

Deathless 176

Chapter 176 (I) Decisions

Leadership is made up of three things, son. Vision, choice, and imperfection.

When you lead, you need to sell people on an idea; a path that they can follow. This ties into choice, but the main reason people seek a leader out is that they are uncertain, that they're lost, that they don't have an idea, and that's something that matters. An idea, a hope, a reason to believe, a reason to fight. When you come of age, you will encounter sell-skills and other Pathbearers who use cynicism or naked cruelty as a shield.

But a vision governs them too. It's a vision of themselves, nourished, comfortable, and protected from harm. I will tell you right now so that you do not need to learn this the harsh way. Every cynic is vulnerable, for they turned away from idealism because of defeat or fear. Should you be able to rekindle their hopes, then they will follow you unlike any other. Because that's what it means to govern someone's vision.

Eventually, they will give you their heart, but they must choose. To be a true leader, you cannot be a tyrant. Fear is potent; fear will betray you the moment you face someone with greater power. Fear is fickle.

Leadership is not a thing of ethics, but a thing of simplicity. If you must force people to decide the same as you do, then there will be a price to pay. You must always be paranoid. You must always watch and fear and worry if you are to be betrayed. There will be betrayals in your future. But the difference between a tyrant and a leader is that a leader will find proper Pathbearers to surround themselves with, and a tyrant will always fight to hold the throne. And someday, perhaps long in the distance, or as near as a few steps away, you will lose the throne because of a series of unfortunate mistakes, or a superior adversary.

Finally, imperfection. Imperfection will rule both you and the people you lead. You cannot possibly understand everyone. And the same applies to the fact that you cannot possibly lead everyone. There will be people that will not listen to you, that will not believe in you. That is fine, that is not your failure. Even failure is not your failure. It is complicated. It is important that you understand what you can do and where you might falter. If you can do that, if you can bring these three things together, then you will look back someday and find yourself bolstered by countless allies.

People are born into Integration with little to do other than to struggle vainly and strive for power, to yearn for purpose. Give it to them, and make sure it's a good one.

-Roland Arrow to Adam Arrow

As the situation within the valley-shaped prison broke down into a series of skirmishes, Adam focused his Awareness to find the next recruit for his team. The burning Pathbearer was already a reliable Vanguard of a sort, but Adam still needed a scout and a dedicated mage to complete a team ensemble. However, he wasn't looking for just any Pathbearer to round out his team. He wanted to find someone who was desperate, who likely couldn't prevail against the wardens on their own.

The reason for that was simple. It gave Adam the best chance of controlling or escaping from them if they proved to be dangerous, and the less powerful were usually more willing to band together. Such was the calculus going through the Gate Lord's mind.

His Seer of Horizons accelerated down the valley as he searched for proper candidates. He saw a massive automaton that blinked from place to place, hatching into existence with knife-like petals. Wardens peeled apart in its presence, and the automaton let out a droning laugh of cruel triumph. As it tried to teleport once more, the spells lining the Orichalcum walls flashed, and the automaton rebounded, crashing back-first against the ground.

Adam considered going for that one, but a mage-warden immediately unleashed a bolt of bright-yellow lightning into the fallen automaton and fried the bot's internal circuitry. Adam had heard enough automaton death rattles to know that the prisoner was lost.

His senses jumped again—this time going upward. The soaring prisoner from earlier returned. He resembled a sort of bird-human hybrid with flaming wings and blazing plumage detailing his body. Yet, blood was spraying free from a deep wound in his neck, and Adam noted a steel bolt in the man's throat.

Ah, Ascendants. Adam winced. The flying Pathbearer fell from the air and struck the ground with a resounding crash. A spatial pocket burst open nearby, and a small group of wardens emerged with blades descending. The prisoner tried to rise one final time, but his limbs were taken, and his wings thereafter. The wardens are reasserting their control. I need to work fast, I need to—

A sound of a body crashing against a shield drew Adam's attention, and he immediately projected his Awareness toward the source of the disturbance. The moment he arrived, he found himself gazing upon a fascinating scene. Twelve heavily armored wardens were surrounding a single prisoner using tower shields that projected vertical and horizontal barriers made from mana. The mana connected the shields to each other, effectively doming one of the prisoners in.

Through the magical sheen, Adam observed the prisoner and noted their capabilities. They were little more than a golden-green blur slamming against the shields over and over again, hundreds upon hundreds of times per second. Adam guessed they were Legendary in terms of Reflexes, far beyond his capacity to follow when time flowed normally. However, their strength wasn't very high, seeing how they couldn't just break out.

Looks like I found my scout. Maybe a Thief or a Shadow based on their Path. Right. Let's do this.

“Friend. Hold. I found some fools you can hug.”

The burning man stared at Adam, and then let out a raspy laugh. “But there are plenty of poor fuckers to cook nearby, little guy? Why not them?”

Adam noted a group of badly wounded wardens just fifty meters away. They emerged from a dense veil of smoke, and were dragging other survivors away from the scene of a battle. Just then, a colossal impact shook the Orichalcum valley, and a rush of kinetic force came flooding toward the wounded wardens. Adam flinched as he saw a wall of flame surging over, but then one of the wardens let out a cry and parried the oncoming blast aside. The explosion curled up the leftmost wall as it rebounded from the warden’s shield.

“Bloody hells,” Adam muttered to himself. “They’re all Heroic-Tier too. At least.”

“Told you,” the burning man said, his skeletal fingers twitching under his flaming aura. “Deal with them first—”

“No. We avoid them.” Adam prepared an arrow and continued his explanation so that it didn’t sound like he was bossing the burning man around. Most Pathbearers hated being commanded by someone weaker. “I suggest that we avoid them so that we can build up our little ground and capture a guard station. I hate the bastards too, but I want to get out. Don’t you?”

The burning man froze mid-step and slowly nodded. “Yeah. Yeah. Fine. Alright. Wait, guard station? You know how to get to a guard station?”

“Not alone,” Adam said. “I know where they are, though. I can see through the gaps in these walls. I just need to find a way to get through the Orichalcum.”

The burning man studied the red-gold walls nearby and cracked his neck. His flames flared outward. “Give me a bit, and I can melt my way out.”

“Right. But we’re not doing that without someone fast. Someone that can intercept enemies before they get to you. I’m not going to be enough. But I know someone who just might be. And if we help them—”

“They’ll scratch our asses too,” the burning man finished, following Adam’s train of thought. “I get you. I get you good. Alright. Show me the next member of our club and make it fast. I can’t hold back the burn for too much longer. I gotta spend it on something soon before I end up popping.”

Adam frowned. He did notice the surrounding temperature was climbing fast. The burning man’s dot-like eyes turned into half moons. Adam got the explicit feeling that The Legendary Pyromancer was smiling at him. It was oddly unnerving. There was something deeply unpalatable about needing to rely on criminals and prisoners to preserve one’s own life against their own government. It made Adam feel like a criminal himself.

Because I bloody am, godsdammit!Godsdamn you, Stormhalt. And godsdamned all the Ascendants too. Just utter madness...

Pushing all thoughts aside, Adam primed a Veilpiercer and prepared to release his shot. But as he flexed his muscles and drew back on his hydrokinetic bow, something changed inside of him. Something completely burst and shattered. For a moment, Adam thought he was more injured than he realized. He'd sustained several brutal blows earlier, impacts that should have concussed or shattered his body, yet Werte reduced down to mere bruises and contusions by his Phoenix Riposte skill. Yet, there was also another detail: he felt no pain, instead Adam felt stronger than he ever did before, and heavier too.

It was then that he saw some transparent particulates in the air flowing into him. As they splashed against Adam's body, he saw how his flesh rippled, felt his very nature go softer, as if he was becoming fluid. What the hells is happening to—

Skybearer's Strength 100 > 102 (Skill Evolution Reached)

Hydromancy 50 > 52 (Skill Evolution Reached)

Skill Evolution: Skybearer's Strength (Adept) - Hydromancy (Initiate) > Herald of the Deepest Fathoms (Heroic)

Particulates of moisture were drawn into his body, and his very flesh became akin to the surface of a turbulent ocean. Waves crashed around Adam as his Hydrokinetic bow became less like a stable water construct and more like a raging tsunami compressed into a curving shape. More uncannily, Adam could feel the tsunami as if it were part of his flesh. And that was because it was.

Herald of the Deepest Fathoms, Adam thought as he observed the skill. He had heard of the Skill Evolution before, and the fact that he'd obtained it left him utterly perplexed. It wasn't a common skill evolution for a human, instead it was more often found in Elder Merfolk who specialized in ranged combat, or certain krakens that survived long to gain sapience and commit themselves to archery.

Thanks to Adam's knowledge, he knew the general way this skill worked, and a smile appeared on his face just as he turned entirely into liquid. Despite the misery pressing down on his mind because of the fact that he was in this prison and how his own Republic had betrayed him, a faint note of triumph played in the depths of Gate Lord Arrow's heart.

The world could be cruel and savage, the System might be out for his blood, but with every battle Adam survived, he became a bit more than who he used to be. The Ascendants were going to discover the folly of not killing him when they had the chance.

"You alright there, little guy?" the burning man asked, regarding Adam with body language that spoke of worry. "You feel a lot wetter than you did a moment ago."

"I feel—" Adam paused. It was then that he realized that the burning man apparently couldn't really see. Maybe he just senses things by heat signatures or ambient moisture? How fascinating.

"Don't mind me," Adam replied, "I'm just building up a bit of strength for my skill."

As he gathered more and more moisture from the air, a dryness consumed the surrounding space, and his physical form vanished entirely. He was now a goliath shaped from crashing waves, a behemoth forged in the ocean's depths that barely retained the dimensions of a human. With every bit of water he absorbed, so too climbed his strength; so too grew the pressure that gripped his very core. But it wasn't painful pressure, instead, it was a power that Adam enjoyed. Rather than relying on his muscles, Adam felt like an incarnation of the ocean itself.

He drew back on his new bow like never before.

A dense cord shaped from surging rivers was drawn past Adam's water-forged ear. A tension built along its length as Adam channeled even more Hydrokinetic power into the bow itself. By this point he was well over four meters tall. Nearby wardens with compromised armors gagged and died as their innate

Magical Resistance shattered and the water in their bodies was ripped free, fueling Adam's ever-growing strength.

"When the dimensional pathway opens, go straight across," Adam said. His words were deep, and they came out not as if a human spoke them, but as if the crashing waters of the ocean spat out a cataclysmic roar. "Kill the wardens, but try not to burn who will hopefully be our new associate."

By this point, other wardens had noticed him and the burning man. One of them pointed in his direction. Adam didn't care. A Veilpiercer formed along the length of his new great bow, and when he could draw it back no further, he let the bowstring free. The air before him detonated like a deafening thunderclap. A dimensional rift was torn open, its width three times the previous norm. The burning man flinched at Adam's awesome display of archery, and in a fraction of a fraction of a second, the dimensional arrow impacted one of the wardens doing their best to contain the blurring prisoner within their shield cage.

There were eight hundred meters between Adam and the warden he shot. They weren't ready for him; he was stronger than ever before; the Veilpiercer had time to travel. The results were fatal. It didn't matter that the warden was clad in adamantine armor. It didn't matter that he was a Vanguard with considerable levels in Toughness to boot. It didn't matter, for when Adam's arrow struck the warden in the back of the neck, it was as if a hammer falling upon a beetle.

The adamantine plating guarding the man's supple flesh gave a sickening scream as it was promptly compressed inward. Adam caught a brief spray of blood as everything inside the man was pulped, his innards spilling free from the rinse lining his broken armor.

Veilpiercer 165 > 166

This provoked an immediate reaction from the other Vanguards. Two stepped out and swung their shields in the direction of Adam's projectile. At the same time, Adam heard some of the wardens near

him fast approaching. He used his Commander's Foresight Skill and halted the moment. Two approaching. Looks like one is an Archer like me. They will probably fire a shot in the next second. The other is a mage. Neither should have very high Toughness. But they're close, and they're dressed in adamantine too. I'm unlikely to achieve an easy kill here. I should have the burning man move across and then follow him. No hesitation.

As soon as he stopped using his evolved tactical skill, a faint ache passed through his skull. "Across! Across now!" he called out to the burning man. The momentarily stunned prisoner responded as if awakened from a stupor, blasting into motion. A flash of heat struck Adam, but rather than suffering any burns, the Gate Lord endured a rush of weakness as some of his water-mass was dissolved by the spike in temperature. "Well, that's useful," Adam muttered.

Just then, he felt a spike of magical pressure in the air and noticed a Hydromancy spell lashing out to cage him. As it struck his body, he winced as he prepared to feel his Hydromancy tear, yet found only a crushing sensation instead. He remembered that his Hydromancy had evolved alongside his Physicality and pushed through the spell with a shout. A crack sounded. An arrow arched over his dimensional rift and struck his body—and passed through without inflicting any actual harm.

Gods, this is a good skill, Adam thought to himself.

He rushed after the burning man, accelerating into the dimensional pathway. To his pleasure, Vectors of the Eternal Ascent allowed him to glide from place to place with ease. His new body tumbled through the dimensional channel like a raging flood—no, not like. He was a literal raging flood now. If Adam had to guess, he was well over three tons right now, and if he gathered more moisture he could keep building on his Physicality. He wondered if there was a limit to his new strength—he would test that by draining as much fluid as he could from the environment.

As soon as he burst out from the exit, he found himself slamming into two wardens from behind as he doused some of the burning man's lingering flames. The wardens Adam struck cried out, surprised and laid low by his sudden emergence. He tore free from his own rift in jetstreams of water. Bones broke against him. Armor endured. But Adam lashed at more than just bodies now—he could strike Magical

Resistances as well. More importantly, he funneled his Physicality down the orifices of the two enemies he just hit and felt them gag.

Rather than letting them fly free, he drew them deeper into his embrace and compressed his might inward. He held them there as he flooded their lungs, as he choked them while trying to follow in the burning man's wake.

To the Vanguard Wardens' credit, they hadn't collapsed before Adam's ambush and were holding the Pyromancer back. One of their number was channeling more mana into their shield, creating what seemed to be a pulsating dome of mana infused with hints of Pyromancy. The others stabbed at the blazing figure using a lightning infused halberd. Adam's fiery recruit was fast and strong, but he fought like a thug, without any technique. He let his enemies cut him, and where they nicked his bones, jets of flame spewed forth, splashing toward his foes.

Even through the clamor of chaos and battle, Adam could hear the burning man laugh. It was the sound of a building crackle. It was the growl of a forest fire yet to reach its apex. And it was drowned as two dimensional wounds opened up behind the two unsuspecting Vanguards holding the burning man back.

