even someone like Uva to dive through another's memories in vivid detail in a short amount of time. And it seemed that Stormhalt wanted to talk before that happened.

"I would tell you," Adam began, "but my brain is swollen from a large bastard hitting me, so... If you don't mind, I think I'm going to get a bit more rest now."

Stormhalt pressed his lips together, and slowly he leaned forward. He placed a single hand against Adam's chest and continued pushing down. The Gate Lord tried to move, but he was held in place by bands, bands of reddish gold, that kept him festooned to his hospital bed. Adam tried not to scream in pain as Stormhalt pushed down on him. The Gate Lord's spine sounded like a mess of rattling marbles.

"I don't enjoy this," Stormhalt said through clenched teeth. Adam bucked and spasmed. The pain grew. "I don't enjoy hurting you, even if you are your father's son, even if I see his face on yours. I don't. I don't."

Stormhalt sounded like he was trying to convince himself more than anyone else.

Adam managed to stop his writhing long enough to stare Stormhalt right in the eye. And despite all the suffering he endured, he managed to smirk. "Liar."

And that made Stormhalt stop. The City Lord drew his hand back and took a step away.

"Liar," Adam spat again. "You lie about everything. In fact, I think you lie to yourself most of all. How many people did you promise the Greater Demon? Again, I can't quite remember. Where are you going to find these people? From the waste of society? The weak? The feeble? The poor?" He coughed.

"There are many who are ill, and many who have sinned," Stormhalt began, trying to defend himself.

"Like you?" Adam wheezed. "Like you, who condemned so many people at Blackedge to their death. My father..." Adam swallowed. "My father is not a perfect man. He has done terrible things. But he has never condemned another to death without purpose, merely to sate a thirst for vengeance."

And suddenly Stormhalt went impossibly still. "You have no idea who your father is, Young Lord Arrow, and you have no idea about the things he's done. You have no idea what he has taken from me. You think this is a thing of jealousy or hatred. No, it is just retribution."

Stormhalt was so furious that he was calm now. And as Adam looked into his eyes, coils of lightning seeped outward. The City Lord was trembling. And for a brief moment, Adam wondered if Stormhalt was going to strike him dead. Instead, a sigh escaped from who should have been his father-in-law. His shoulders sagged once more, and he swallowed.

"This was a mistake. I was a fool." Then, he blinked as a flash of dark lightning burst free from his eyes. "I... Yes, my ascendant, I... I understand. I apologize for my indiscretion and lack of thought." He drew in a long breath and gave Adam a pitying look. "I did not wish this for you, Young Lord Arrow. All my hate, all my loathing, that is for your father. For everything that has happened, that is his sin. Not yours. You are just..." He trailed off, and his look turned distant. Then, he clenched his fist. "Godsdamn it, I hate you too. I despise you just for looking like him."

The admission escapes Stormhalt like air would a ruptured wheel. By the end, he just chuckled. "I am not a perfect man. I fear I am not even strong. But that is my truth. You should have just told me. You should have just spoken. You should have..."

Stormhalt stopped talking and shook his head. "Now the Psychomancer will have you. And when they are done, I will see you fixed properly. If nothing else than to insult your father. The other Ascendants can protest, but your compliance will be worth the Republic's security. Or at least that is what I am going to tell them. We are going to carve you hollow, Young Lord. We are going to remove every part that is you and replace it with something that will serve the Republic and, more importantly, serve us. For when your father returns, if he returns, we will use you to finish this mistake."

"No," Adam whispered.

"We will use you as our weapon to finish this pointless, stupid, miserable travesty. And what little of you is left will watch through your own eyes as a prisoner in your own body when you strike him down!"

Stormhalt was screaming by the end, and he suddenly seemed to wake to what he was doing. He looked at his hands, and he shuddered before turning and running away.

"Stormhalt !" Adam cried out. "Stormhalt, come back. Come on, you felling cock-strap! Come back!" He struggled and strained against the restraints, but it was hopeless. It was hopeless before; it was hopeless now. Even with his strength on the verge of an evolution, he couldn't exert enough force for another level, but he had to try. He had to do something. "Starhawk," Adam whimpered. "Starhawk, please. Starhawk, I need—"

Another shadow fell over him, and this time it was an older human Pathbearer with a snow-white beard that looked down at him. His eyes were cold, and from his crown rippled a wave of translucence. Soon, every one of Adam's secrets and every bit of himself would be compromised. It didn't matter if it took the man weeks to sift through his memories; they would have them in the end.

"No!" Adam spat. "Godsdamn you, stop! I am a citizen of the Republic! You—"

He tried to shape something with his Hydromancy, but his magic flared and broke against him. He screamed as it was ripped asunder, and the room's magical wards flashed. It was specifically designed to hold him, he realized. He tried drawing on his Dimensionality thereafter, but a faint burst of static descended from the ceiling and hammered down upon him. Adam gagged. His vision spun, and he did everything he could to not throw up. He failed, yet still no bile came, only sour spit and snot.

"Struggle. Do not struggle. It makes no difference." The Psychomancer placed his thumb against Adam's head. "Your mind is mine now."

And a spearing lance of pain punched deep into the Gate Lord's consciousness. Everything went white, then red, then white again. Adam tried to resist, but he could no more resist the Psychomancer's touch than he could stop thinking.

A miserable howl escaped Adam, and he tried to bite down on his own tongue—if only to protect what he knew and guard those close to him. Yet his jaw spasmed, and he couldn't quite close it. Adam shuddered and called out to the Starhawk again. But when the Ascendant refused to reply, he reached out to another god, one he'd met in person.

Composer, Adam thought, if you can hear me, if you can do anything, anything at all, I will give you everything in return. Please, don't let them do this. I need to break free. Shiv needs me. Uva needs me. My people need me!

The Composer has noticed your cry.

"It doesn't matter who you call." The Psychomancer's cold voice echoed inside Adam's skull. He felt like a hollow bell. And with every passing second, there was less of him capable of resisting. Soon, he would be more a glove than a person, and the Psychomancer would be able to weave and wield his thoughts, whichever way he so desired.

Just as Adam was about to break, the pressure of Psychomancy vanished altogether.

Something wet hit him in the face, something with the faint taste of iron. Adam's vision cleared once more, and he saw the Psychomancer spasming as blood poured from his open throat.

It gushed down and splashed over Adam's face, and the Psychomancer gagged and clawed at the wound, but he couldn't fall. In fact, his entire body was stiff and rigid. His eyes were no longer cold. Instead, they were filled with fear, confusion, and desperation.

Adam was stunned by the turnaround of events, but a bitter scowl stretched his features as he glared at the Psychomancer with loathing. "Take a step to your left," Adam hissed. "Stop bleeding on me, you shit."

Despite Adam's plea, the Psychomancer didn't obey. He continued spilling his lifeblood all over Adam, and soon the Gate Lord went from startled to exasperated. He spat off by the side, trying to clear the Psychomancer's blood from his lips. He pulled his restraints once more, but it was futile, just like before. Slowly, Adam began looking around the room, trying to figure out what was happening.