Adam unleashed a chain of Veilpiercers as they struck his enemies. The Vanguards folded as they failed to anticipate this asymmetric attack. It left them merely injured—yet that was bad enough. As they crumbled, more arrows exploded out from them due to Adam's Propagating Salvo Skill. These new arrows zipped out and impacted the other Vanguards still battling to contain their fast-moving prisoner.

The Gate Lord readied another shot—but paused as the world went white in front of him.

“FEEL IT! FEEL MY EXISTENCE!”

A pure beam of Pyromancy erupted forth from the burning man, consuming everything in front of him in a cylindrical shape.

There were only a few meters between the Pyromancer and Adam, and the Gate Lord expected to feel an incense rise in heat, but instead, only the space in front of the burning man came ablaze. And what a blaze it was. At first, Adam saw the wardens as faint shadows. About three seconds later, there wasn't even that.

And that was a good thing, as Adam was still building up more moisture. But he was having a hard time containing all the fluid that made up his body now. Every time he moved or took a shot, parts of him were left behind as he failed to hold on to them. The Gate Lord winced internally and understood what he had to do. I really need Parallel Thinking. This skill demands too much concentration.

Just then, an alloyed spike tore through his chest. Adam felt something inside him part, but then meld back together. He realized the two Pathbearers he was drowning were making a last-ditch effort to get free. At the same time, Adam could hear at least fifteen sets of heartbeat nearby. More wardens were on the way, and he needed to deal with them. The first thing the Gate Lord did was spit the wardens he was drowning inside himself out at the burning man. The moment they tumbled past the Pyromancer, they were vaporized entirely, along with their adamantine plate.

Good thing I'm not standing in front of him, Adam thought with a shudder. He wasn't lying when he said I might want to keep my distance.

Adam fired shot after shot at the enemies coming from behind. Between his vector wings and his fluid morphology, physical attacks either missed and passed through Adam without inflicting true harm, and magical spells were avoided entirely. Veilpiercers crashed into his enemies in an unceasing stream. Every arrow spawned more, and where he didn't slaughter his foes immediately, he launched them against walls, sent them sprawling across the ground, broke knees, and shattered ankles.

A few wardens had strange skills of their own. One turned into a rush of wind when they dashed—but they were combusted by the burning man as he waved a hand, reduced to cinders in an instant.

“Oh, yeah, baby!” The burning man let out a near lustful shout. “I’ve been holding that one back for a good long while! Yeah! YEAH! Burning’s good! Love to burn! Burn is love!”

With every word the burning man spoke, Adam felt his discomfort grow. The Pyromancer was a psychotic pyromaniac at the very least, and probably had a pretty good reason for being in this prison. But prisoners couldn’t be choosers, so Adam was going to keep using him and figure out the moral dilemmas later. Gods, that’s such a Shiv and Uva thing to do...

Chapter 176 (II) Decisions

“Switch positions with me,” Adam said. He tore through the air and hovered just over the Pyromancer. “I’m going to—shit, I hope you didn’t burn them to death.” He was looking for any sign of the fast-moving Pathbearer he came here to recruit. Right now, though, all he saw on the ground were a few puddles of melted adamantine, the smoking corpse of a Vanguard with impressive Toughness, and a few soot patches aside. There was no sign of the blurring prisoner.

Dammit. I told him to—

A spatial pocket burst open right beside Adam. A heavy blow slammed hard against his body. This time, the force didn’t just pass through him. It crushed down on every part of him, ensuring there was no way for him to disperse the impact. It was then that Adam realized he was surrounded—and that it was not just one team of wardens jumping in to ambush him, but four. Twenty heavily armed Pathbearers tore into him with Dynamancy first, caging his Hydrokinetic form. But then they made a mistake. Before the Pyromancers among them could do anything, the Dynamancers squeezed too hard, and Adam released the water he was pulling into himself.

The excess fluids blasted free from him in a concentric tidal wave, and Adam snarled as he felt his bones crack beneath the gravitation pressure. The tidal wave slammed into the wardens surrounding him first. It didn't harm them much, but it did stun them long enough for him to reposition himself using Phoenix Riposte. He landed right behind the burning man and began drawing in water once more. As his flesh quivered, he called out to his companion, trying to get the Pyromancer to stop burning corpses and face the new enemies.

And then twenty fountains of blood erupted all around him as twenty wardens were beheaded simultaneously.

Adam's breath caught in his throat as he beheld the carnage. He activated his Commander's Foresight Skill immediately—and found himself startled to notice a new presence in the fray. The world turned top-down, and there was something standing right next to him. No. Not something, someone.

Adam found himself staring down at what he thought to be the small form of a goblin. She was of average height for her race, a good meter shorter than Adam. Her prison jumpsuit was partially shredded, leaving her green-skinned stomach and parts of her back bare, and it was the latter that had caused Adam to do a double-take at first. Her back, neck, and arms were densely covered in long, golden quills that pierced through her clothing, and they grew from her head instead of hair as well, making her look akin to a goblin-shaped echidna. Wicked, curved claws, each the length of her lower arms, extended forth from her fingers like scythes, and a shimmering mirage was left in her wake. Her large, golden eyes were wide open, but from how her jaw was relaxed, he thought it was due to focus rather than panic.

As Adam's head swelled with heat, he noticed illusory outlines of the goblin flickering past the decapitated head of each of the twenty wardens.

Well, I suspect I found my scout. But... she's pretty close to my neck as well. Oh, gods, I hope she doesn't behead me too. Yet, with how she had her arms down by her sides and was just staring up at Adam, he had a feeling he wasn't about to get finished just quite yet.

Commander's Foresight 101 > 102

He dismissed his Tactical Skill and shifted back just into his body. He immediately turned fully fluid just in case, but the goblin prison remained in place, staring up at Adam while the burning man loudly proclaimed to no one in particular that the world was his oven and he wanted to fry the sky.

"Well," Adam said, looking down at the goblin. "Hello. I'm glad to see you remain unburned." He coughed awkwardly as the goblin just stared at him with her golden-glowing eyes. Due to that and the golden outlines that had beheaded the wardens, he highly suspected that he was dealing with a Chronomancer.

Adam opened his mouth again, but then she suddenly vanished—only to return between blinks, with blood dripping from her claws onto her bare feet and entrails hanging around her small torso. The viscera painted the thin rags she wore red, and she gnawed on what looked like a collection of ears.

The suddenness of her disappearance and return was jarring. The violence painting her even more so. Again, Adam was reminded that he was drawing his recruits from a pool of Legendary prisoners. Felling hells. Shiv. Uva. I'm never complaining about either of you again.

"You're the one that fired the shots," the goblin said, speaking so fast it took Adam's brain a moment to catch up.

“Hey, you our new Thief?” the burning man asked as he sauntered over.

The goblin vanished and appeared behind Adam, using him as cover from the burning man. “Keep him away. Hot. Don’t like heat. Don’t like him. Doesn’t care what he burns. Deranged.” Her quills bristled as she spoke, and she shook her head in a rapid blur. A human’s nose might have wrinkled, but goblins only had slits for nostrils. Even so, her feelings for the Pyromancer were more than clear.

“What did she just call me?” the man in question asked, sounding more confused than offended. Adam guessed his Awareness was either inferior to his own or not specifically good with sound, so he had an even harder time understanding the goblin than the Gate Lord himself.

“She said you were the rage,” Adam quickly said. He chose to hold up a hand before the goblin, and she just frowned slightly as she continued eating ear after ear, shredding them between her sharp teeth. “Listen. We’re going to—”

“You want to break out. Recruiting me because of my speed. Need someone to intercept or keep you both protected from ambushers. Got it. I’ll do it. You have a plan about getting out? Know where to go? What to do? What’s the plan? What are we doing? Where are we going?”

Questions left her lips in an unceasing rush, and Adam found himself overwhelmed. The goblin didn’t just move absurdly fast; she thought that way too.

“I might have a plan,” Adam said. “We need to get out of this place first and maybe secure a nearby station. I think I saw a guard-manned cube earlier. Not that many people inside. A common living space, a teleportation anchor, and a few other rooms as well. We can use that to figure out our next move—learn the layout of the prison.”

The goblin blinked—or at least he thought she did—and then nodded rapidly. “Acceptable. But we need a way through the Orichalcum. Or someone needs to disable the warding spells. Can’t do it. Tried. Claws not sharp enough. Hard to use Chronomancy to displace myself with the wards constantly active. Need alternative strategies.”

Adam extended a quivering hand made of water and realized he didn’t know the burning man’s name. They had a brief moment of respite just then. There were no wardens within a hundred-meter radius. Most of them within fifty were burned down to smoldering husks. The rest had their ears taken and throats slit.

I need to be very careful about how I interact with my two new friends, he reminded himself.

“Firstly, do either of you two have names?” Adam asked.

“Call me Candles,” the burning man said with a laugh. “Candles McCormac.”

“Candles McCormac,” the goblin muttered. “I am Gone.”

“What?” Adam said.

“Gone. That's my name. That's what you can call me.”

“Uh, alright. Well. I think we should get a—”

“Mage. Dedicated. You already serve that purpose. Reserve mage? Maybe. Risky. No other prisoner in this cube has the mental stability for that. Unless Wormtooth is still alive. Can go take a quick look.”

Adam gritted his teeth as he caught up with what the goblin was saying, a full three seconds after. “Yes, but—” The moment he agreed, Gone was... well, bloody gone. “We should move together to maintain maximum security,” he finished with a sigh. Controlling Legendary-Tier prisoners wasn’t going to be easy. Adam knew that. “Candles. You want to try burning your way through the walls now? We seem to have an opening.”

Candles threw his head back and let out a primal cackle as he cracked his knuckles. “Yeah! Let’s see at what temperature Orichalcum melts! Buuuuurrrnnnnn, baby!”

A dense beam of flame exploded out from Candles’ entire body. It splashed against the Orichalcum walls, but the Pyromancy simply splashed outward without inflicting any harm. The Gate Lord used his Divination then to track Gone. He focused on the afterimage she left behind, and immediately, the System began whispering details directly into his mind, painting visuals before his eyes. A violet glow manifested to his left—

And then Gone was back again. She dropped a badly mutilated skull at Adam’s feet. “Wormtooth didn’t make it.” And then the goblin began loudly sobbing in anguish. For about a second. Then her expression turned neutral again, and she wiped her eyes with the heels of her hands before shaking her head. “We should leave. You shouldn’t have let me mourn so long. Only friend here; barely knew her.”

Gone went from point to point so fast that she gave Adam whiplash.

“I—right, so—”

A crushing force pressed down on him as a burst of pain flooded his being. Yet, the part of him that ached was spiritual. His Dimensionality was in agony, and he realized what was coming. “Contact!” Adam shouted. “Enemy—”

The dimensional hunter emerged. Candles swung his body around and channeled his Pyromancy into the ambusher with a shout. Adam triggered his Commander’s Foresight Skill and bade the battlefield to halt for a moment. As everything came to a standstill, Adam fought off a spike of pain burrowing through his brain matter and studied the dimensional hunter. His armor was cracked in several places and leaking static mana. One of his arms was slightly limp, but it still held onto his bladed greatbow.

There were but three meters between the warden and Adam, and there was already a dimensional arrow nocked along his bow. He needed to face this enemy with careful precision. He’d resisted his Dimensionality earlier, but it had left his mana strained. The Gate Lord doubted he could take another direct blast of mana from this enemy. But he was wounded, and Gone was right behind him as well.

Alone, Adam was outmatched. But the dimensional hunter had made a mistake. He gave Adam time. And so Adam changed the variables of their struggle. The dimensional hunter came here to hunt the Gate Lord down and bring him back to the Ascendants as a prisoner. Too bad all he did was damned himself to an early death.

Should have brought backup, fool, Adam sneered. Heat began to swell up inside his skull, but he considered how he might be most useful in this battle. Gone was far faster, and Candles had incredible Pyromancy. What did Adam have that could stun the hunter?

I have mass and pressure. I should keep him held in place. Losing a bit of water mass is worth it if Candles can get a good shot off. Yes... That should make this fast. Gone will likely hit the hunter first. I'll drive my body into him and pin him against the wall, and then I'll have Candles finish them.

With a simple plan in mind, Adam deactivated his Commander's Foresight and entered the fray.

True to his expectations, Gone struck the hunter first. She tore into him fast and savagely, her claws raking his helmet time and again, leaving the smallest gaps along the side. Adam saw the hunter's eyes for the first time and noted their hazel color. The hunter was human, and judging by slightly wrinkled skin texture, probably somewhere past eighty years of age if he was an Adept without any Biomancy treatments. Considering he was probably borderline Legendary at the very least, that hinted his true age was probably substantially older.

The hunter let out a snarl and unleashed a pulse of force from his body. A rushing wave pinned Gone against the wall, and the small goblin cried out with a shrill scream. The hunter fired the shot he'd prepared for Adam at her—and missed as the Gate Lord swallowed him whole using his Herald of the Deepest Fathom Skill.

A static arrow drove a deep divot into the Orichalcum wall, and Adam found himself staggered by the hunter's strength. But despite the dimensional hunter's considerable Physicality, his Toughness was lacking. He gagged as Adam forced water down his throat and into his eyes. The pressure the Gate Lord unleashed upon him wasn't enough to crack armor or break bones, but it did leave the dimensional hunter startled.

"Blast him! Now!" Adam shouted at Candles. The Pyromancer didn't hesitate. But instead of releasing a massive, valley-swallowing blast of fire, he extended his index finger and thumb as if mimicking a gun and directed a finger-thin thread of Pyromancy directly through Adam. That didn't mean the fire magic was any less potent. Immediately, Adam felt a good portion of himself evaporate. The dimensional hunter suffered far worse. The beam punched a clean hole through his chest and cleaved downward as Candles swung his arm. The hunter tried to teleport, but Gone was back, and she practically reappeared with both hands buried knuckle-deep in the hunter's collar and neck.

A warbled scream came from the hunter as his agonized howls created air bubbles within Adam. Large vibrations pulsed, and the hunter concreted his Dimensionality. But before he could do anything, Adam spat him out past Candles. “Full power! Now! Gone! Off!”