He didn't kill the Psychomancer, so then—

The elven Biomancer from earlier suddenly came into view. Before Adam could say anything, her hand was over his mouth, and she pressed a single finger to the glass mask over her lips.

"If you wish to live, don't make a sound. They are still watching. But I managed to put an illusion in place." She gestured at one of the spell patterns, and with a twitch of her fingers, two of the shapes within the pattern flickered.

"Who are you?" Adam asked, wary.

“Right now, your only friend.”

Adam scowled. “My friends have names.”

“Then you can call me Raven.” The Biomancer grinned. “Now, Little Hawk, how would you like to leave this prison?”

Chapter 175 (I) Escape

The most important skill you can all develop in this course is Awareness, not Stealth. Awareness will teach you about Stealth. It will instruct you on all the aspects of Stealth that you have not understood yet. There is no absolute Stealth, not even for Legendary Pathbearers.

Consider all your senses, visual, auditory, taste, touch, and more. Your Magical Skills come into play here too. They are another layer of sensory advancements you can gain. And they are spiritual infusions at that, hard to avoid, hard to counter. And this is simply speaking with our organic Pathbearers in mind. The automata students in this course must have a variety of other sensory options that are far beyond the organic norm.

As we evolve our Awareness skills and learn about how our comrades might perceive the world, you will understand that Stealth does not mean clinging to the shadows and staying silent. That is rudimentary, and it will not be sufficient against an enemy with an appropriately leveled Awareness skill. When you engage your adversaries in a battle of subterfuge, understand that you are a clashing onion.

You have layers of protection over you, and the outermost layer is Awareness—you being aware of your enemies before they are aware of you.

You cannot always have a higher Awareness skill compared to your adversary, but you can learn how they perceive things by observing their reactions in the field. And so we move on to the most fundamental lesson of this class. Observe. Learn. And then act.

Understand your enemy. Notice them first. And then move.

So. Break into teams and descend into the darkness of the dungeon. There are things down there that will hunt you. Make sure you learn where they are first.

-Captain Andrea Yuwei, STEALTH-101, Phoenix Academy

"Oh, gods," Adam groaned.

A rush of nausea crawled through his body, and bile threatened to overtake his throat. It wasn't bad enough that he was a prisoner. It wasn't bad enough that he was lying here, stripped bare, without his equipment, captured by the Ascendants and their treacherous avatars.

Now his life lay in the hands of a Raven once again.

"So, what now?" he asked. "Have you come to take over instead? Are you planning to rip into my mind yourself? Make me a good little spy?"

The Raven pressed her lips together. "Don't be so histrionic, Gate Lord Arrow. You are of far more use to us coherent and willing than as a mind-broken slave. You'll discover that we aren't nearly as heavy-handed as your so-called Ascendants."

Adam narrowed his eyes at the Raven. She knew his title. That meant she knew about Gate Theborn and likely a good portion of what had happened there. Adam wondered how she was aware of so much.

He had been diligent in scouring his gate for any saboteurs or spies. None of the slaves were in any condition to serve as spies for the Stolen Throne. The mercenaries were especially monitored, and Uva had scoured their minds. Of course, she could have missed something, and Adam might have as well. However, he didn't think so.

The weak point of his Gate couldn't be the mercenaries or anyone within Gate Piety right now. Instead, his thoughts turned to another group of unwelcome visitors that bordered his gate. If there was one variable he couldn't control much at all, it was the orcs themselves.

"Before we do anything," Adam said, licking his dry lips as he took his blind swing, "I want to know something. I want to know if your informant inside my gate is an orc."

The Raven was well-trained. She controlled her facial muscles well and held to an impassive expression. Unfortunately for her, she was dealing with someone with Heroic-Tier Awareness. Adam noticed a slight quiver in her facial muscles, the almost imperceptible twitch of her eyes. He also smelled a faint scent in the air, but then disregarded it as he realized it was the dead Psychomancer who'd just fouled himself. A snort of annoyance escaped Adam as he shook his head. Even that action caused his neck to flare up in agony.

"You can't trust a damn greyskin bastard with anything. Did you bribe the orc, or is he an actual agent?" Adam sneered as he finished probing.

The blank look on the Raven's face was gone now. Instead, she offered him a deep frown. "The dossier said you were astute, even for someone with prodigious Awareness. I see I've underestimated you."

"And I see you're avoiding the question," Adam replied. He took another guess and asked a follow-up question. He knew the Raven wasn't going to answer this one either, but he had her measure. Adam could read her micro-expressions to some degree. "So, bribery, then."

She controlled herself even better this time, but that faint twitch of her eye was still there. It was the slightest shudder, and Adam wouldn't have seen it at all if he hadn't been concentrating so hard on her forehead. The Gate Lord added that potential problem to his list. Find a way to control what the orcs learned about Gate Piety. But that would be a long-term task. Far behind the pressing matter that troubled Adam right now.

The Raven couldn't shake her look of displeasure as she reached under Adam's bed. He projected his Awareness to where her hand was as his anxiety spiked. He was worried that she was going to activate some kind of mechanism and finish him off. What he discovered then was a button of some kind. As soon as she pressed it, the restraints holding him in place gave a loud snapping sound before they retracted with the final click.

Adam drew in another breath. Delicious air filled his lungs, and he realized how much the bonds had been compressing his chest until they were undone. He tried to rise, but nearly curled in on himself in pain as every ligament and bone in his body screamed at him to stay still. Adam gained an architectural map of his own skeletal system from just how many parts of him combusted into searing swaths of suffering. Though his mind was clearing up, his body was still in no condition for battle, perhaps not even in condition for movement.

Adam took a second to center himself. A stray thought entered his consciousness as he wondered how Shiv would handle this misery. The Gate Lord knew the answer to that. Shiv cared about pain like a bear gave a damn about bees when it was hungering for honey. The hurt existed, but it didn't matter. That wasn't Adam's mindset. No, Adam had to deal with silly things like physical and mental trauma, so he had to be considerate. Something Shiv skipped over sometimes.

Adam didn't much like pain. Adam didn't much like having a broken body, and Adam most certainly couldn't come back from death or near-death stronger than before.

Just then, the Toughness Evolution notification flashed before his eyes, and the Gate Lord realized that wasn't entirely correct. If he got hurt one more time, perhaps that would push him over the threshold. Perhaps that would see him completely restored. He didn't know what awaited him with this upcoming Skill Evolution, but something told him he had to reach it if he wanted to escape from this place.

"Raven," Adam choked out, trying to hold back his distaste for the woman. "My wounds... Can you patch me?" She was his enemy, of that, there was no question. Aviary used people, and right now, he was simply a tool aligned with her interests. He had no illusions about her loyalties or ethics, but that didn't change the fact that he needed her to help him. There was no one else he could rely on right now, and she was a Biomancer. Whatever they did to his body, he needed it fixed.

"Hold on," the Raven interrupted him.

He felt the faint prodding sensation jab into his back. A slight pinprick of pain crawled across his skin, and numbness spread from the outer hive of Adam's flesh down to the very marrow of his bones. Soon, the agony subsided, though he still felt a weight there. It was like his muscles had been turned to lead, but he couldn't complain. This was far better than feeling like his entire nervous system was on fire every passing second. Coolness glided through his veins, and Adam let out a relieved breath he didn't know he had been holding.

Slowly, he pushed himself off the bed and shook his head. He still had some slight double vision, and the room was far too bright. Like his eyes were being stabbed by needles each second they remained open. But he could move now, and if he could move, he could fight. And if he could fight, he could be free.

"I synthesized some pain suppressants and administered them to your bloodstream," the Raven explained. Adam could still feel her Biomancy curling within his flesh. It felt like snakes were wriggling their way through his body. "I'm removing the nerve damage Master-Avatar Stormhalt had me deliberately inflict to keep you incapacitated. It'll take a few moments longer for me to calcify the fractures I lined your bones with, and the many slight tears left upon your ligaments."

She released a slight hum of curiosity. "Your armor was quite remarkable. By all means, you should have died when the Tarrasque hit you. You were more liquid than solid when they pried you out of your armor. Without the intervention of one of the Ascendants, you would have perished. They sacrificed an Avatar to channel enough power to keep you alive. That's how close to death you were."

Adam rubbed his face and grimaced. Just because his Ascendants had proven to be the enemy didn't mean he relished the death of one of their Avatars. Aside from Stormhalt, Adam didn't know much about the people he was facing. He suspected some of them had families and friends. Some of them must still believe that they were faithful servants of the Republic. And for their lives to be spent to keep him alive, it felt beyond callous.

"They shouldn't have done that," Adam muttered.

"Oh, but they absolutely should," the Biomancer rebuffed. "After all, a Pathbearer with a Unique Skill and a Unique Feat, a direct connection to one of the rogue Ascendants, and one of the primary associates of the now infamous Deathless, is well worth the life of an Avatar. Perhaps even a hundred. Maybe more."

"People are more than the sum of their skills," Adam replied.

"And you actually believe that," the Raven said, with the faintest hint of scorn in her voice.

"I do," Adam said, resolute. He lifted his head and glared at the woman. "I do, because I've seen societies that treat people based on their Paths and skills, and I spit on those societies. When I was in Gate Theborn and the Abyss, I want you to know something. I want you to know that all the slaves there were wasted. I want you to know that everyone there could have been more than what they were if they had been allowed to have other experiences, if they had been allowed to add just whatever they had, what little they had, to the society they lived in. Instead, it mauled itself."

She opened her mouth to retort, but he had no interest in hearing her opinion on the matter.

"Spare me your pointless cynicism, Raven. I've seen the blackness festering in this world. I know more than you think. You might be helping me escape, but don't think you're going to get to bludgeon me with your fetid ideology. Everyone is capable of greater glories than they assume. I know this. I've seen this. And it doesn't matter if you deny it."

That provoked the most obvious response from the Raven. Her mouth parted behind the glass faceplate she wore, and for a moment, Adam thought she was going to say something to rebuff him. Instead, she looked away, and his gaze followed hers. By now, his vision had cleared enough, and the room made itself known. Spell patterns crawled along the walls, and they lingered there ominously. So long as Adam remained here, he wouldn't be able to use his own magic. But the Biomancer could, further confirming that this place was specifically designed to keep him a prisoner.

However, there was another problem. Adam couldn't find any semblance of a door or exit for this place. Aside from the spell patterns, the room was mostly a blank, white cube. The ground was covered in

smears of blood and splatters of other fluid. Adam guessed that those must have originated from his body. Just noticing how much blood was on the ground made him feel nauseous once more.

"He's around your size," the Biomancer said finally.

Adam looked at her, but then realized what she was saying. His gaze fell on the Psychomancer, and he understood what she intended. A wince crawled over the Gate Lord's face as he noticed just how much blood painted the front side of the Psychomancer's armor. It was like a crimson waterfall had been allowed to flow down the prismatic plate. He was about to complain about the state of the Psychomancer's armor when the Raven waved a finger.

Suddenly, the blood that stained the front of the Psychomancer twirled into the air, forming into a dense sphere that she promptly compressed further, shrinking down to a small dot. She made a pulling motion, and it reeled into the center of her hand.

With that done, she walked over to the Psychomancer and began undoing the man's armor. At the same time, the blood she just took from the man fused over his head, becoming a solid red helmet, which even had a frog helm-style visor.

"Did you just make a mask for me using that man's blood?" Adam asked incredulously. He tried to stand, but his legs shook. He tested one step, and then another. The ground was miserably cold, but at least Adam could still feel the temperature. Better than being crippled. It took everything he had not to collapse, but he managed. Slowly, his balance was returning to him, but his disbelief remained.

"Of course," the Biomancer said as if it were no big deal. Her fingers worked fast, and she seemed to have no issue stripping the Psychomancer bare, even though she was wearing thick gloves. One piece after another came free, and soon it was the Psychomancer that stood bare before Adam. And that was the most unnerving thing. The man still stood. His body was rigid and tight, even in death. The man was

skinny enough that Adam could see every outline of tissue and tendon in the dead man's body, and they were drawn taut.

By this point, the Gate Lord was beginning to suspect that the System wanted him to develop a phobia of Biomancers. With all the time he spent with Shiv, with the time he spent facing the First Blood, or that bookish-looking orc Biomancer that was now trying to teach Shiv his art, the thought of someone being able to reach into his body using magic to subvert his very flesh with their will filled Adam with a deep sense of unease.

I really, really need a personal Magical Resistance Skill, he thought to himself.

He suppressed his worry and put on the Psychomancer's clothes. The Raven was correct in asserting that the other man was around his size, but he was still thinner than Adam, and parts of his inner uniform and gambeson felt stifling. The rest of the armor was a bit better, but still ill-fitting. That didn't last long.

The prismatic armor made a few clicks as it adjusted around Adam. The Minor Size Modulation enchantment was quite a common thing in the Republic. It saved the military a great deal of money when one set of armor can be worn by several different people.

And that wasn't the only benefit it provided to Adam. He suddenly heard a crackle in the back of his mind. Whispers glided against his consciousness like the rustling of leaves. And there was also a lingering sense of emotion that lay just beyond the boundaries of his mental reach. This armor also included Magical Resistance and a strength-boosting enchantment. Its physical durability was nothing compared to his Legendary armor. But even so, having some armor was better than walking nude through the prison, despite the momentary advantage that the shock value might provide.

The final thing that Adam adjusted was the blood helm the Raven had made for him. He pulled at the visor, sliding it up and down, and found that it was extremely well designed. More importantly, it didn't

feel like blood; it felt like steel. And that was when he began to suspect that the Raven was more than just a Biomancer. Perhaps she was a Bio-Geomancy fusion, considering the texture of the blood, how it felt like reinforced titanium. Adam thought that was probably a good guess.

"Right then," he said, looking at his uneasy ally. "So, how are we getting out of this place?"

"We have to be teleported," she replied. "No way in, no way out, but through spatial magic. Of course, if you're strong enough, you can tear open the Orichalcum walls that surround this chamber. But I'm assuming that you don't have Legendary-Tier Physicality, do you, Gate Lord Arrow?"