The goblin had already vanished by the time the commands had left Adam's lips. Candles, meanwhile, flared bright, and a rolling blaze exploded free of his incendiary shroud. The Pyromancy impacted the dimensional hunter's body, and Adam immediately heard the crackling sounds of burning fat. Maybe the hunter screamed just then, but the Gate Lord wasn't sure. It was hard to hear a man's shrieks over the wail of hyper-heated air. More importantly, Adam wasn't done either. He fired shot after shot into the flames. His Veilpiercer struck something over and over—

And then the hunter blasted free from the fire and drove his blade into Adam. A flash of Dimensionality glided along the edge of the blade, and Adam felt his own mana fray to the point of utter ruination. He tried to move back, but the hunter was on him—and a pulsating blast of force sent Gone crashing against the wall again and keeping her pinned. Candles was still in the middle of turning around. Adam felt his magic on the verge of shredding.

He activated Commander's Foresight, and patches of darkness spread through his vision. A migraine crept through his brain as he let out a miserable groan. He was using this skill too frequently without letting his brain rest, but being able to pause the flow of a battle to plot in real time from a bird's eye view was too useful.

Right. So I have a problem: My Dimensionality is on the verge of being shredded. If I don't do something in the next second, he might just end up teleporting me back into a prison cell of some kind, and all this would be pointless. I can't resist his magic, and I'm not faster than him... Adam tried to see if there was something he could do with Candles, but winced internally as he realized the Pyromancer was slower than the hunter as well. Maybe I can try to free Gone somehow? Fire an arrow at her? No. I'm not fast enough for that. So, what other skills can I use to get out of this? What can I—

He paused as he noted his new Toughness Skill Evolution. And a plan formed in his mind. It wasn't a wise plan, but it might just work. Of course, it came with a bit of pain, but what plans didn't when better options weren't available?

Alright. Just... try to have his blade burst out through our shoulder instead of chest, Adam thought with a grimace.

He released both Foresight and Fathoms in the next moment, and suddenly, he cried out as a good meter of metal was left in his chest.

That was enough to trigger Phoenix Riposte, and Adam came ablaze once more. The stab wound on his chest vanished into a slight scratch as Adam crashed against the dimensional hunter in a fraction of a second. Rather than delivering a concussive blow this time, a similar stab thudded against the hunter's armor.

I'm transferring damage types through the riposte, Adam realized.

He impacted the hunter several more times—but found himself flung back by another repulsive wave the man projected. As Adam tumbled through the air, his riposte time came to an end, and a stinging pain lined his shoulder. It wasn't quite a scratch anymore, but it wasn't a full cut either. And if I don't fully transfer the damage inflicted on me to something nearby, I still retain some of the ha—

The dimensional hunter fired an arrow at Adam. The Gate Lord tried to shape a Veilpiercer and fire back. He knew he wasn't going to be fast enough—

Adam slammed hard against an Orichalcum wall and blinked as he found himself displaced from the fight by eighty whole meters. The dimensional hunter roared in agony as Gone tore into him, shredding her way into his compromised throat. Comprehension came to Adam as he realized she'd pulled him out of harm's way. Just then, a large teleportation arrow ripped past him—the same arrow the hunter had been about to fire at him earlier.

Exploding back to his feet, Adam drew in moisture once more as he shifted into his Fathoms-form. He fired two shots in quick succession—then two more right after. One of his first shots missed due to the flailing of the dimensional hunter's body, but the additional arrows crashed into his ankles. He collapsed against the ground, and Gone was burrowing into his guts. The massive Pathbearer was trying to push her out, but by now, his repulsion skill was dead.

Adam locked eyes with him and froze momentarily. He saw several things in the man's eyes. Dread. Despair. And defeat. He knew he was dead—and he had died trying to hunt down an honest son of the Republic. Adam knew he wouldn't feel at ease if he perished in such a way. The hunter cried out and tried to say something, but Candles' burning foot slammed down on his skull, and Adam watched as the man's eyes popped in sprays of sizzling gore.

It was one thing to be a Legend. It was another to face another Legend in close-quarters combat while not having enough Toughness. To the hunter's credit, he clung to life a while longer, but the goblin ended up severing his spine, and Candles incinerated his entire head with a final burst of fire. When everything was done, all that remained of the dimensional hunter was an unmoving body and a discarded bow.

One that Adam promptly picked up.

Equipment Gained: [Arch of the Banishing]

Tier: Heroic

Condition: Perfect

Composition: Adamantine

Enchantments > Banish to Prison Plane; Dimensionality 150; Self-Mending; Seeking Shot; Perception Link; Master Regeneration

The moment Adam picked up the bow, the wounds lining his body began to close. A rush of healing flowed through the Gate Lord, and he let out a satisfied sigh. At the same time, he felt a vast space within the bow and realized it contained an internal dimension for prisoners, not too unlike Hawgrave's sword. Glad I didn't get hit by this damned thing. Just how large is this dimension anyway? This bow doesn't have that many enchantments. I'll figure that out in a moment. We still need to get out of this mess.

He regarded the dimensional hunter's armor for a moment, frowning. Gone pulled her upper half free from the hunter's chest, her round face painted with blood. The hunter's helmet was also gone. Utterly vaporized by that maniac, Candles. Adam could have done with a new set of—

Oh, wait, I couldn't use that anyway. It has a telepathy enchantment. They can track me through that.

The Gate Lord remembered what the Raven had told him before her most untimely demise and grunted with displeasure. It was a good set of Dimensionality-infused armor. It would have served him better than the tattered dress uniform he was wearing right now.

“Well, that one was a bit harder to cook,” Candles quipped as he rubbed his hands together and giggled. “I liked that. I wanna get the rest of the body too.”

“How about some other guards instead?” Adam suggested, trying to keep the Pyromancer focused. “After we find out if you can burn us a way out of here.”

“Oh. Right. Got interrupted.” Candles shook his head and shrugged. “Hate that. Hate that.” He giggled again and started staring at nothing for a few seconds.

“Candles?” Adam asked after a beat, not sure what was wrong with the other Pathbearer.

“He’ll keep losing track of things if you don’t mention them,” Gone said. “It’s better if you just keep saying things to him. The guards made him this way. He was too good at thinking before, so they cut out part of his brain. Kept him because he’s a good resource for fire. Made me run on a treaded machine to power cells for their automata. All prisoners have work. All prisoners have wounds.” Gone looked Adam up and down. “And you’re not a prisoner.”

That got Candles’ attention as well. “What. But he’s...” He leaned in and noticed Adam’s ruined uniform.

“I’m escaping from them all the same,” Adam quickly said. “I just got brought here and woke up in a cell. Look. I stole one of their uniforms and was being aided by a spy—If I am one of the guards, why would I have done all this?”

Gone shook her head fast. “Not saying you’re a guard. You just aren’t a prisoner. Not crippled like us. Not hurt yet. Still pristine. Jealous. Sad. Miss that.”

Adam’s apprehension about his new “friends” gained a side note of pity as he realized just how damaged they were. Whatever the Republic was doing to them, it wasn’t right. They might have been sinners and criminals, but wounding and using them this way was wrong.

Everything I know about the Republic is wrong too, Adam realized. How could a good nation do this to people? Punishment was one thing, but mangling someone’s brain to reduce their threat capacity? It was just brutal. It was inhuman. I never knew my own home at all.

He'd known this for a while now, having learned of Stormhalt's machinations and the Inquisition's betrayal, but even so, a sorrowful weight built inside Adam.

He pushed it aside with a clench of his jaw as he called out to Candles to fire a beam through the wall. The Pyromancer began charging up his shot again, but then a loud whistle came from behind.

Adam spun, priming a Veilpiercer arrow, but by the time he laid eyes on the intruder, Gone was already on them. To Adam’s surprise, he found a raven-helmed man standing just eight meters away, with both hands held up.

“Can we talk?” the Raven asked. He carefully nodded down at Gone’s claws, which were pressed against his neck.

“Gone. Hold on.”

The goblin blinked back beside Adam. “Know them? What are they? No. Helmet. Raven. Aviary.” She paused, and a rush of rage flared behind her eyes. “You’re Aviary?”

“Gods, no,” Adam snarled. “But right now, they’re trying to get me out of this place. And they can probably help you as well.”

The new Raven rubbed at his throat and looked around. “Before we continue—”

“I couldn’t keep your associate alive,” Adam said. “I’m sorry. She died in the heat of combat.”

“Ah. Well, that explains why we couldn’t locate her. Her body was likely destroyed beyond recomposition as well.” The raven shook his head. “Quite the life we lead. Anyhow. Would you like to leave this place, Gate Lord? Because your method of burning your way through the Orichalcum? That won’t work.”

“Oh, we’ll see about that,” Candles growled. He unleashed his fire, and it splashed against the red-gold walls again.

Adam narrowed his eyes at the Raven. “So, what’s your way out? Actually, how did you get in in the first place?”

The Raven stared at the ground—at the entrance to one of the nearby cells. “Anchors, dear Gate Lord. And the larger a place is, the more compromises it gains. So. Shall we?”

Gone looked up at Adam and gave him a disgusted look. He returned it. “It’s our best option.”

“Can’t trust them. Did work for them. Tried to collar me.” The goblin shuddered violently for a split second.

“I know,” Adam said. “But they need me right now. So they’re not going to do anything to us. Not yet.” He looked the Raven up and down and sighed. “Fine. But you stay in front. And I want to know everything about this place.”

“Ah? Going to seek out the Deathless, are we?”

“Yes. But also, I think I want to know where the most dangerous prisoners are held so I can let them out. I think I’ve suffered enough of this place. I want the Avatars to be miserable in my stead.”

Chapter 177 (I) Terrify [I]

You’re wrong, Shiv. Dead felling wrong. Gods, boy, it’s like you’re not paying any attention at all. The reason why the Swan-Eating Toad works isn’t fear. People don’t cook here because they’re afraid of me. I’m not dangerous. My Physicality is shite. My magic’s pathetic. I’m not a dedicated warrior, and my Toughness is so low that I still get burned touching the bloody stove sometimes.

There’s nothing about me that’s terrifying to most Pathbearers. But there are plenty of things about me that make people uncomfortable.

Why do you listen to me? Why do you always do what I tell you to without question? Beyond the mithril, Shiv. Hells, with how much you like watching people and figuring them out, you would have made a good enough Thief. It's not terror. I'm definitely not as intimidating as a Lesser Vampire. Well, stop staring at me like a dead fish. You know the answer. You do—don't be dumb. Think about it for a second.

Disappointment. Right. But that's only half of the answer. What else? Yes. You want to be here. You want to be in this kitchen. You want to spend time with the other chefs and make good food. It's not rational, it's sometimes miserable and stupid, but you love it and want it, and that means the world to you.

It's coming from inside you. I'm not making you do anything. Just like I don't make people cry when I yell at them. If I yelled at someone who didn't care, they wouldn't cry at all. They would tell me to fuck off or just leave. We're not the only restaurant in town. But the chefs here are terrified of disappointing me, because I echo how they feel. I am here, determining their futures. I control what they think of themselves. And I didn't take that from them; they gave that power to me.

Want. And then consequence.

You want to be a good chef. So you peel the potatoes. If you do well, the reward is that you've made a portion of a good meal. If you do poorly, I'll ask you how many times you were dropped on your head as a child because I'll be godsdamned pissed across every hells, yeah? Because it's consequence for me, too, since it's affecting everyone's pace. But it's consequence for you because what you want isn't being met. What you want is taking damage. Your idea of yourself is taking damage.

And that's what breaks many chefs. They can't deal with the consequence. It's bigger than the want.

Life's complicated. Being Head Chef is complicated. People need to fear you—but they need to fear you because they want to fear you. Because it means something to see something done well. Leadership is someone giving you their fear, their efforts, their suffering, their all.

All to make something that's better than shit. You get it? Good. Now. Clean this shit up and tell Lucessia she's fucking gone. That dumb bot can't cook worth a godsdamned shit.

-Georges Archambault to Shiv

Shiv regarded the Ascendant in silence. Cripple wasn't the type to lie—not to anyone but itself. Even if it was speaking the truth regarding Rebis or Five, Shiv still felt like he owed them something. And leaving them here in this prison felt crueler than just murdering them, especially after what they'd gone through together. Death was one thing, but being caged for year after year? Being made into an experiment? That was a special kind of torture.

And it's not something I can accept, Shiv realized. What the Ascendants were doing here was basically orc-shit with extra bullshit to justify all the brutality and torture. Just because someone else was a godsdamned bastard didn't mean that you had to be. Killing them was one thing. Protecting yourself was one thing. Torturing them and using them under the pretense of punishment was like trying to insulate some of your own wretchedness.

But Shiv thought back to the vampires at Gate Piety—at the experiments he used them for—and remembered that he might be a bit of a hypocrite right now. They were vampires that tortured and inflicted their depravity upon the world. That was true. Shiv felt nothing when he hurt or broke them, but that was because his experiences with the First Blood were nothing but violent and foul.

But the Ascendants might feel the same way about these prisoners, he thought. What if they see Rebis or Five like how I see the First Blood?

What if Shiv truly learned of the sins his fellow prisoners had committed to see themselves interred here? What would he think then?

My ethics might be a bit too underdeveloped, the Deathless thought to himself. I really need to think more about this. But I also kind of don't wanna, because the world's a felling mess.

Philosophy 16 > 17

"Cripple," Shiv began, sticking to his instinctive candor. "I kind of feel like I owe these guys something. But now I might owe you a bit too. So. Yeah. Can I have a second?"

The expanse of light that comprised the Ascendant's domain shifted slightly. "We do not have long." Shiv heard a strange tension in Cripple's voice just then, and the Ascendant let out a weary sigh. "And once more, I see the depths of my actions. How old are you?"

"Why's that matter?"

"Because this entire time, I have been treating you as a warrior, but with your words just now, I understand you are but a child."

"Look. I might just be eighteen—"

"It is not solely your age. It is also what you have experienced. What you have done. Do you have many regrets, Deathless?"

Shiv didn't hesitate when it came to that question. "Yeah. My Legendary Delve was made from my regrets. I hate the fact that innocent or weak people die a lot when I fight. I hate the fact that I'm not strong enough to stop them from getting caught in the crossfire when I run up against something strong." He paused and fought through his discomfort. "I hate that I'm responsible for their ends. I hate it."

"It is a good thing to despise," Cripple sympathized. "But you are not unique. Collateral damage is almost impossible to avoid if the circumstances are ill and the moment is wrong. I have tried to protect many people. I remember their faces. I remember failing them. All of them. I have forgotten none."

And that inadvertently made Shiv feel a bit worse as he only recalled a few select people from his past. Leu and the boy that 811 had killed were at the top. The others were more like silhouettes to Shiv. They were more conceptual entities with faces and theoretical lives than actual victims. It didn't make it any better.