This Raven liked to tease. Adam let her. Maybe she would let slip some additional details.

"The armor, is it working properly?" she asked.

Adam gave her a brief nod. "Let me guess, we need to use the Psychomancy enchantment connected to the armor to communicate with someone. Only after that can we be moved out of this cell."

Once more, his words took the Raven by surprise.

"It wasn't that hard of a guess," Adam said. "Containment control and redundancy is very common in the Republic. The concept of the cell makes sense to me as well. The Academy taught us cage and control strategies. In the field, if we needed to interrogate or even construct a bivouac to provide medical or psychological assistance to one of our comrades, the simple thing to do was simply creating a pocket of space in the underground, lining it with reinforced metal, and then building from there."

Though he wanted to keep going, he stopped himself. He was quite proud of what he'd learned at the Academy. But he remembered he was speaking to a Raven, and she probably knew about these strategies better than he.

"Quite so," the Raven said. "But before we call for aid, there's one final thing I must do." She looked around at the chamber and made a gesture. A few shapes composing some of the spell patterns came aglow. She pointed at them. "I lined those spells into the walls over the course of the past few weeks. Not only here but other locations like this. It's the reason why the observers haven't noticed anything." She let out a satisfied sigh. "It's quite a feat, you know. Compromising the Rubix Well."

"Well?" Adam asked. "Wait. I'm in a bloody Rubix Well."

"You're in the ultimate Rubix Well," the Raven explained. "I'm sure you understand what that entails."

Adam had had a suspicion, but he didn't fully connect the dots until now. I was still a little bit disoriented. Great. So I could be anywhere. Even if I manage to escape from this prison, I could be under the ocean, underground, or even within a gate.

"Oh, it's worse than that," the Raven said with a sing-song voice. She'd clearly guessed his thoughts. "You're near the capital. In fact, I would say you're utterly surrounded by it."

Chapter 175 (II) Escape

Adam's jaw dropped. He managed to guess what she was implying in an instant. The capital of the Yellowstone Republic was built around the Yellowstone Supervolcano. The ever-erupting volcano was also the seat of the Ascendants' combined power. It was said that they brought peace and prosperity to the land from here, drawing upon its endless energy and boundless fire to serve as a forge in the

construction of an egalitarian empire. If what the Raven said was true, then he might just be at the very bottom of said volcano.

Going to need my armor back if I want to take a dip in this place, Adam thought to himself. He remembered how he and Shiv had to repel the Vulteg invasion. And then Adam realized Shiv was probably here as well. Where else would they bring the most valuable enemy on Integrated Earth if they wanted to contain him, after all?

"Now, give me a moment." She turned her attention to the Psychomancer and placed her hands around his head. Adam wanted to keep asking her for more details, but he fell silent as sickening sounds of ripping flesh and cracking bone filled the room. The Gate Lord's eyes widened as the Psychomancer had his flesh sculpted.

The first thing Adam noticed was the fat being drained out of the man's face. He was thin, but his cheeks were still fuller than Adam's in several ways. The fat then shifted, traveling along the edges of his cheekbones until they were deposited in his ear. It took a few moments of manipulation, but his ears finally widened slightly, resembling Adam's. Then the man's nose broke.

A splash of blood sprayed free from his nostrils, and it was reconstructed several times. Its bridge was elongated, tearing the skin. Then the Biomancer managed to heal what she destroyed. And soon the man had a nose that looked like Adam's. She continued on. The rest of the face was mutilated and remolded in intimate detail.

By the end, Adam thought he was looking at another version of himself, a clone. Yet, as he concentrated his Awareness, he still noticed a few discrepancies, faint outlines of scarring, ridges of hardened tissue resting just beneath the exterior. The Raven's work wasn't perfect, but for the amount of time she spent on it and the overall accuracy achieved, it was staggering.

"Help me place him on the bed," she said.

Adam didn't hesitate. He picked the Psychomancer up and laid him where Adam used to be. Once more, the Biomancer struck the button beneath the bed, and the clamps slammed around the man once more.

Adam noticed the adamantine texture of the restraints. No wonder he couldn't break out. But she'd said something about Orichalcum. Orichalcum was a godly metal, something so rare that many went their entire lives without ever laying eyes on it. Adam had seen it a few times now, mainly thanks to Shiv's Skill Evolution.

"Just," Adam paused, "how long have I been incapacitated?"

"At this point, approximately a day," she said. "And took most of that to keep you alive. Now, I must tell you something about your Psychomancy enchantment. Don't use it. Your mind is not cleared for the local network. If you try to use the enchantment, you will likely compromise us both. Let me do the interfacing."

Adam made an open-handed gesture, acquiescing, and then he waited. The Biomancer did nothing obvious, but he saw how her eyes twitched. She was having a mental conversation with someone, and, approximately a second later, several pockets of Dimensionality opened in the room. But that wasn't all Adam noticed. He saw how certain spell patterns along the walls flared ablaze, leaking mana all throughout the chamber.

As soon as the reinforcements arrived, Adam realized they were other Biomancers as well, judging from the white gowns and glass faceplates they wore. They channeled their magic into the now-dead Psychomancer who had been sculpted to resemble Adam.

The Raven put on a performance. Her voice rose to a shrill pitch as she cried out, "He's flat-lined! Severe damage, I don't know—I don't know what happened to him, I was called back by venison, and when I got here, he was gone!"

She suddenly turned to Adam and reached out with a hand. She seized him by the neck and throttled him slightly. He was taken aback by her sudden violence but managed to piece her plan together. He was the Psychomancer. The aforementioned Venison.

Adam winced beneath his new helmet.

What a terrible name.

And now she was blaming him for “Adam Arrow's” supposed death. This was how they were going to get out. She was going to bring him to a brig.

"I've been trying to keep his blood pumping," the Raven said. "No response, no brain activity!"

Another one of the Biomancers, a heavyset goblin, began channeling waves of red mana out from his small, four-fingered hands. The bulk of that mana swirled around Adam's head, and the body began to twitch violently.

"I need... I need... I need—" The Raven began to hyperventilate.

The other Biomancer reached out briefly, patting the Raven on the shoulder. "Get out of here and take him with you." Adam caught sight of the other Biomancer for the first time and noted them to be a tall, human male. "We'll do what we can to keep him alive. You're spent, Bethany. It's not your fault. We'll review the feeds later, but right now, you need to take him and get out. Stormhalt is gonna wanna hear this. We might need Enoch to come in and help intervene on our behalf."

"Of course." Once more, the Raven looked ahead, and her eyes widened. She shot Adam a look, and he understood what was coming, even without any verbalizations. They were about to be teleported. Her plan had worked.

A sudden clench of pressure washed over Adam, and he nearly fell over. He was wrong. He was still not in the best shape, but he could move. And if I can move... I can fight...

I need to stay standing, Adam told himself. I just have to walk. One foot in front of the other.

He clung to that mantra as the teleportation ended.

They found themselves in an anchor. The room around them was cylindrical, and the doorway was wide open. New Biomancers rushed in. A few of them asked the Raven what was happening. She repeated the story she'd come up with earlier, and Adam caught several ugly looks pointed in his direction.