"It's not supposed to be this way," Shiv muttered.

"The System cares little if the weak and feeble live or die," Cripple replied with a softer tone. "We might. But there is a limit to what can be done. This also does not apply to the people you feel honor and loyalty to. These are good virtues to have. Have no one tell you otherwise. The Republic would not exist if these values were not enforced to some degree, but there is folly in giving too much clemency to those who would not offer it in return."

The battle-loving part of Shiv wanted to argue with the Ascendant some more just for the sake of arguing, but he refrained. It wasn't a good use of time right now, and Shiv had another idea. "How about this: I do whatever I can to keep your wardens alive while recruiting whatever prisoners I need to get Adam back. Once I find him and make sure he's safe, we can talk about if these guys should stay in this place or not."

"Why then?" Cripple asked. "Are you planning to defer this choice to your friend?"

"I'm planning to ask him about it, at least," Shiv said. "I don't think I'm a bad guy, but sometimes I... I guess I don't really care enough about things or people. And I haven't thought about problems like this nearly enough. Adam probably has. And whatever he decides, it's probably as close to proper righteousness as anyone can get."

A mechanical rumble sounded from all sides. "You think that much of him?"

"More than you can ever know. Guy's got the biggest heart. Even after he got dragged down into the Abyss, all he could think about was saving Blackedge and stopping another war. And anytime someone needed him, he was there." Shiv chuckled to himself as he remembered Adam's adventures across Weave, catching serial killers and talking automata off ledges. "He's my favorite asshole."

Silver Tongue 33 > 36

A somber silence filled the bright expanse, and then it suddenly began to dim. "Very well. But understand that I will not put the Republic at stake. These prisoners are beyond dangerous. And unlike you, they hold few virtues close to heart. You will learn of their depravity firsthand soon. Take care not to expose yourself to them. They will bite down on your neck if granted the chance."

“And if I do, I’ll deal with it, and then I’ll deal with them,” Shiv said. “Can’t be worse than running with a bunch of orcs.”

The Challenger is amused by the Ascendant’s—

Cripple the Strongest rebuffs the Challenger’s presence from its domain.

Shiv felt himself getting displaced. Slowly, patches of color were bleeding through the bright canvas shrouding the world around him, and the weight of Cripple’s presence began to recede as well. “I am being summoned. Apparently, Adam Arrow has escaped. Under Stormhalt’s supervision, no less.”

A loud snort escaped from Shiv, and he couldn’t stop it from turning into a resounding laugh. “Well, now we’re at two people you shouldn’t have placed in this prison.”

A drone came from the Ascendant. Shiv felt a faint vibration rattle forth from the reactor core he was still holding. “There is another matter related to his escape: Do you have another comrade here with you aside from the orc? A female Biomancer or someone capable of shape-changing?”

Shiv frowned. “What? No.” For a moment, he considered the possibility that Uva got back to Adam somehow, but it didn’t seem likely. Especially with her apparently being trapped in the Outside. “Why? Wait, did someone break him out?”

“One of our wardens, it seems.” Cripple sounded half-distracted. “You are unaware of anyone else assisting you in this prison?”

“The only other person I can think of vanished into the Outside along with Blackedge. Or so you claimed earlier.”

A low grunt of displeasure escaped the Ascendant. “Worrying. Master-Avatar Stormhalt is currently broadcasting orders to all active personnel in Spine-B-12—one of the central control cubes meant to relay commands and control the settings for various Zeroth Prison Cubes.”

And Bonk probably took control of one of those cubes earlier, used whatever network they had to release a bunch of prisoners.

“Okay, so do they know where he is?”

A few seconds of silence passed. Then, Cripple spoke again. “Adam and his mysterious associate left through a teleportation anchor. They were intercepted by one of our Groundskeepers—a warden specializing in returning Legendary-Tier prisoners to their cells.”

“Yeah, real cute felling name,” Shiv growled. “Alright. Give me his last known location. I’ll grab however I can and... Hm. The other Avatars will be on the scene first, won’t they?”

“That is a high likelihood.”

“Okay. Rushing in is probably not the best idea. I need someone with Stealth capabilities. Legendary-Tier Stealth.”

As Shiv continued his musings, the incandescent mana surrounding him shuddered and thinned. Cripple's presence grew ever-fainter as well. "I am being summoned by the other Ascendants. Doubtless, they are recalling me to help secure Young Lord Arrow. I suspect they intend to use him as bait. But I think I will have words with them about Daughter's gluttonous behavior and City Lord Stormhalt's questionable deeds."

"Any chance you can put the bastard down?"

"It is unlikely," Cripple answered with a growl of dissatisfaction. "I do not fear Halsur. I will face him openly if it means punishing Stormhalt for everything he has done on top of his most recent failure. However, I cannot go against Kathereine."

Shiv narrowed his eyes as he detected both shame and fear in the Ascendant's voice. "Look. I know talking about her bothers you something bad and how you won't tell me what she has on you, but can you let me know about her weaknesses or something? Anything that I can take advantage of?"

"There is nothing," Cripple said, its voice reverberating with a terror-stained hollowness. "I cannot say. I cannot. She will know. And she will take what is left of me. She will take it, and she will not give it back until she is satisfied." Shiv tasted the sheer amount of dread radiating from Cripple like it was a spike in the temperature. The air around him stank with humid fear.

Psycho-Cartography: Cripple is clearly mentally burdened. It likely has several issues related to self-loathing. There's a bit of depression in it as well. Kathereine is a social god. This is just a nightmare match-up for Cripple. And for us as well. We stay away from that woman at all costs. We leave a temporal anchor anywhere we go so we can bug out and get away from her if things go to hell.

Cripple broke out of its quavering stupor. “Keep my Avatar’s reactor core close to you. I will be silent for a time, but through the core, I will still be able to communicate with you when the moment allows for it. When you reach Adam, I will send a cube out to receive you. It should be able to hide your presence and allow us all to speak at length about recent happenings.”

Once more, Shiv’s paranoia reared its head. The Deathless promptly stomped on the feeling, as there would be no point in capturing both him and Adam at the same time. Again, Cripple could have simply aided his fellow Ascendant earlier if he wanted Shiv captured. “Got it. You’ll be able to track me with this core, won’t you?”

“It is necessary. If you do not trust me—”

“It’s fine. I think we’re both past that point now. If the other Ascendants manage to recapture me and peek into my mind, how much trouble will you be in if they see this conversation we just had?”

“I do not wish to think of such things,” Cripple whispered.

A beat of awkwardness slid between them, and Shiv grunted. “Alright. I’ll see if I can figure out where Adam is without getting myself put back in a cage. You better get back before the other false gods start getting more weird feelings about you.”

“Mind yourself, Deathless. And mind who you decide to use for this task. The prisoners in the Nadir are powerful and without remorse. You may think yourself a Legend, but you are not yet True. There are many here that could slaughter the capital alone if not for our own Legends, as well as us Ascendants and our Avatars. I will hold you to your words about my wardens and beg that your deeds will live up to your beliefs.”

"I'm damn sure going to try," Shiv said in reply.

Cripple gave a distorted hum. "That is all that can be done sometimes."

With that, the talk between them came to a close. A thunderclap of pressure shook the brilliant domain, and the divine mana crashed toward Shiv in receding waves. Rather than slamming into his body, the incandescence narrowed into streams and wormed into the reactor core Shiv now clutched in his left hand. When the final motes of brightness faded, he found himself hovering in the crawlspace, staring at a shredded Orichalcum wall. There was still a lingering stench in the air, but with Daughter missing, it wasn't nearly as bad. He placed the reactor core into his cape and stepped forward. Shiv lined the underside of his feet with vectors and dashed through the air. He entered the prison cube again in search of Rebis—and then realized Bonk and Five probably heard the entire conversation.

I completely forgot about them. Well, might as well get this over with. "Five. Bonk. Come out. I think we got some stuff to talk about."

Neither the orc nor the wolf-man replied immediately. Shiv frowned as he landed on the valley floor of the prison. There were bodies everywhere. Dismembered wardens littered the ground, and smears of their blood painted the walls. Most of them were crushed and mangled in strange ways. It looked as if a giant hand squeezed them until their organs were forced out of their body.

Shiv remembered the massive Vulteg that he'd halted earlier. Urri, Shiv thought his name was. Maybe this was his doing. Distant sounds of battle rang out from ahead and behind, and Shiv considered calling out for Rebis. Drawing attention to himself might not be the best idea right now, but he needed—

Something crashed into Shiv. The Deathless felt his heart drop as he reacted. He seized his attacker by the neck and drove them against the Orichalcum wall. A resounding bang rang out. The attacker

writhed. Shiv gathered his Shapeless Tides and prepared to rip them asunder. Pointed vectors of force speared along his arms and stabbed against his adversary. Just as Shiv was about to pull his newest victim apart, he hissed and stopped himself.

“Rebis,” Shiv snapped, looking at his badly damaged companion. “The hells? Don’t just throw yourself at me like that.”

The amalgamated Pathbearer was not in good condition. His human side was bleeding and wounded in a dozen places. Blood seeped out from his many cuts, and his skin bounced in parted flaps while smoke rose from sparking wires protruding from his mechanical side. Despite this, Rebis was still combat-capable.

“S-sorry,” Rebis said, pointing his face away from Shiv. The cyborg’s wings twitched a few times before ultimately going slack. “I was... I moved too fast.”

Shiv let Rebis go and used his Aegis of Assimilation to drain away the wounds he could. As he turned the cuts lining Rebis into crystallized mana, the cyborg glanced down at his human half in surprise before briefly shooting Shiv a glance.

“Glad Daughter didn’t kill you,” Shiv muttered. “She tore you up something bad, though. Damn, that’s a lot of cuts.”

“No,” Rebis said, shaking his head violently.

“No?” Shiv asked, not understanding what the cyborg was referring to.

“Not a lot of cuts. They cut more when they experiment on me. They cut more when they are trying to put things inside.”

“Oh. Yeah. Sorry. Bunch of felling bastards.”

Rebis gave Shiv a twitching nod.

“Five. Bonk. You guys alright?” Shiv called out again. When there was still no response, Shiv knew something terrible had happened.

Chapter 177 (II) Terrify [I]

He adjusted the spatial fabric of his cape and moved the Forest of Alloy in place. If Bonk or Five wanted to step out, they could do so with ease now. But the Deathless didn't intend to wait. He poured his Biomancy down into the cape to figure out why the two were so quiet. He got his answer almost immediately. Bonk was mostly fine. His body was mapped by Shiv's crimson mana, and aside from a few new cuts along his arm, he was hale and robust. He was, however, absolutely still, and something was pressing against his neck. Bonk was also holding Five up in the air by his head. His fingers were clenched rather tightly around the wolf-man's skull, and a few cracks lined the organic parts of Five's skeletal structure.

“Broken Moon! Guys, what the hells are you doing inside there? Bonk, couldn't you keep your itch in check for one—”

“You heard the Ascendant, Insul! He's a spy! We don't leave spies alive. Especially not rats from Aviary! We can't just let him go. He'll do rat things and rat on us to the other rats. Why, he's probably not even

an actual lupine. He probably has some kind of Blessing meant to make him resemble a wolf-man so he can infiltrate their society and bring them down from the inside.”

“My task was to solely observe,” Five said, sounding as displeased as Shiv could recall. “I was not meant to serve as a direct action asset. It was a vacation detail. One that would have stayed as that if my damnable greed didn’t get the better of me.” The wolf-man sighed. “Deathless. I understand if this makes things a bit strained between us, but understand that I didn’t lie to you. I was trapped here for a very long time, and I did end up getting trapped here because I was performing a heist in your Republic. A heist meant to take back something they stole first from my adopted people.”

Shiv’s right eye twitched.

Psycho-Cartography: If your question is whether this spy is using some kind of social skill to influence you, the answer is yes. You can’t trust him. Not any further than you can trust a fox in a hen house. The wisest thing to do is to kill him.

But as Shiv thought about things a bit longer, he realized murdering Five wasn’t the best play.

“Something wrong?” Rebis gasped.

“Give me a second,” Shiv said, ignoring the spasming cyborg for now. “Alright. Five, if that’s your real name. Don’t use your Social Skills on me again. If you do, things get unpleasant. Bonk. Watch him, but don’t kill him yet.”

“Why not?” the orc complained. “He’s right here. I have him in my hand. All I need to do is squeeze.”

“And all I need to do is push, and your throat will have a new hole in it,” Five replied without any hint of worry. The wolf-man was cool as a cucumber, and Shiv suspected he probably had a few more tricks up his sleeve—eh, fur.

“Just watch him first,” Shiv said. “He probably wants to get out as much as we do. He still might be useful and...” The Deathless stared at Rebis. “Hey, Rebis. How likely are you to try and tear me and my orc apart if we end up killing Five?”

Rebis began shaking violently as he gritted his teeth. “Don’t—no—nonoNO!”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” Shiv muttered. He held up a hand as Rebis’s twitching got worse. “Don’t worry, we’re not going to murder him. Just wanted to know where you stood. You know he’s an Aviary agent, right?”

Rebis looked down at the ground. He went non-verbal after that. Five answered on his behalf. “He doesn’t. I didn’t tell him. And he likely won’t be able to fully understand either. The information is there, but he has a hard time processing complicated things. If you haven’t noticed so far, he’s very much impulse and emotion-driven. The mechanical processing portion of his brain hasn’t been fully refined yet.”

A low moan escaped the cyborg as he fought to control his wings. Shiv did everything he could to not visibly grimace. Every fiber of his being screamed for him to euthanize Rebis. The poor bastard was beyond tortured. But he knew the cyborg still had his uses. And he needed every edge if he wanted to find Adam and get him out of this place.

"I'll have you know, there's another reason why you should keep me alive," Five said. "On top of the fact that it will break poor Rebis's heart."

"Yeah? What's that?"

"Your friend. The Ascendant said he was helped by a warden during his escape? Well. I think that might be one of mine."

Something clicked into place inside Shiv's head. "Of fucking course they are," the Deathless growled. "Godsdammit, Five, did you know about this shit? Was this part of Aviary's plan?"

The wolf-man let out a soft laugh. "Truthfully? I have no idea. I am a genuine prisoner, but I know of a few Ravens here among the wardens. And they have been working with me to further subvert his prison. But I highly doubt the Stolen Throne knew about Young Lord Arrow's presence within this Rubix Well until just a few hours ago at the most. We are informed, but not prescient."

Psycho-Cartography: I don't know if he's bullshitting you or not.