"This is not good," a tall elven woman snarled. "Avatar Stormhalt just left. He told us that we couldn't make any mistakes with this, that we need to see the process finished."

"I'm going to get Enoch right now," the Raven continued, "and I'm bringing him with me. Whatever he's done, he will answer to the Ascendant, and we'll make sure of it. It wasn't my fault."

But once she reached out and took Adam by the shoulder, she pulled him out of the room, dodging an influx of additional Biomancers.

"It won't be long now," the Raven whispered, leaning close to Adam. He appreciated her grasp because it made it easier for him to walk. Still, he stumbled and ground along the hallway walls. And it was then that he noticed they were made from a red-gold substance, the same red-gold that constituted Shiv's Toughness skill. This was Orichalcum. And as Adam looked ahead, he guessed that there were a hundred meters to this hallway, before it led into a far wider room.

He cast his Awareness skill far beyond his body, and as it arrived in the following chamber, Adam found himself staring at what seemed to be some sort of command center. There were people everywhere, several groups of Pathbearers interfacing with large focus crystals built in the form of an obelisk. They pulsed with Psychomancy, and the mind-manas effusing from these constructs spiked directly down, passing through the ground and vanishing elsewhere.

There was something else as well. Adam could feel the Hydromancy mana circulating beyond the walls under his feet in the ceiling. It didn't take him long to guess that there must have been mithril supports built through the structure. Some of the wealthier Pathbearers in Blackedge built their houses this way. It allowed for greater heat or coolness depending on the change of the seasons. It also allowed them to modify their own residences in a variety of ways. When the house itself could serve as a conduit for magic, there were a great many things one could enjoy, but it was remarkably expensive.

Roland had decided against applying such an overarching fix for all of Starhawk's Perch. It was a large structure, and they still used the old ways. His father wasn't a wasteful man, but now, Adam also suspected that it was because Starhawk's Perch was a Sacred Phylactery, and changing it in any form might have damaged the connection between his father and their patron god.

Godsdammit, father, just how much were you hiding from me? About yourself. And about the Republic. I don't even know we are anymore. I don't know who I am.

For a moment, Adam's mind went out to his father, to Uva, to Valor, and everyone on Blackedge. He remembered the colors of the outside, of the grand fissure that tore a gap into reality, swallowing the town whole before the Tarrasque descended. He remembered, and he grimaced. He hoped they were safe right now, wherever they were. But knowing the System, Uva was probably struggling just as much as he was, if not more. The Outside was a nightmarish place. But if there was someone capable of navigating it, it was Sister Uva Mettabon.

Better her than me, Adam thought. And that came with a slight pang of jealousy. It was 'better her than him' when it came to being the Starhawk's avatar as well. But he shrugged that aside. He understood the irrationality of his envy. But he also knew that he wanted to serve in his father's stead. He wanted to bear the burden of protecting his town, and it should have been him.

No, no, it really shouldn't, Adam said internally. Stop thinking that way. Stop thinking that way. You're still recovering. Your mind's drifting. Focus, Arrow. One foot in front of the other.

"We won't have long," the Raven said as they drew close to the command center. "The other Biomancers will notice several discrepancies about his body. They'll be coming for us soon. My cover will effectively be burned, and I hope to be out of here by then." A beat of silence followed. "I really hope you understand the cost of my actions."

"I understand the rewards you might gain more," Adam shot back. "You might be able to get at the Starhawk through me. Should he ever return more, you might be able to get at the Deathless. And that's the main thing, isn't it? You're after the reward on his life."

The Raven chuckled. "Let's just say the Stolen Throne is more curious about why the System wants him dead so bad, rather than greedy, about a few Legendary Skills."

"A few?" Adam hissed. "It wasn't a few, it's ten! I would be tempted to kill Shiv for ten Legendary skills." Adam blinked as he considered that statement. Hells, I was tempted to kill Shiv even when there wasn't a reward.

The Raven regarded him with a wry look. "You must really care for him."

And Adam reminded himself once more that he was dealing with a spy. "Something like that," he said nonchalantly. "But I must warn you, trying to play these games with Shiv is a bit like sticking your hand in a fire. He will burn you eventually. And being near him is a surefire way to get killed."

"You're still alive," the Raven noted.

"Yes," Adam said, "and that's not because the System is merciful. It tried. It failed. It keeps failing. I'm still here. And I'm not done. Not nearly." A hint of iron entered Adam's voice, and the Raven fell quiet.

They staggered through the command center, and Adam used the time to survey its layout in detail. He counted approximately 200 Pathbearers here. Most of them were Psychomancers, and they were processing strands of mana that were filtered through the obelisk crystal structures he'd seen earlier. Adam also noted an odd section of the wall. There was a portion of Orichalcum that was half a centimeter off from the parts below, like it was slightly pressed inward. That told Adam it wasn't a design flaw, so he concentrated his Seer of Horizons there, and soon found himself capable of slipping through the gap. There were sounds on the other side, and as they grew louder, Adam transported his Heroic-Tier Awareness skill into a new place entirely.

He got beyond the current structure they were in and found that he was inside what seemed to be a large cube. They were traveling via a complex gear network. Massive mechanisms turned and rattled, pulling the entire chamber they were in along the insides of a complex superstructure. Adam continued

casting his Awareness from place to place and soon found his cube adjacent to several others. He managed to slip into them as well, but he realized most of the surrounding cubes were a bit like his.

However, there were some cubes that were more like guard stations. They were smaller than the large cube he was in, and they didn't have so many Psychomancers. Instead, they were filled with combat-ready Pathbearers. And that's how Adam realized they were wardens. There were many of them within many cubes, and they were all in motion, each one sliding from place to place rapidly. The entire system here was like a series of bricks being slotted from position to position. When one cube moved, it made way for another, and so this large mechanism was almost constantly in motion.

He checked a few other cubes and found himself startled by scenes of brutal battle. After a few moments of observation, he realized the prison was at war with itself in places—but he kept that detail from the Raven. He wanted to see if she would mention it—if she knew at all.

Something else might be happening here. Something that smells like Shiv. Heh. The Ascendants might be the first to touch the fire.

Chapter 175 (III) Escape

A tug on Adam's shoulder made him draw his Awareness back into himself, and he found that the Biomancer was leading him toward the new chamber at the opposite end of the hallway. Approximately five meters away was another teleportation anchor, but rather than a great many spells lining its cylindrical form, there were lockers built in the side. A sign hung above its doorway, which he read as Decontamination Zone. As they crossed through, the Raven immediately began stripping out of her medical attire, and she briefly looked over her shoulder at Adam.

"Take your helmet off last," she said. She reached over and ripped a locker open. Inside, he saw two sets of clothing. One was specifically his size as well. She pulled it out and handed it to him. Adam regarded the black-gray uniform with a faint look of unease.

"Out of the armor?" he asked. "I'm not sure if that's wise."

"You're not going to be able to keep it anyway," she said. "It was only meant to get you through security, and you don't want them to use it to track you mentally. Now, hurry. Or do you need help?"

He shook his head. "No, I'll manage."

He was familiar enough with the Republic's armor patterns that he managed to disassemble the plates in short order. His hands were still shaking, and he didn't nearly have as much dexterity as he would when healthy. But a faint strength was returning to him. He might not be capable of fighting now, but soon, very soon, he'd be more like himself again. As both he and the Raven put on a change of uniforms, she tapped the helmet on his head, and suddenly it shifted.

It went from being a frog helm of some kind to a cylindrical, dome-shaped object, and parts of it flowed down his neck across his arms until they clasped his hands in a similar material. Adam realized she was disguising him as an automaton now. Most humans wouldn't be able to tell unless they had the proper Skill Evolutions, and with everything happening, most of the automata here were likely distracted too.

She closed her locker and triggered the decontamination process with a wave of her hand. The spells hanging above them came alight with mana, and just then, a blaring siren sounded.

"Attention! All Pathbearers within the current cube! Pathbearers Bethany and Venison are to be detained and held! Repeat, detain and hold! Do not let them leave! If you have spotted Pathbearers Bethany and Venison, intercept! Their last known location is the decontamination chamber in the port side quadrant!"

As the Psychomantic broadcast ended, Adam just shook his head. "It all had to go wrong at some point."

"Not a moment too soon," the Raven declared. As the spells began to spiral above, Adam gave her a worried look. A banging sounded from the outside, but she didn't seem nervous at all. "Just give it a moment," she said. "I've made sure that—"

Suddenly, the spell above them changed. A few patterns broke out of place and slid into other sections. The glowing magic that pulsated with Biomancy, Pyromancy, Psychomancy, and more turned into something of Dimensionality. A wave of black static fell from above, consuming both Adam and the Raven. Suddenly, another pressure gripped him, and he found himself being flung across a vast tunnel of space.

"I've prepared for this for a long while," the Raven elaborated. "I've been here for years. My cell and I have compromised a good amount of the cubes over the time period, and we've kept up with our subversion in the meantime as well. You will be arriving within a safe house there. We will see you stored."

There came a ripple of instability. The Dimensionality mana surrounding them shivered, and for the first time, the Raven seemed disquieted. She looked down to her left, and Adam did as well. A hole had been opened in the mana tunnel they were traveling through, and Adam realized what was happening.

A figure burst in. They were humanoid in size, but Adam caught sight of a glinting weapon in their hands. He reacted.

"That—" was all the Raven managed to say before Adam threw himself against her, flaring his vector-wings into existence.

Vectors of the Eternal Ascent 139 > 140

A projectile snapped free from the invading Pathbearer and tore past Adam's shoulder, barely missing him. That attack was infused with Dimensionality mana as well—Adam could feel its sheer magical potency as it tore past him. It punched another hole through the tunnel surrounding them, and suddenly, the pressure dragging him across space itself collapsed. Adam found himself being flung free, and the Raven cried aloud, any semblance of control lost. He wasn't so cool and unflappable anymore, and the Gate Lord knew their escape plan had finally gone off the rails.

"Never going to let me have a smooth journey, are you, System?" Adam growled.

The world came into shape around him once more. He barked out a cry of pain as his body slammed against the cold, hard ground. Instead of being in some kind of safe house, Adam found himself lying in a valley. His head was pressed against a wall, but just then a loud, resounding impact made him jolt.

Something barely missed him, bouncing off the wall just a few centimeters away from his face. As he turned, he found himself in the middle of an active war zone. Pathbearers were tearing into each other. Prismatic armored wardens were fighting in groups, trying to contain several barely dressed prisoners. It took little time for Adam to put the pieces together and realize he was in one of the compromised cubes, trapped in a prison riot.

One was an elven woman with framed snake-like tattoos that curled around her body. There was something insectoid about her features as well, especially with the antenna jutting out from her forehead. She used that antenna to whip at the air, and Adam realized she wasn't striking blindly.

Several wardens fell apart in pieces thereafter, and the elven woman let out a chilling laugh as she threw herself into the fray once more. Not far away, an automaton composed mainly of spinning blades was being held against the Orichalcum walls by a group of heavily armored Vanguard. Though the wardens fought with all their might, the automaton seemed to be content with where it was, slowly sawing through their tower shields and chipping at their armor. It even hummed the jaunty tune while it was at it.

There came a scream of noise from above, and something glided fast overhead. By the time Adam looked up, he saw what appeared to be a chain of glowing orbs descending, and the Gate Lord's eyes widened. He didn't know what they were, but when something was glowing and falling, the human brain didn't need to make too many leaps before they got to the conclusion of a bomb.

A groan sounded beside Adam, and he realized that the Raven was lying flat on the ground. Her face was covered in blood, and he realized it wasn't hers, as not far away, the severed remains of a warden lay. And it was those severed remains that Adam leaped out to grab.

"Help me," Adam cried out. He pulled the warden back, but the Raven was too disoriented to respond. Instead, he pressed his body against hers and held the warden's armored form high.

Just then, the falling bomblets impacted the ground, and a wave of magical force swept through the narrow valley they found themselves in. The world turned bright. Adam hissed in agony at the heat. Patches of his skin were burned, but it would have been far worse if he hadn't had something with Magical Resistance to shield him. The Raven screamed as well, twitching and shuddering behind him.

There came a violent snap as Adam felt the dead warden's armor break apart. Its Magical Resistance had shattered, and soon he would feel the full sting of the Pyromancy eating through the valley. Just then, however, a blast of coldness swept through the space, severing the heat at its root.

Adam dropped the dead Pathbearer he was using as a shield and winced as he tried to ignore how raw and painful his skin felt. He patted at the few patches where his uniform was burning, and he put the Raven out as well. Her flesh was raw-red, and her eyes were bloodshot, but aside from that, she was mostly fine.

By this point, her training had taken over, and she was casting spells. She used her magic to mend herself, and then mend Adam as well, but the Gate Lord's attention wasn't on her; instead was on a towering creature, a kind that Adam had never seen before. It had a large reptilian head and a mostly human torso, though it was devoid of any nipples. Its arms, however, were several serpents, and they clamped down on a few downed and groaning wardens, swallowing them whole. The strange creature's legs were also like a jungle of vines, sprawling across the ground and allowing it to glide fast along the walls and floor. As Adam noticed it, it noticed Adam as well, and it narrowed its eyes.

"Oh shit," Adam growled. He held out a hand and pulled moisture from the air. A bow manifested, long and sturdy. He shaped a Veilpiercer and fought through the weakness still pulling at his body. "Raven!" he growled. "Stay with me. We're moving."

"What?"

The strange snake-human hybrid blasted forward, moving so fast that Adam barely reacted in time. But he did. He fired an arrow right between him and the serpent, and then fired two more in quick succession. Both arrows impacted the serpent, but Adam wasn't expecting it to do any harm. He was weak right now, and far too close. His arrows needed distance to build up velocity and kinetic energy.

But that wasn't the main thing he was trying to do.