Shiv bit back a groan of agitation and decided to take a gamble. "Right. Bonk. Let Five go. Five. Do you have any idea how we can get in touch with these Ravens? Because I think I might have better odds of finding Adam if I find them instead of rushing after his last known location. That's where all the Avatars and wardens are going to be soon anyway."

"Good instincts," Five said. A lull entered the conversation as the wolf-man stepped out from Shiv's cape. He appeared first. Bonk followed him a second after, keeping his axe pointed at the wolf-man.

“And to answer your question, yes. Yes, I might just be able to find one of my associates. But there are no guarantees that your friend will be with them.”

“I got a hunch,” Shiv said. “Adam’s no idiot. He’s not going to stick around and wait for the Ascendants to take him. He won’t like working with a Raven, but he’ll do it.”

“Or so you hope,” Five said casually. He looked down at the dead wardens nearby and hummed. “We should move too. We need to find a subverted anchor. Aviary has its own teleportation network hidden within the existing spells. We just need to find the right interface. After that, well, it’s more a matter of hoping they respond.”

“What do you mean?” Shiv asked.

“Someone needs to be operating this hidden set of Dimensionality spells, of course. Our little tunnels won’t just trigger for anyone that uses them. Or trigger at all, should there be no active Raven on standby.” Five gave Shiv a shrug. “I just want you to know that nothing is certain here. This might not pan out, and we’ll be back to doing things the hard way.”

“That, or you’re covering your ass,” Shiv said flatly. Five offered him a sheepish grin. Shiv grunted. “Fine. Let’s get the hells out of here and find one of these anchors before someone—”

“YOU!”

A booming voice nearly made Shiv jump out of his own skin. The Deathless narrowed his eyes at the huge Vulteg approaching him alongside a small army of other prisoners. Once more, Shiv felt his body

resonate as the notification marking him as the target of the Hidden World Quest activated. "Deathless! You stopped Urri earlier! And the System has put a big prize on your head."

"Oh, dear," Five said.

Bonk stepped forward and planted himself right beside Shiv. Rebis began babbling nonsense, but limped a few steps past Shiv as he flapped his bladed wings at the approaching horde. "Back! B-back! Away!"

Shiv counted approximately sixteen Pathbearers. They came in all kinds of weird shapes and sizes. Urri stood at the front of the group and was one of the few that were still mostly human-looking, which said a lot, considering he was a tentacle-haired, one-eyed Vulteg. Behind him was a large crystal-creature that resembled a column of mithril orbited by smaller chunks of turquoise stone. There was a near-transparent figure trailing just behind Urri. As light struck their body, Shiv watched as an outline of their contours came aglow. He thought he was looking at an elf for a moment, but realized their bodily dimensions were entirely alien. Their ears were longer and curved backward, their body was impossibly thin, with little space for organs, and their eyes took up a fourth of their face.

Yet, something about them still reminded Shiv of an elf. What is that thing?

The rest of the horde were equally eccentric. There was a figure bathed in tendril-like shadows. There was a grinning woman with a pixie haircut and a longcoat made from the flayed faces of prison wardens. There was a man who had swords growing out from his body, as if his flesh was some kind of blade-garden.

Skill Evolutions changed a person in body, mind, and soul. With each subsequent step someone took, they gradually became closer to the conceptual ideal of their evolved skill rather than a purely biological organism. Comparatively, Shiv looked relatively normal, if one chose to ignore his absurd muscle mass

even at baseline, how his skin flashed red-gold sometimes, the faint turbulent membrane that was his inertial sheathe, and also the Shapeless Tides circulating across his body.

Okay. Yeah. I look like a bit intimidating too. He sized Urri up and frowned. He'd managed to stop the Vulteg earlier, so weirdly, Shiv might have the edge in a straight brawl despite being the smaller party. But he didn't know what other skills Urri had, and there was no chance he could beat almost two dozen Legendary or High Heroic-Tier prisoners. Not even with help from Rebis, Five, and Bonk.

The bodies on the ground were clad in adamantine, and their armor was absolutely deformed in ways that made them look like they were made from cheap tin.

"Way I see it, we got two choices here, and both of them are fun." Bonk was grinning as he spoke. His eyes were locked on the large Vulteg, and he was probably itching to take a few swings if things went the wrong way. Or the right way, considering he was an orc. "First, we can run. They'll chase us like dogs going after a juicy rat. I see it in their eyes. They're still riding that battle high. Second, we can go right up to them and see if they want to be friends instead."

"Both," Shiv said, walking forward. He left a temporal anchor in his stead as he approached the incoming horde. "I'll try two first. Then we do one if things go to shit."

"When, Insul!" Bonk called out from behind. "It's always a matter of when."

Shiv hated the fact that the orc was probably right. Rebis tried to follow him. Shiv held up a hand. "No. Stay. Don't do anything unless they attack me first. Trust me." He turned to glare at the cyborg, and to his surprise, Rebis turned away from him. A faint cord of flesh and metal connected Shiv to Rebis, and he realized the amalgamated Pathbearer was in fear of him. Shiv wondered when, but then considered his new Feat.

Dread-Tainted. It says that I can lace my skills with the lingering terror that Daughter experienced. But I haven't tried using it yet. Not consciously, at least. Well. Time to see how good this Legendary Feat is.

Shiv waited until Urri was within ten meters before speaking. "That's close enough, Vulteg."

"Close enough?" Urri replied. His single eye was bloodshot, and he was missing a few head-tentacles as well. "No. Not yet. You stopped Urri earlier. Very strong of you. Very impressive. The System has noticed your power, and it seeks to test you."

"The System just wants us all to fight and kill each other," Shiv replied. He shot the transparent elf-like entity beside Urri a look and watched how they just stared right back at him. The large crystal-creature rose up into the air, and it let out a trumpet-like noise. The rest of the prisoners spread out from behind Urri like an unfurling fan. Shiv stood his ground. "Alright. Let's cut the shit. Yeah, I'm the Deathless. And if you manage to kill me for good, you'll get ten Legendary Skills."

Urri opened and closed his hands. Shiv studied the huge Vulteg some more. Aside from being five meters tall and made from dense slabs of muscle, Urri didn't have any other physical oddities. There was no magic radiating from him, and Shiv couldn't guess how tough he was at a glance. That just made the Vulteg more dangerous in Shiv's eyes. Unknown dangers were often much more treacherous.

"If," the transparent elf-thing hissed at Shiv. "Something is wrong with your soul-story. No separation between your life and legend. Both bleed together. Abomination. Nightmare." It sniffed at the air. "The taint of the world-ender is in you. Man-fleshed; Tarrasque-souled."

Okay. Extremely godsdamned creepy. If this turns into a fight, I'm halting time and killing that one first.

“Tarrasque-souled?” Urri breathed. He looked between the transparent elf-thing and Shiv. “Scorn’s Tongue. There’s such a thing?”

“You can thank Udraal Thann for that,” Shiv said. “Wasn’t up to me.”

And at once, Shiv felt the fear in the air explode around him. One moment, there were no chains binding the Legendary Pathbearers to him. But when Udraal’s name was uttered, faint lines flashed into existence, threading each of their beings into Shiv. Slowly, the Deathless began growing in size. Urri took a step back and gritted his sharp, vertically aligned teeth. “Udraal... Fatebreaker. Realm-Thief. Soul-Crafter...”

“He Who Walks Beyond,” the transparent prisoner whimpered. “F-father-Maker! You are one of his as well?”

Shiv blinked. “As well. Wait, he made you too?”

The transparent elf-thing didn’t say anything. Instead, they decloaked for the first time, and Shiv’s jaw dropped as his mind struggled to process what stood before him.

Chapter 178 (I) Terrify [II]

I’ve always been interested in borders, even as a child. Borders are fascinating things. A powerful Pathbearer can ignore the borders drawn by a weaker nation, for they are beyond consequence. Yet, the same Pathbearer must recognize the border of a changing biome. If they go north, they will notice snow falling from the sky. They will notice the temperature dropping, how the sun hides itself behind a blanket of dense clouds. They will also regard the threshold between dimensions and worlds to be true, especially when the ambient mana threshold changes.

There are borders which we imagine into existence, and then there are borders that simply are. Borders are places that denote change, and I think the truest border in existence is that separation between ourselves and the world outside. Many might argue this is purely psychological, that consciousness is more function, and that these are patterns that we choose to see rather than absolute concepts that can be shaped into skills.

I argue differently. I'd argue that every single skill is a border, that they are lined by borders, that they are defined as places unto themselves. Think of your Delves when you descend into a skill to advance to Legendary. Are you not in a place, a place shaped from other moments of your past, perhaps, yet still a place?

And this is why I decided to begin the Thresholder Project. Because I wish to discover just how much one person can contain. If nothing else, having the soul infused with a different mana threshold compared to an outer reality will make this individual the most potent bomb.

Or perhaps... Something that chokes the flow of magic entirely...

More research is required.

-Notes recovered from Udraal Thann's abandoned laboratory

Shiv looked on in surprise as the once transparent Pathbearer turned visible. For a moment, he thought he was looking through a gap. The once transparent elf thing didn't have any distinct features, for there were none there. Instead, there was simply an absence, an opening. Their body was defined by contours, but now that he studied them, they resembled more of a keyhole than a person. Through that keyhole which embodied their existence, Shiv saw faint colors oscillating within.

The undeniable feeling of mana radiated free from the insides of the strange Pathbearer's body, and Shiv fought to process how they functioned at all. They didn't seem to have any organs, they didn't have eyes, ears, or even lips. He had no idea how they were talking to him at all.

Even telepathy required a mind for the composition of thought, so his mouth hung slightly agape until he arrived at his first question. Despite the tenseness of the situation, he didn't really want to offend this most unusual Pathbearer. He didn't know what they could do, and starting a fight right now wasn't the best idea. "Were you always like this, or did he make you into this?"

"Udraal. Father-Maker. Before he imagined my creation, there was nothing like me, no one like me, and now there are only a few others." The strange Pathbearer ran a hand across their body, and the only way Shiv knew their arm was moving was due to the different kinds of mana that left their limbs and body, separated by varying gradients. "I am a Thresholder, a thing of boundaries and borders, and my purpose was never a purpose at all. Inside me, there is mana. Of all lores and varieties, of a different ambient threshold."

"Different threshold? Why, though? What's the point of..." Shiv paused. He thought about everything he knew regarding Ambient Mana Thresholds, and quickly came to an uncomfortable guess. "You meant to destabilize worlds somehow? Create mana storms where you go by connecting whatever thresholds inside you with the world outside?"

"That is a cornerstone of my existence," the Thresholder said, sounding miserable, "but is not the only one. Father-Maker left me in the laboratory for many years, until its wards finally decayed enough to collapse, and I was set free. I did not have a name. I still do not have a name. I am simply Vault Northeast. That is all the distinction he gave me in his documents. But it seems he offered you more. You have a name. A life

."

A faint growl entered the Thresholder's voice then.

Psycho-Cartography: This one's jealous of you. You can hear it in their voice, you can read it in their posture. They're angry that you are more of a person than they are. It's also likely that they're not entirely stable. Not mentally, not magically, not physically. Be very careful what you say or do around them.

"Yeah, well, that wasn't up to me either," Shiv said, holding up a hand in the defense. "Look, I didn't ask to be, no more than you did. But that probably doesn't matter right now, considering we're both in this shithole prison. But that's where I might be able to offer you the first good turn of your life. You want to get out? You want to go find Udraal once you're out? Because I do. I got plenty of questions to ask him, and you probably do too."

The Thresholder said nothing. For a few seconds thereafter, they simply faced Shiv. He got the distinct impression that they were staring at him, and a faint sense of unease crawled up his spine. The fear chain connecting him to the Thresholder still existed, and it grew stronger with every passing second.

It's kind of hard judging someone's mental state by their voice alone, Shiv thought to himself. The posture's there, but it's kind of hard to read, and the mana inside them is too chaotic for me to observe any patterns.

"No," the Thresholder suddenly said.

Shiv was taken aback by their disagreement. "No? You don't want to go find Udraal?"

"I wish to never lay my senses upon Father-Maker. I wish to exist far apart from him in eternal perpetuity. I have seen what he has done to those of my like, and I have survived what they tried to do to me."

Shiv took a slight step backward as his danger intuition screamed at him. "You think I'm a threat?" Shiv asked.

"I do not think," the Thresholder replied. "You are his creation. We are all threats. We are all mistakes." The mana within them grew brighter, and the first tendrils of magic seeped out from the Thresholder, bleeding into the world itself. As it did, a notification appeared before Shiv's eyes.

Warning: Mana instability detected. Clashing mana thresholds might result in magical friction.

Shiv's thoughts were cut off as he felt his Biomancy field get frayed. He barely held back a wince as spiritual pain pulsed through his mind. His Biomancy field felt as if it had been dragged across a jagged carpet of gravel. And that was how Shiv learned about mana friction. It also revealed to him the true function of Vault Northeast. They weren't just a bomb, they were likely a magical inhibitor. Something that negatively affected every bit of mana in their surroundings.

His suspicions were proven correct as Bonk, Five, and Rebis all let out mutual gasps. The many spell patterns raining down from the Orichalcum walls nearby were also dissolving, turning to powder with every centimeter they traveled. Shiv kept his Biomancy and other magical fields still. But even so, the grind continued, burrowing through his mana fields, then filling him with growing strain. But it wasn't just Shiv and his companions who were affected.

The other Legendary prisoners staggered away from the Thresholder, and Urri let out a growl. "Gap! Gap! You're doing it again! Stop! Urri demands it! Stop!"

And just then, the Thresholder shuddered. The mana tendrils seeping out from their body were reeled back in an instant. The Thresholder shifted awkwardly. "I've lost track of my... track of myself again. He distracted me."

Psycho-Cartography: Vault Northeast's Social Skills are likely pretty low. They avoid apologizing, even when it's obviously their mistake. This means they're going to be easy to provoke, especially by us, due to our shared connection with Udraal. They're afraid of us more than the other Legendary prisoners are. We can use that if a fight breaks out. We might not be able to grip their body, but we can still take the fear chain. And if we can hold the chain, we can transfer our shapeless tides into them. Vitaemancy is also unaffected.

Shiv realized he kept his expression stable as he rolled his neck. "Eh, thanks, Urri," Shiv said, turning his attention to the large Vulteg. "Understand why your friend here might not like me so much. I haven't done anything to the rest of you, and frankly, I got more to offer alive than dead."

The crystalline column rose behind the huge Vulteg, and it directed a telepathic cry at Shiv. "You're worth more dead than alive, Deathless! Ten Legendary Skills will make me equal to any Avatar—more than equal!"

And here came the problem Shiv needed to resolve. Quickly, if he wanted to make use of this horde at all.

"Yeah, if you kill me. Again, if."

"There are sixteen of us," the column declared with a growl in its voice. "You are alone."

"No," Shiv shot back immediately. "There aren't sixteen of you. There's one of you. Because only one of you can get that reward. And as soon as he does, he's going to be pretty powerful. But the rest of you? You're just going to let that felling bastard have that power? Let them figure out how to use it? Pretty risky."

Silver Tongue 36 > 37

Suddenly, the large Vulteg went still. And he briefly looked over his shoulder at the other Legendary prisoners. The rest were doing the same. Shiv saw how an automaton that bore a crown composed from ever-changing ones and zeros turned to regard a man growing blade after blade out from his bare flesh. Behind them, a snarling elven woman with a golden shadow hovering a few meters behind her person glared. Her stare was locked on Shiv, then slashed out to direct her loathing at the other prisoners around her. The golden shadow behind her revealed an arm that resembled a scythe-like blade more than a human limb, and the Chronomancy mana radiating from it was beyond dense.

Great. Legendary Chronomancer. Better be careful with that one.

Shiv pressed his advantage. "You know what I'm saying is true. You can all work together and put me down, but before you kill me, the question you need to answer among yourselves is who gets to keep the reward. And the person who gets to keep the reward needs to ask themselves another question. Why won't the rest of you simply turn on them and kill them when the chance comes?"

Shiv finished and let the prisoners nurse on that question. Instead of breaking into discussion, an oppressive silence followed.

Psycho-Cartography: These prisoners don't have very high social skills. Or if they do, their Psychology is sorely lacking. Suppose it makes sense, considering they're prisoners here. I don't know how to imagine someone with a Legendary Psychology Skill or a Legendary Social Skill. But that indicates a deeper level

of long-term thinking and rationality. These people don't strike me as rational, but they are extremely self-interested.

But something didn't fit right. It shouldn't be the case that all the Legendary-Tier prisoners lacked good Social Skills. No. Shiv considered it for a while longer and came to a simple conclusion: the Legendary prisoners that had good intelligence or social based skills must've been in another cube. A place dedicated to containing them specifically.

When none of the prisoners spoke, Shiv took charge of the situation again. "Right, glad you're all as stumped by this problem as I am. But there's something else we have to worry about. See, if we stick around here any longer, an Avatar might show up. Because that's who attacked me earlier. I'm sure a few of you caught sight of the Waifs here. She'll probably be back if we keep wasting time, so you'll get to say hi to her in person if we wait."

Invoking the Avatars brought another desired change to the prisoners. Instead of being suspicious and paranoid of each other, they were now anxious as well. They might be Legendary, but Shiv knew that even Legendary Pathbearers had limits. His Shapeless Tides Skill Evolution made him a juggernaut, both physically and magically. But he still had no answer for Daughter's Stealth. And he could still be overwhelmed if a few Avatars cornered him. The same applied to the rest of these prisoners. He didn't know what Legendary Skills they had, but he was certain that they wouldn't be able to fight off an Avatar in a direct confrontation. Especially not if all the Ascendants arrived at once.

Right. Let's see if I can convince them to join in with me instead. I'll work up to the fact that there's a loop around this place, and that I'm the only one that can get us out. Shiv triggered his Outside Context Problem. Then he winked out of existence as he receded into his own soul. And then he re-emerged with a splash of Vitae. It was a calculated gambit meant to shock the prisoners. Urri flunked back. He was faster than Shiv, but not by a lot. That placed him as a High Hero for Reflexes, rather than a legend.

Several other prisoners tensed and calmed in the same instant. Shiv barely noticed the changes in their posture, their movements little more than flickers before his eyes. He grunted as something struck him from behind. Yet it wasn't a physical blow, rather, it was a blow sent across time. A shallow golden scar

tore pieces away from his temporal shell, and the Deathless offered a flat stare to the most likely culprit. The elf with the golden shadow glared back at him, but her lip curled in dissatisfied frustration.

"What did you just do?" Urri demanded.

"I left—"

"He left this dimension," the Thresholder said, cutting Shiv off. And it was then that Shiv realized the Thresholder saw everything. The Deathless frowned. He left context once more and stayed there for a bit longer this time. While the other prisoners flinched and looked around confused, the Thresholder continued staring at Shiv.

Can they see me? A faint violet glow lit the inner gulf of the Thresholder's being, and Shiv knew that was divination mana. He wasn't sure if the Thresholder was aware of him, or if they were simply guided by the magical senses lining their insides. So he called out to them. "Can you hear me?"

The Thresholder shuddered. They turned their head slightly, as if someone who'd heard a whisper in the woods rather than a voice calling out nearby.

Okay, kind of weird, but useful to know. Still can't exactly hear me, but you can feel me nearby. Shiv wasn't sure how he felt about that. He already disliked the fact that the Ascendants could use Divination to track him when he was out of context. The last thing he needed was someone else that could counter his Unique Skill. And if the Thresholder could do so, that meant that Udrael might be able to compromise Shiv's Outside Context Problem, if they ever met. It's one godsdamn problem after another.

Shiv grumbled to himself as he emerged from his soul once more. He halted time only to discover every single Legendary prisoner before him also had a Chronomancy skill. His surprise was deepened as he realized half of them had a Chronomancy skill not too different from his. Rather than forming a temporal shell over their bodies, some had strange animal-like forms made from solid gold, while others projected a small sphere that further expanded outward like a layered onion or a temporal fortress.

All of them immediately noticed Shiv.

“So. With this skill, I can—”

Only one struck with deliberate violence.

The elf with the golden shadow came for Shiv again. He didn't know if it was her natural instincts that drove her to default to violence. But considering her Reflexes, she had more than ample time to decide otherwise. The golden shadow ripped free from her person, and Shiv watched as the elf's human base form remained still, a statue bound to the outpaced present. The golden shadow was anything but a statue. It was lightning across time. It was death riding from the future back to the past, seeking to reap a spoil of souls with its bladed arms.

As it drove its wicked scythe-like limbs against Shiv's torso, he felt a chunk of his temporal shell get slashed free. The slice was so deep and true that Shiv lost three seconds immediately, and before it could cut again, he seized the bladed limb and held it tight.

Inertial Overdrive 133 > 134

His overflow vectors crashed against its plunging blade, and a splash of gold erupted out from the back of the shadow as Shiv's Shapeless Tides repelled the offending mana. The golden shadow looked upon Shiv and flinched back in surprise. That proved to be a mistake as he drove his head into its chin. Rather than the golden shadow suffering any harm, the elf's jaw jerked aside.

The shadow tried to rip itself free, but Shiv held on tight to its bladed arm. Just then, its other hand thinned into a rapier, and it plunged, delivering another stab toward Shiv's throat. The shadow was far too fast for the Deathless to react, but his Shapeless Tides were circulating through his body.

Another chip of Chronomancy was cleaved free from Shiv's person, yet the golden shadow's blade was knocked aside, wrenched off course by a surging vector of force and countermagic. It tried to attack again, but Shiv stole the momentum and threw himself against its body.

Instead of trying to overpower it entirely, Shiv went along with its force, pulling it in close before wrapping his arms under its body. His Legendary Skill Fusion wasn't just something born of Physicality and Magical Resistance, it included Grappling as well. Grappling taught Shiv about leverage, about joints, and about centers of gravity. The golden shadow might have been a manifestation of Chronomancy, but it was still humanoid, and Shiv was quite good at wrestling humanoids.

He wrenched his foe along their midriff, pulling the shadow off the ground, and as it tried to fight the momentum, he suddenly spiked it down the other way, slamming the shadow against the ground. A resounding impact shook the room, and Shiv sprawled atop the shadow's back. Its arms lashed out, but he drove tide after tide into its body, pinning it in place, while circulating other vectors of force along its limbs. He fought to control it at first. The shadow resisted him, kicking and lashing, yet it had no ability to fight off the ground.

Its ability to resist was further worsened as Shiv drove a knee into its midsection. Once more, the shadow didn't take any damage, but the elf folded slightly, curling over her left ribs.

Shiv stole this opportunity to concentrate every single Overflow Tide he had into the shadow's right arm, and then he inverted half those tides. Fifty percent of the vectors went in one direction, fifty percent went in another. The shadow's arm didn't have joints per se, but it was still mostly solid, and solids had rules. When you bent a solid too much, it would either fold or break, and the golden shadow gave a resounding shriek before the first cracks lined the time-mana forming its body. Shiv let out a growl of effort as he circulated more tides through himself. Every time he got close to being exhausted, a new burst of force flooded his very bones and urged him to fight on.

But then a spearing pain burst from his back, and he looked down to see a golden blade protruding from his chest. He blinked, and as he turned behind, something took him across the top of his head. Death came, and only thereafter did he discover why.

Outside Context Problem 92 > 94

Inertial Overdrive 134 > 137

Strider of the Unbending Path 155 > 158

His Vitae emerged from his body as he found his skull split at a 45 degree angle. But that was secondary to the fact that there were thirty other golden shadows that had manifested into existence from out of nowhere. They came right at his body. The shadow he was trying to disable rose just then as well, and they started hacking at Shiv's corpse. In a frenzied instant, there was little left of his body beside blood and giblets.

Shiv was glad that his Voidmantid armor was bound to him. If it stayed connected to his corpse, it would have been utterly mangled as well. Just then, a fourth shadow came for Shiv. Right as his temporal shell was about to break, he almost flung himself back in time, but remembered what happened back at Gate

Piety in the last moment. He'd tried to revert time when dead before, and all it did was rip his Vitae wide open. He needed to resurrect fully and be in a stable state before he could use his temporal anchor.

The Deathless growled. He launched himself forward and drove his Vitae against the nearest golden shadow. It parried his Vitae and slit the tendrils he unleashed upon down the middle. Shiv tried to concentrate on both his shapeless tides and his Pillar of Orichalcum. But he couldn't. He decided to focus on his Legendary Skill instead.

It proved to be a good choice, as another few hundred golden shadows suddenly exploded out from the thirty. In a moment, Shiv was drowned by a swarm of attackers. Blades fell from all directions. A few shadows simply burst into being, as if they had existed then all that time. Only the faintness of Chronomancy warned of their coming. The attacks were overwhelming. By all means, Shiv should have been cut down. But where his Reflexes were lacking, his Shapeless Tides prevailed.

He channeled vectors across his entire body, Overflow Tides gliding over his Vitae. His innate tides were directed outward. Blows that should have cleaved clean through his Vitae-forged form were driven back. Chronoromantic blades bounced off of him after leaving shallow gaps like axe heads recoiling from plate armor. Other strikes were dragged off course. His frictionless vector skill activated over and over, causing golden blades to crash against one another. A few times, the golden scab shadows skewered their other selves as well, and through the messy tangle of limbs and shifting bodies, Shiv noticed that the elf was bleeding, her body dotted with small wounds and shallow cuts.

The shadows halted their onslaught, trying to figure out why they were the ones hurt instead of Shiv, and that was their final mistake. He reached out using his Vitae and curled a branching limb around one of the golden shadows, and he pulled, tearing at the life force inside of them. Then Shiv linked his being with Integration itself.

Chapter 178 (II) Terrify [II]

A sudden rush of brilliant red life force exploded through the valley of the prison. All the other Legendary-Tier prisoners turned into fading shadows under that awesome display of light. The Deathless

resurrected in an instant. He emerged from his pulsating mass of Vitae as he continued ripping the essence free from the golden shadow. It arched its back and writhed. As did all the other shadows.

Then, without warning, they all vanished at once.

He looked toward the elf as she collapsed to her knees, gasping. Her eyes were sunken. Her features were gaunt. It looked like she'd aged approximately 20 years in an instant, though Shiv knew that elves didn't quite grow old like humans did. Before any of the other prisoners could act, he went out of context and rushed through them. Shiv wrapped his hand around the elf's neck, and as she fell, as she fell to her knees, he wrenched her neck off at an angle, and a satisfying crack filled the chamber. The elf gave a vicious cry.

Despite Shiv's Legendary-Tier Physicality, her head wasn't torn free from her body; rather, a few tendons snapped first, then a bone shattered. She tried to fight back, but Shiv ripped some more of her vitality out from her, and a burst of red expanded free from his form, briefly shrouding him once more. The other prisoners didn't know how to respond, or were more than willing to let Shiv finish this brawl.

Suspect it's probably the latter...

He drove the elf against the wall, and a loud crash sounded. She kicked and clawed at him. She was strong, a High Hero at the very least. Her fingers felt like metal hooks as they dug bloody furrows into his skin, yet she couldn't tear fully through his flesh as every vector he channeled slammed into her, sawing against her Magical Resistance while cracking her bones. A series of overflow tides glided across his arm, and they slammed into her fingers at an angle. The fingers broke, and the elf screamed.

Shiv drove his elbow into her throat and lifted her high up along the wall. As he did this, his powers grew, his body got larger, his bones lengthened, his muscles grew dense, and his mana fields thundered with growing power. Shape of Monstrosity took hold, and Shiv saw the elf's eyes widen. He tried to

crush her skull. Over a dozen tides collapsed inward, painted vectors lined with mana, crashed against her face, and pressed hard upon her flesh. The Magical Resistance lining her body gave first, bursting as if an armored egg beneath a stubborn heel, finally revealing the tantalizing yolk within.

Before he could fully take her life, a burst of gold came, and a golden shadow replaced her. A blade was driven through Shiv's throat instead. He gagged on his own blood. But before it could sever his vertebrae, he seized it with both hands, and he slammed his palm up along the underside of that golden arm. Shiv directed his anger into his Legendary Skill and then activated the Icon of the Paindrinker to magnify the damage.

The arm cracked and shattered.

A resounding shriek followed.

Shiv ripped the blade free from his gored throat and wrenched the golden shadow to the ground. He held its broken arm with all his might, keeping it close to his chest, and he used his tides to snap it further, wrenching it in a circle until it dangled limp and useless. The golden shadow tried to rise. Shiv gripped it by the back of its head and drove it down against the ground in a brutal piledriver.

Once more, a loud impact followed. The sound of a nose cracking popped in the air. Shiv tasted the sweet iron of bitter blood, but he didn't heal himself. The battle haze was on him, and he needed to break his foe. There was going to be a lesson to learn about trying to kill the Deathless.