Instead, three dimensional pathways opened up before him, and the serpent's attacks were prevented from arriving directly. Through this encounter, Adam also gauged the Raven's Reflexes Skill. She was

probably an Adept. She reacted far too slowly, but she still followed things in the aftermath. And so, it was with a cry of surprise that she found herself being dragged along down another dimensional pathway.

The moment after Adam fired three arrows, he fired a fourth with a new pair of hydrokinetic arms—a fourth that led them down along the narrow corridor of this strange place. She kicked her legs and looked up as Adam flared his wings. They went from being still to moving impossibly fast in an instant. As soon as they came free from the other side, the serpent was close behind them. The damn creature was fast, ridiculously fast. It passed through Adam's dimensional pathways in an instant, and it was closing on him. But he had an advantage.

Adam suddenly went downward, changing his vector without suffering any inertial consequence. The same couldn't be said for the snake-like entity. It tumbled along the walls, its many fiber-like legs lashing and spearing out, trying to seize him before he folded behind it, trying to find a surface for purchase to arrest its momentum. It failed. It crashed along the leftmost walls and tumbled down to the ground. It slammed down next to another group of wardens who were currently trying to hold a Pathbearer made from literal flames down, and he lost sight of it thereafter.

Adam fired another dimensional arrow and kept going. "Raven!" he called out. "I need you to figure out where we are, and I also need to know if you've subverted any kind of teleportation anchor here. I think someone intercepted our escape plan."

The Raven fought to control her breathing, but gave him a certain nod thereafter. As soon as they emerged from the dimensional pathway, Adam cried out as something slammed hard into his side. A series of cracks rattled through his body, and he felt multiple of his ribs break. His vision darkened momentarily, and it stayed dark as something tightened around his neck. A hissing sound followed, and Adam expected to see the snake-human hybrid.

Instead, the insectoid elven woman he saw earlier was here.

She stood across from him, the tattoos lining her body glowing, snakes undulating free from beneath her tattered clothes, seeping out from her bare skin as hardened ropes of water-mana. Adam tried to turn her magic aside, but she was strong. This was the strongest Hydromancy mana he'd ever felt.

The Gate Lord gagged. Beside him, the Raven choked as well. She tried to cast a Biomancy spell at the elf that held them, but the magic she channeled was simply split apart as it crashed into the elf's body. Worse yet, the moment the Biomancy mana impacted the elf, her tattoos flared even brighter, and a cruel smile grew across her face. The elf was bald, and her head was brutally scarred.

But it wasn't a messy scarring; it was ritualistic, and from it came a whispering noise, a hissed chanting, and it compelled Adam to project his Awareness into the tissue. As his Seer of Horizons rested against the woman's skull, he realized there was something there—something dwelling just under her skin, chittering and chattering inside her skull. For the first time, he began to suspect that this might not be an elf at all, but something wearing an elf's body.

"Oh, you think I missed the two of you?" the elf said. She let out a slow growl. "If you think I'm going to let you escape, that I'm going to let a single guard here go, then you are wrong, you are wrong. I will kill you, I will kill your families, I will drink the moisture from your bodies, and then you will be a part of me for good. I will finish the ritual, and the Feathered One will finally claim this wretched land as per their will in the name of the Bloodied Sun."

Chapter 175 (IV) Escape

Adam had no idea what the hells she was talking about, but he decided to respond by firing an arrow directly into her face. The Veilpuercer crashed against her chin, but rather than impacting her in any way, it splashed into her skin and glided along her body, becoming as if a tattoo itself.

And just then, Adam realized he might be dealing with something a bit more than just Heroic. Oh, good felling shit.

The nightmarish elven Pathbearer gave him a smirk and slammed him back-first against the nearest wall. Two things happened to Adam then. His shoulder shattered, and he leveled up in Toughness again.

Repulsion Shroud 100 > 101 (Skill Evolution Reached)

Skill Evolution: Repulsion Shroud (Adept) > Phoenix Riposte (Heroic)

A choked cry turned into a resounding shout of surprise as Adam felt his body combust. He was suddenly consumed by a rush of force, and a lightness took hold of him. A lightness as if he were a feather dancing in the wind. And then he was moving fast. The world twisted around him, and instinct took hold. He knew there was a lot of force resting inside him, derived from his injury—a great deal of weight he needed to impart on something else before time ran out. And so Adam did.

He launched himself directly into the elven Pathbearer that was holding him and let out a vicious shriek. Instead of hearing his own voice, the sound of a hawk echoed through the air, and Adam slammed into the elf, not as a person, but as a comet of falling flame.

A blast followed, a blast of force and fading ash. The elf was driven back a step, and Adam's cracked shoulder became a large bruise instead. It still hurt, but rather than being a jagged, stabbing pain, it was simply a throbbing ache. The combustion faded from Adam's body, and soon, weight returned to him as well. He stood before the stunned enemy and took advantage of her surprise.

He jammed a fist against her face and winced as his knuckle cracked. Once more, his body came ablaze, but the intensity was lesser, and he realized the time he could burn was far shorter as well. The moment he came alight, he began returning to his physical form again. But Adam didn't let that opportunity go,

driving himself against the elf, and the impact that had cracked one of his knuckles simply became a bruise once more. This time, the elven Pathbearer wasn't driven back, but she was still startled. And Adam began to get the hang of his new skill evolution.

New plan, he decided. He clapped the elven Pathbearer across her left ear, not physically, but using a brief pulse of Necromancy. A splash of corrosive mana disfigured the rim of the elven Pathbearer's ear, and she let out a cry of alarm.

At the same time, Adam fired an arrow straight down and plunged through a dimensional pathway using his vector wings to accelerate even faster. He emerged from the wall right behind him and snatched the Raven out from the elven Pathbearer's grasp. The serpents, distracted just like their master was, gave little struggle as Adam slashed through them using a hydrokinetic blade.

Yet his evolution and momentary cunning granted him barely more than a second of breathing room. The elven Pathbearer was still far greater than he was, a Hero in Reflexes if he had to guess. By all rights, she should have cut him down. By all rights, the many snakes that infused her body should have lashed through the air and shredded him down to mincemeat and bloody mist.

Before she could do anything, however, a splash of black static emerged behind her, and a hand was driven through her chest. Suddenly, the snakes extending from her being splashed down, becoming nothing more than droplets of water. The elven Pathbearer groaned, and she stared at the appendage jutting free from her chest.

What it clutched, however, wasn't a heart, but what seemed to be a porous, pulsating hive with strange, wriggling creatures akin to insects crawling along its surface. Adam thought they resembled snakes as well, but they had feathers at the end instead of scaly tails.

The creatures looked up at the elf and let out a vicious cry. The noise was thin like a whistle, but it was bad enough that it gave Adam a nosebleed. The elven Pathbearer clutched at the arm jutting free from her, trying to pull it free, but then another hand joined the first, and a moment later, she was ripped in half. Both sides of her corpse impacted the far walls as Adam kept flying.