He got the golden shadow by the other arm, and just then it vanished as well. It vanished and was replaced by two others. Their arms were broken as well, but they drove their working limbs through Shiv's torso. The first passed, cleaning through his pelvis, and he lost all feeling below his right knee. Another went for his chest, but Shiv saw that coming. He twisted out of the way and threw himself against both golden shadows.

They tried to shred him apart, but he knew where they were now, and every sloppy blow they delivered on his back or neck was converted into overflow vectors. Overflow tides that he did nothing to maintain. They exploded out from him, launching him at odd angles as the vectors activated, turning him into tides of rushing kinetic force.

As he crashed into the orichalcum walls, the golden shadows went with him. Rather than continuing with the wrestling match, Shiv drained their vitality once more, and they predictably disappeared.

As they vanished, Shiv tried to stand, yet nearly slipped in his own blood. A small river was leaking out from his gouged throat. He absorbed those injuries using his Biomancy and turned to face the other prisoners. The moment he saw their expressions, he gained an intuitive understanding of what was happening.

Psycho-Cartography: Look at them. Look at the light in their eyes. They're enjoying this, but they're also using this opportunity to study how you work, how you fight. None of the others joined in, probably because of what you said earlier. If someone tried to strike you down from behind, someone else needed to beat them to you, or to stop them. Because if anyone killed you for good, they'd be the single strongest creature here, maybe even in the prison, including all the Avatars as well. And for a group of imprisoned Legends, that's just not an acceptable risk.

Psycho-Cartography 63 > 66

Shiv stared the prisoners down. He spat thick clumps of blood out of his throat and shook his head in disgust as he saw chunks of flesh resting in the glistening viscera. The golden shadows would have gotten him good if his tides had flowed just a little bit slower; if he was just a bit unluckier, his head would have been taken again.

"Where is she?" Shiv growled. His eyes jumped from prisoner to prisoner. He watched as the Thresholder stiffened and slowly backed away from him. He watched as fear chains solidified, but only slightly. These were Legends, and they did not shake easily. But the fear chains allowed him to do something else. Find the elf without anyone telling him, for only one chain was nearly entirely solid, and only one chain was moving. Shiv seized that chain with his hand. Immediately, a Shapeless Tide surged along its length, and he followed it upward.

Farsight 56 > 57

The elf was bleeding. She was about a hundred meters in the air, clawing her way along the Orichalcum walls, slashing the red-gold alloy over and over again, trying to cut her way out. Blood spilled out from one of her arms. It was broken. He could see the bone jutting free from parted skin. He also saw her face. It was a mess. She didn't have much of a nose anymore. Instead, it was more like a red crater buried at the center of her face.

"Back down you come!" Shiv pulled hard on the fear chain, just as the first vector splashed against the elf's body. Shiv let out a cry as she suddenly plummeted downward. Her Reflexes were high, but before she could do anything, before she could change places with one of her golden shadows or summon more time constructs, her Magical Resistance broke entirely, and she gave a pained howl. That pain howl turned into a loud groan as she slid face-first along the sides of the wall, a long smear of red painting her trajectory.

As she was about to land, Shiv stuck his knee out, causing the elf to land forehead-first against his protruding limb. Blood erupted from her already compromised face. Pieces of teeth flew out from her mouth like shrapnel. The elf bounced off, groaning in pain, but Shiv seized her by the throat and held her up as if showing the other prisoners his prize.

"You could have stopped," Shiv said calmly, even though that wasn't what he felt. Inside, he was screaming with steaming-hot rage. "You could have just let it go. The first time you cut me, I ignored it. Guess that was you being jumpy. Second time, fine. Test the waters. But you kept going, though. You got greedy."

The elf all tried to say something, but all that came out of her was a wet cough. Shiv held her up with a single arm and looked to the other Legendary prisoners. "I'm happy that the rest of you were wise enough to stay out of this. Let's see if we can get this lesson through her thick skull, huh?" As he studied them, he realized his joke didn't land. "Because I've been beating on her?"

Psycho-Cartography: Don't do that again. Also, don't speak without thinking. Your adrenaline is too high. Observe. Think once, think twice, and then speak. If you rush, you will betray yourself.

The prisoners were silent. They watched as he considered what to do with the elf. His first instinct was to kill her, to put her down as an example for the others. It seemed like the logical thing, and it would be a statement of strength. But he took Psycho-Cartography's advice for decision-making as well. He thought once about killing the elf, then he thought again, and by the third thought, he guessed. He suspected that there might be something else he could do with her.

Offering mercy to someone who just tried to kill you didn't seem wise to Shiv. Just because she failed this time didn't mean she would fail the next. She was a Legendary Chronomancer. Maybe Legendary in terms of cutting too, though he doubted it. Something about her cuts hinted she was a Low Hero or a High Master instead.

"Why, why, why?" the elf muttered, the word whistling out from her mangled face, with wet rasps. "Why can't I heal?" He saw a shudder of gold pass across her body. "Why am I not healing?"

He realized she was trying to cast herself back in time, or use Chronomancy to avert her wounds somehow. Shiv just chuckled. "Causal Scargiver," he said. She turned slowly, and the fear chain between them became almost adamantine-hard. "It's a Unique Feat, something you get after you hurt someone from the Outside."

"No. You... you couldn't have..."

"Oh, but I could. And I do hate eldritch bullshit. Your gimmick is pretty simple in comparison."

Slowly, Shiv's expression turned calculated. The anger remained there, but instead of being hot, inflamed anger, it turned cold and patient. His first instinct was wrong. Just killing her wouldn't be punishment. It would simply be the status quo between Pathbearers. Shiv didn't need to adhere to the status quo. He could go beyond it. He could defy it. Shiv could teach them just what they had to lose.

Tendrils of Vitae crawled out from Shiv's hands and burrowed under the elf's flesh. She kicked and writhed, her swollen eyes trying to widen. "No, no, what are you doing?" she cried aloud.

Shiv ignored her. He dove through the depths of her soul, and as he found her Chronomancy, he pressed against it. "I'm considering cracking your skill," Shiv said. The elf went entirely rigid. The fear chain between them was so hard that it felt unbreakable. And then, for the first time, Shiv began using his new Dread-Tainted Feat. He infused fear with every action and watched as the expressions of the prisoners changed.

It was subtle at first, nothing more than slight frowns or half steps, but his Shape of Monstrosity was growing at an alarming pace. The dread taint radiated out from him like a festering rot. Images of Daughter flickered over each of the prisoners, especially the elf Shiv was in the process of breaking, and the terror they offered him as tribute gradually began to build. In the case of the elf, it soared.

"No, stop, don't, don't!" Her pleas went unanswered as Shiv pressed his Vitae against her Chronomancy skill. As soon as he dipped into its core and infused himself with a new animated skill, he considered shattering her right then and there, but something halted him.

Psycho-Cartography: There are a few paths ahead of us. If we break her and we cripple her for good, we will give her back to the other Legendary-Tier prisoners, but she will be a liability then, and judging from how they act, it's likely she will be killed. Her life isn't what matters here, though. It's her use. She's a dangerous Pathbearer, and with what her golden shadows can do, she would be an immense help scouting through hostile zones.

"Please, please don't, please," the elf whimpered. "Don't break the skill. I'm sorry. Great, Great Legend. Great legend! Deathless! Do not break my skill. Do not unmake me!"

Her cries were hysterical, unbecoming of a Legend, yet entirely understandable. Shiv remembered Valor, how depressed the former Legend seemed now that he was but a shadow of himself. He remembered Can Hu, who yearned for nothing more than to return to what it was at its apex.

It was one thing to die, to be cast from this mortal existence into the great uncertainty that lie beyond, but it was another to be broken while you were still alive, to be rendered less than you could, less than you were, and less than you could ever be, to see your future cut down before your eyes and be forced to live it regardless. There was a great trove of fear down that path, but that was also a path where Shiv lost out on other opportunities.

He hesitated, and then he leaned down.

"Why shouldn't I break your skill?" Shiv asked.

The elf drew in a ragged breath, and she gripped his arm with her working hand. "Because, because, I'll give you anything, anything, if you would simply spare me." She let out her ragged hiss. "Or just kill me! Kill me! Don't do this! Anything but this! Anything at all."

Shiv wondered how he might react if someone threatened one of his skills. He'd like to think he would have more dignity, but he really wasn't sure. It had taken death and sacrifice for him to become a Legend. And if someone else threatened to take it away, to reduce him back to being nothing more than a Pathless? The very thought inspired spiking dread inside Shiv himself. And he developed an unwanted burst of sympathy toward the elf.

Ugh, I really don't like this thinking twice thing. It makes me feel shit I don't like, Shiv thought.

Psycho-Cartography: That's part of being alive. That's part of being mature. You want to be more than a brute; deal with it. Deal with the discomfort. The ones who do make the best choices.

Shiv gritted his teeth as he considered the elf once more. He was two steps away from his initial choice now. Originally, he was just planning on killing her. Then he wanted to make her a crippled example. But slowly, he was moving toward a new thought. A thought that he wasn't entirely sure about.

"Listen," Shiv whispered, licking his lips. "I have planted a magical bomb inside your skill." The elf shuddered and let out a pained moan. Shiv kept talking. "The bomb will only go off when I want it to. So I'm going to ask you to do a few things for me."

"I'll do anything," the elf repeated. Her head was bowed. She refused to look him in the eyes. Shiv wiped her wounds away using his Aegis, and as her crystallized injuries glistened around him, she shuddered and lifted her head. "How did you—"

"Causal Scargiver's a fun Feat," Shiv said. "It wounds things that don't adhere to the natural flow of time or the natural patterns of the world. Or at least that's how I think it works. Doesn't stop me from healing you the conventional way. I want you to understand something right now. This isn't mercy. I'm not giving you mercy. I'm not letting you go with a slap on your wrist. I have you. I have you by the fucking balls, uh..." Shiv cut himself off as he realized he was talking to a female elf. "I have you by the..."

"Cunt!" one of the prisoners shouted.

"Thanks, random asshole who'll probably try to kill me later," Shiv muttered.

"You're welcome, Deathless. Keep going. I'm kind of enjoying this. Uppity bitch stole my grub once."

Chapter 178 (III) Terrify [II]

The absurdity of that exchange made Shiv briefly crack up. "Bunch of felling freaks," he muttered under his breath. "Where was I? All right, you're not going free. You're my prisoner now. That bomb is staying inside of you until either you die, I die, or we get out of this prison," he lied. "So, when I ask you a simple question, do you want to get out of this prison?"

The elf nodded vigorously. "Yes—you... you're not going to break my skill."

And it was back to that question again. She was willing to die instead of losing her skill. That's how much this mattered to her. That's how much being Legendary defined her.

"I'm not going to break your skill yet," Shiv said. "The future is unwritten and full of potential." His voice ended in a snarl. He grew just a bit larger from that final threat, and he pulled his Vitae free of her body. He wrenched her off the ground and shoved her back toward the other prisoners. "Same goes for the rest of you. This one here is scarred by me. I left something special inside her skill, and if any of you come for me, I want you to understand something. You don't just need to worry about the people beside you. You should worry about me too. You might win. You might take my life. You might get those 10 Legendary skills. But you fail, and I'm going to give you the deal I gave my orcs."

Shiv turned and looked toward Bonk. "What was the deal I offered you?"

"A perpetual crippling," Bonk said with a wide grin. His arms were behind his back, and he was like a sergeant reciting the orders of a general. "The Vaketh-Insul will see any orc that offends his sensibilities mutilated at the soul, which means even if we do come back, we will come back bloodied, wounded, and perhaps, worst of all, a screaming nugget without limbs, without eyes, without even a tongue. Simply screaming forever and ever lost in the darkness of our own body, our wounded self a cage."

With every phrase Bonk spat, Shiv's eyes narrowed a bit more. He expected the orc to simply tell them what was at stake. Instead, Bonk decided to turn this into a poetry night or some shit. Some orcs, man, Shiv muttered to himself. "Alright, with that out of the way, does anyone else want to take their shot at me?"

None of the other prisoners moved. None of them, aside from Urri, who took a step forward. Shiv clenched his fists. He still wasn't as big as the massive Vulteg, but the size difference between them had shrunk considerably ever since Shiv started gaining power from his Shape of Monstrosity. The Vulteg looked down at Shiv with his single bloodshot eye, and the Deathless read something other than apprehension in his gaze.

Instead, the Vulteg seemed impressed.

"You. You have courage, Spawn of Legend Udraal."

"Never call me that shit again," Shiv growled back.

The Vulteg ignored him. "To threaten sixteen foes at your Tier. It takes great courage. Great courage." The Vulteg slowly laughed. "Lord Scorn would quite like you."

Shiv nearly folded over laughing. If only the Vulteg knew who he was talking to. And just then, another thought occurred to Shiv. If he was going to save Adam, he needed to keep this Vulteg as far away from Adam as possible. Or he needed to lie about who Adam was. The Vulteg might have been interred in a Republic prison, but as far as Shiv knew, world Quests weren't blocked here, and the System's reach couldn't be denied.

Urri likely knew about the Corpse Shedder and the infamous Adam Arrow. And that brought him to another consideration. Just like how the Challenger could stare at the world through Shiv, or at least spectate over what Shiv was doing at any given moment, perhaps Lord Scorn could do the same with his Vultegs.

Oh, hell, Shiv thought to himself, better be real careful around this one.

"Lord Scorn, huh," Shiv said, doing his best not to reveal any hints that he already knew quite a bit about the Vulteg god. "Quite the name."

"A mighty god! An indifferent but just god!" Urri insisted. "Perhaps if we are freed, I can introduce you to him. He might even offer you sanctuary in his realm. Sanctuary and a position. I am a High Marshal of the Vulteg." He frowned slightly. "At least Urri was. Until I was betrayed by one of my own, trapped here in this feeble prison." He sneered at the Orichalcum walls. "A feeble prison that will hold me no longer, and does not hold you either."

He looked at the other prisoner and let out a bark. "He lives. For now, he lives. He has proven his valor to be metal. There is iron in his veins. So I declare upon my Vulteg honor that he will not be struck down in shadow nor light." The massive Vulteg held out a fist. "This is Urri's declaration. Who else shares in this?"

The other prisoners simply regarded the Vulteg, but few of them responded outright. However, Shiv noted the hesitation gripping a few of them and decided to take advantage of that. "I'm not demanding that all of you follow me. You don't need to do anything. You can flee right now, but I'm going to tell you this much: We've wasted plenty of time here. The Avatars, the only reason why they're not here is because they're hunting for someone else and trying to use him as a lure for me. I'm going to find him before they do. And after that?" Shiv flapped his dimensional cape. "After that, you're all welcome to stay inside this cape."