He caught sight of the figure from earlier. It was a tall Pathbearer clad in black, static armor. He wielded a massive scythe-like blade that also doubled as a great bow, and Adam recognized this enemy. This Pathbearer was the one that knocked both him and the Raven off track when they were trying to escape through the anchor. "Shit," Adam hissed again. "Godsdammit, System, just give me—"

The new Pathbearer vanished in a swell of black static. It was only instinct and guesswork that kept Adam from being knocked unconscious. He pointed his vector wings straight down, and a fist cut through the air where he used to be. The dimension-piercing Pathbearer emerged a good meter above Adam, and he let out an audible curse as he missed his swing. Adam cried out in panic. He was about to say something else when the hostile Pathbearer accelerated into him.

Adam let out a cry as he was driven down against the floor, and once more, his Phoenix Riposte activated. The enemy Pathbearer couldn't hold onto him. Adam swirled around the man's body and slammed into him one more time. He got a new bruise from the experience and fired two Veilpiercers straight into his lower back.

Both dimensional arrows bounced off like wooden javelins greeting steel plate. The Pathbearer swung his arm, cracking Adam across the jaw, and Phoenix Riposte activated again. Adam's teeth should have shattered. His jaw should have turned into nothing but shards of bone. Instead, he slammed against the offending Pathbearer once more and drove his head off at an angle.

As Adam returned, he kicked off the enemy Pathbearer with a backflip and fired an arrow directly above him. As he plunged through the dimensional space, it collapsed immediately, and he felt himself displaced out from the same side he was trying to escape through. This time, there was nowhere to go. Instead of hitting him, the enemy Pathbearer seized him by the throat and pinned him to the wall gently.

"What is it with you bastards and strangulation?" Adam cried out through gritted teeth.

"Nice attempt," the warden growled, "but you're finished. This is done. You're going back to your cell."

A collapsing wave of mana slammed against Adam—and it was only his own Veilpiercer that kept him from being cast somewhere else immediately. Despite this, Adam cried out as his Dimensionality mana was practically flayed to its foundations. He wasn't a Master wrestling against a Hero. He was a Master facing something far greater.

Veilpiercer 163 > 165

Adam managed to endure for a full second before everything went to hell. Darkness curled around Adam, and the cold hand of another Pathbearer seemed fated to be the guide that decided Adam's path.

Yet Adam wasn't quite done just yet. He fired an arrow off to his left, and rather than aiming at the hulking Pathbearer, his own arrow slammed into the side of his head so hard that it should have been fatal. Yet Adam came ablaze. Suddenly, he shot past the enemy Pathbearer and crashed against the wall.

As soon as he did, a good portion of the force inflicted upon him was displaced. Adam slid down the wall with a swollen lump on his head rather than a shattered skull or even a concussion. But even that only brought him half a second of time. Adam zoomed backward using his vector-wings, and he barely avoided a swinging hand. One that left actual scratches on the Orichalcum.

Adam's eyes widened, and then they widened further as Adam noticed the large, snake-bodied Pathbearer approaching the dimensional hunter from behind. And it was then that Adam reacted. He tore at his uniform and struck himself in the jaw. Once more, he turned into a phoenix and bounced off the ground. He avoided the dimensional hunter for an instant, which bought him just enough time for the snake-limbed Pathbearer to intervene.

They slammed against the dimensional hunter, driving them against the wall before rolling across the ground. The two struggled, their bodies becoming a blur before Adam's eyes, but he had a few moments to breathe.

"Raven," Adam called out, "I need you to..." And then he realized the agent was missing. "Shit!" He directed his Awareness—and found the corpse of the Raven smeared against the wall. At some point, something had struck her and eviscerated her entirely. Adam didn't even notice what killed her.

He didn't get even a second to think about her fate before a large, pitch-black arrow carved past Adam. It barely missed him, and he noticed the dimensional hunter being overpowered by the serpent-limbed prisoner. Adam moved to flee, but then his mind turned to other possibilities.

He knows just how many wardens were here, and just how many prisoners were fighting them. The prisoners here were strong, powerful, and right now, Adam was dressed too much like one of the wardens. If he managed to differentiate himself from the other prismatic armored people, he could mix in with the prisoners, perhaps even use them to—

Tactical Overseer 100 > 101 (Skill Evolution Reached)

Skill Evolution: Tactical Overseer (Adept) > Commander's Foresight (Heroic)

Time halted. Adam's perspective shifted entirely, unlatching from his body. As he looked down at the battlefield from high above, a swelling heat flooded his mind, and he felt his consciousness overclock. And soon, Adam saw the world not as a person, but as a general looking down at a chessboard.

And right now, there were a lot of useful pieces he could possess. He'd lost the Raven, but maybe he'd gained something far, far greater. He used his Seer of Horizon Skill in tandem with his new Commander's Foresight, and he began composing a plan. He isolated prisoners that were struggling against the guards first, charting a path. Adam didn't know nearly enough about this prison to escape on his own, and he wasn't strong enough to stop some of his adversaries, but he would find people who could help. He would make them owe him.

Adam retracted his foresight back into his body, and he clenched his teeth as a rush of pain pulled at his mind. Using Commander's Foresight stopped time as he planned, but it also cooked his brain, and likely took a lot of his cognition to do. He needed to be mindful when he used that skill. He fired an arrow, and as it sailed through the world, leaving a rupture, its other end impacted the head of an armored warden and sent them stumbling off to the side.

That created a domino effect, as the Pathbearer they were trying to hold down burst free. A humanoid shape seemingly composed of nothing but fire unleashed a searing wave of Pyromancy. The other guards were launched back, and Adam could sense them being cooked inside their armor.

When the flames died down again, Adam arrived through a dimensional tunnel, where he found the burning Pathbearer planting a foot on the skull of one of the wardens. He heard her scream, smelled her burning flesh, and winced as the escaped prisoner's foot melted through the warden's helmet and finally cooked her brain matter.

A moment of peace followed amidst the surrounding chaos. The incandescent Pathbearer turned to regard Adam, noticing he had a Veilpiercer knocked, but pointed to the floor. By this point, Adam's uniform was shredded, leaving his torso partially bare.

"You looked like you needed help," Adam said, looking the prisoner up and down. They were about the same size as him, and it was only now that the flames had calmed slightly that he noticed that the Pathbearer didn't seem to have any flesh on their body. Instead, they were like a burning candle, with a pristine, human skeleton instead of a wick. "And you look like you really want out of this prison," the Gate Lord continued. "A man after my own heart. What say we stick together and start increasing our odds?"

The burning skeleton regarded Adam briefly, pure-white spots flickering in its sockets, so bright that they seared spots into Adam's vision if he stared too long. He felt increasingly uneasy. For a moment, he wondered if he was just going to be incinerated, but then the fiery Pathbearer let out a low breath. "I would hug you right now for saying those words," he rasped, his voice sounding far more like a normal man's than Adam had expected, "but I don't think you would survive it."

"That's fine," Adam replied, his tension dissipating just slightly. "I think you should hug a few guards for me. I'll accept that as a recompense. And I think we should go make a few more friends too." He looked around. "It seems like there are more people than just us who wish to leave."

And that made the burning man snicker, his fire dancing rhythmically with the noise. "Can't just be us, indeed. I like you, Bowman. But stay back. These flames are not good for your health."

"Duly noted."

Adam Arrow was good at making friends when he put his mind to it.