They all stared at him. Shiv realized how awkward that sounded. Shit, I really need to upgrade Silver Tongue. Sometimes spitting the first thing that comes to mind doesn't really work.

Psycho-Cartography:Think twice.

"It's not a trap," Shiv said, and then he winced. Instead of continuing on and making things worse, he thought twice. "It's a dimensional cape. There is a category one dimension inside. You can reside there, and I can get us through the time loop."

"Time loop?" Urri said. He sounded surprised.

And that's when Shiv realized that most of the prisoners likely didn't actually know about the Well's layout. "Okay, first things first, how many of you know where we are?"

A few of the prisoners let out grunts. "We're in a Rubix Well," the man with blades growing out of his flesh said, shrugging. "Don't know much about that. Could be in any Rubix Well as far as I know. My guess, though, we're in the capital Well." He spat off to the side, and his saliva smashed into the skull of a downed warden. It punched a hole through the helmet and even dented the Orichalcum beneath. "We're pretty heavyweight prisoners. It's where I'd keep us. Close to the seat of the Ascendants' power. Close and easy to smash if we ever get out."

The binary-crowned automaton regarded the bladed man. "If that theory is true, then my best guess as to our exact location is under the Throne."

"The Throne?" Shiv repeated.

"A colloquial name for the Yellowstone Supervolcano," Five interjected. All heads turned to the wolf-man as he continued with his elaboration. "I suspected but wasn't sure. If we are indeed under the supervolcano, that means that even after we get through the Nadir, we will be surrounded by divinity-infused lava. Not quite sure how we're going to overcome that problem, but I'm almost certain that there is some kind of mechanism connecting the outside world to the lava."

A few of the prisoners muttered something, but none of them seemed to have solutions at the ready.

"This process takes quite a bit of mana, and sometimes magic is unreliable," Five said. "No, it must function without attuned magic or divine intervention. Redundancies matter. That makes it reliable. You don't want something that can become just as much a prison for your guards as it is for the prisoners."

That sort of made sense. Shiv didn't know enough about prisons to contradict the wolf-man. "Alright, we'll deal with that problem once I figure out the first. I'm going to make this plain: I'm not leaving this prison until I save my friend. That's the only reason I'm still here. If he wasn't, I would be long gone. The Ascendants and their Avatars are going to go looking for him too. Now, I have no intention of running from the bastards. I know how powerful they are. I know what they can do. Well, some of them."

Shiv looked off to the side. He'd already had brief encounters with Daughter and Cripple. Not to mention his ugly experiences with Kathereine and Halsur before that. "I'm not letting that run me off. In fact, I'm going right for them. I intend to cripple whatever Avatar comes my way. I intend to make a mess of this prison. I intend to survive and eventually take bloody retribution on these bastards. Now, if you want to leave, I'm good with that. But if you want to square some debts for all the years you spent in this prison, well, I might have an angle on that as well. All I can say is that you won't be making it out without someone who knows the layout of this place, and if you want that reward on my head, I just want you to know that you're probably not making it out of this prison without me, so you can't enjoy it."

And soon, the prisoners were looking at each other. No longer did they gaze at Shiv as if he were a prize to be won or some lamb to be slain. Instead, there was a glow of opportunity in their eyes. But Shiv knew better than to let down his guard. They were likely only biding their time. Some among them would still try to come for his head if he ever gave them the opportunity. At least for now, they weren't going for him openly anymore.

"Very well," Urri said, clasping his hands together. His head tentacles curled, and Shiv got the faint impression that the Vultag was grinning. "If you are intent on making an enemy of the Ascendants, then you will need mighty, mighty allies. Urri is mighty. I cannot be stopped. And the Ascendant dogs owe years taken from Urri's life."

Shiv briefly remembered stopping Urri earlier, but he decided not to mention it, considering he was volunteering. I need to figure out what to do with him. If he sees Adam, I'm probably going to definitely have to kill him. Probably closer to a question of when right now.

"You serious, Urri?" the blade-covered man grunted. "That's enough to make us not go for this guy's, uh..." He stopped talking as he noticed Shiv glaring at him. He wasn't entirely afraid, but that didn't mean he wasn't wary of the Deathless. He grunted with displeasure. "Look, I know some of you guys might be trying to get recaptured or put down like dogs, but that's not what I'm into. I got out of my cell, and I'm gonna stay gone. It doesn't matter if I have to die or complete this escape. Hey, what are you doing?"

Shiv took a few steps toward the wall and slammed his fist into it. As soon as he did, a cube-shaking impact tremored through the space. Vectors slashed out from his body and crashed against the Orichalcum. One after another, the Shapeless Tides hammered against the red-gold material until, finally, it ruptured with the loud shriek. Slowly, Shiv began to peel this large section of the metal away, letting out a growl of exertion as he worked his Legendary Skill hard.

A few seconds later, a five-meter-wide opening was made, and Shiv gestured out into the crawlspace. "Anyone who doesn't want to come with me is free to go."

He stared at the prisoners. None of them moved. None of them moved immediately, anyway. "I can't guarantee you'll know where to go or that you won't get lost among all the gears and shit. I've been outside. I don't know if any of you have, but if you know the layout of this prison, then you'd understand that you're just part of one cell. There are a bunch of different cubes, and they're all moving constantly, each one sliding into place right next to another. Where we are right now might be entirely different than just a few minutes ago. And if you keep going, you'll probably find your way out of the maze of cubes, but then you'll be hitting the time loop. If you don't have strong enough magic or means of slipping past it like I do, well, you're probably just going to get launched back in time and stuck here anyway."

The Deathless shook his head and sighed dramatically. "There are layers to this prison. Lots of layers. I might be able to make it out with my Unique Skills, but the rest of you? Well, let's say you do kill me at some point. I really wonder, how are you going to get past the time loop? How are you going to avoid the notice of the Avatars? Even if everything goes right, how are you getting out of here? How are you going to complete almost a dozen Delves while still in here?"

There was no answer to that. They may have been Legendary Pathbearers, but this was a prison meant to hold them. They really didn't know how trapped they were. More importantly, they didn't have the capability to vanish from someone else's awareness by sinking into their own soul. When no one walked out through the gap, Shiv just shrugged. "Well, looks like you're all picking the only other choice there is. Come with me, and we can deal with our Ascendant problem. No, you can't talk me into leaving early. Yes, you can stay here if you want, but you know what's going to come if you do that."

Silver Tongue 36 > 37

"What are we going to do right now?" the automaton with the crown asked Shiv. "Updated: What do you intend to do right now?"

"Right now?" Shiv's thoughts trailed off. He wasn't exactly sure, either. It took him a moment before he remembered what he wanted from Five. "Five?" Shiv called out. "Tell them what you need. See if they can speed this up with one of their skills, somehow."

The prisoners all turned to regard the wolf-man, and Shiv noted how the Aviary agent barely reacted to the collective gazes of sixteen other Legendary-Tier prisoners.

"As you wish," Five began. "I'm looking for a prison cell in this cube."

A chorus of muted laughter came from the other prisoners. "Take your pick," the crystalline column said. It tilted its body and jabbed itself at one of the nearby portholes lining the ground.

"I should elaborate more," Five continued without offense. "I'm looking for one with a particular spell combination circulating across its walls."

The prisoners all looked at each other, and a few of them shuffled. "Well, there's a lot of cells here. I don't think you expect us to go through all of them."

Five simply nodded. "Of course. I expect you all to be helpful and speed this process along."

"So, what, we're all going to be errand boys now?" another prisoner called out. This one was a large human. Instead of having flesh or skin, however, their body was veined with coursing lightning, while a layer of glowing stone formed an exoskeleton around them. "If you think—"

"What patterns?" the elf that Shiv nearly broke earlier said aloud. It was the first thing she'd said ever since Shiv decided to spare her. He made eye contact with her again, and she flinched away from him. "What are the patterns? I can find the cell. I will send my Shadows of Futures Coming."

Everyone else was looking at the elf, and Urri's mouth was slightly agape.

Psycho-Cartography: This could be a trap, or it could be our choice turning out good for us. There are many ways to use fear. Some of them come with the benefits of mercy. Sometimes, mercy is strength.

Instead of answering the elf, Five held out a hand, and three different spell shapes formed. The first looked like an arcing symbol with three dots in the middle. Following that, there were two lines with a triangle infused with complex geometries. The third was a fractured rectangle with strange circuits running in between.

Before Shiv could even fully remember the symbols, the elf sent out a small army of golden shadows. They expanded more and more with each passing second. They cut free from the elf's person, gliding through the crowd and circulating through the valley. More shadows appeared over every porthole and descended into the cells. Shiv was staggered by her efficiency. More than that, he was impressed by how soon she located what the Aviary agent was looking for.

"I found it," she called aloud after about half a minute. Every single shadow snapped back inside her, and Shiv wondered how her Chronomancy worked. He didn't see an extension of her running in the past. Could it be that she was launching projections into the future instead? That was useful. And if she could cast multiple versions of herself across time...

If I could do that, I'd be beyond unstoppable. Shiv imagined a version of himself that could fight across the future. Chronomancy was a hell of a Magical Skill.

"Wonderful," Five said. He walked toward the elf with both hands clasped behind his back. "Show me. After that, I think I'm going to give my associates a house call."

She broke free from the other prisoners, and almost reluctantly, they followed along as well. They kept their distance from the elf and Five, and they only started moving after Shiv did. While he walked, Bonk came beside him and began keeping pace with Shiv while retreating backward. He kept his eyes on the other prisoners, and he grinned widely at them.

"Bonk, what are you doing?" Shiv said.

Just then, Rebis appeared right next to the wolf-man, and he stayed close. The elf regarded the amalgamated Pathbearer, but she didn't do anything. Shiv understood what the cyborg was trying to do. Five was his friend, and he was going to make sure the elf didn't harm him.

"I'm just making sure no one tries to take a run at you again," Bonk said.

"Didn't want to help earlier?" Shiv asked.

"Oh, you seemed like you had that. Besides, I wanted to be entertained as well." The orc sighed. "But it was a wise thing you did."

"What, letting her live? I didn't expect you to approve."

The orc simply smiled. "Insul. Sometimes, the most delightful cruelty to inflict is letting your enemy know that you could have taken their life at any time. Sometimes, mercy is dominance."

Chapter 179 (I) Councilwoman

"You're a godsdamned fool... Should've left me. I wasn't..."

"Oh, be quiet, Harlon. This is your fault, you know? I wouldn't need to risk my life if you'd just won that fight and stopped yourself from getting taken prisoner."

“...”

“Hey! No! No! I just insulted you! I’m calling you weak and pathetic. You can’t take that.”

“I am...”

“Gods—fuck! Rose! Rose! I need you here, now! Please! Harlon. I didn’t mean—”

“I know. But you’re right. I was... dead weight in the end, wasn’t I?”

“No. You weren’t. You’re my brother. I’m—just keep talking. Stay focused on me. Don’t close your eyes! Don’t close your felling eyes! Harlon!”

“Brother...”

“Yeah. Yeah. I always wanted a brother when I was growing up. And I found one. I found a good one. You’re not dead weight, Harlon.”

“I’m not enough. Vera knows. You know...”

“No. You’re worth more to me than any power. You’re worth more than all the stars in the sky. Just don’t go to sleep! Harlon!”

-Harlon Lowe and Roland Arrow

“Veronica. Veronica. Dearest. Please let him go. There’s no need for this.”

Veronica Chandler ignored her grandmother’s pleas as she tightened her grip around Stormhalt’s throat. The City Lord was choking violently. He kicked and struggled against the Legend-Councilwoman’s grasp, but his might was feeble compared to hers. Veronica was but a Master in terms of Physicality—and a Low Master at that. Such was why she strangled Stormhalt with borrowed hands

.

She had summoned two Orichalcum-forged gauntlets from the Dimensional veil she wore and had them throttle the City Lord in ways she couldn’t. This allowed her to command Stormhalt to “Gag Harder,” or “Forget how to breathe,” and even “Enjoy getting choked.” The City Lord’s brutalized expression turned from indignation, to terror, to ecstasy, and then desperation as he kept looking upward. Halsur’s massive form glimmered faintly over existence. Veronica disregarded her grandmother’s favorite walking dildo and continued running the edge between releasing Stormhalt, or just breaking his neck and putting him out of his misery.

“City Lord Stormhalt. You. Simple. Stupid. Creature. Why the hell do you exist? Are you here to give me an aneurysm? Do you want me to finish you off, is that it?”

“Councilwoman, this is unbecoming,” Councilman Anthony De Diego said from the other side of the meeting chamber. She ignored the only member of the Auroral Council older than her and continued her strangulation exercise.

Veronica Chandler stood atop the grand ulenold table, having strode across its entire length with the activation of her Zen Berserker Skill to inflict bodily harm upon Stormhalt after he'd reported his latest blunder. “I’ll tell you what is unbecoming, Anthony. Helping an Abyssal Lord. Arranging for them to receive an Animancy Core. Allowing them to siege one of our towns and nearly restart the Abyss War. That’s unbecoming. What I am, right now, is simply upset. I am somewhat emotionally compromised. And the fact that the rest of you aren’t as well makes me just a little bit more angry.”

There were nine other Avatars in the meeting chamber besides her and Stormhalt. Nine other Avatars to nine other Ascendants. Right now, Cripple’s newest Avatar had yet to arrive, and one of Daughter’s sobbing Waifs was being held by a towering clockwork golem that served as Maiden’s Avatar and conduit to comfort her daughter. Why the Waif and Daughter were sobbing? Veronica didn’t know, and she didn’t have the energy to ask. She suspected it had something to do with the Deathless, considering how the Waif kept whimpering about him.

The Deathless, who really shouldn’t have escaped since he was under Cripple’s watch. But I guess I just expect too much from my fellow Avatars and my exalted Ascendants. Truly, the standards of stopping a True Hero with a single Legendary Skill from escaping the Capital Well are too much to ask for. I’m definitely the unreasonable one here. Yes, indeed.

Veronica took a deep breath.

And started choking Stormhalt even harder to deal with her stress. His eyes began to roll, and her grandmother began singing a soothing tune. Veronica was resistant to the Sonbringer’s ways, but resistant didn’t mean immune. Immediately, she felt some of her anger fade, but the intellectual annoyance still stayed.

"I'm not strangling you for the Blackedge debacle right now," Veronica seethed elegantly. She pronounced every syllable with casual calmness while the Orichalcum arms she wielded trembled with unstable fury. "I'm strangling you right now because, after all your screw ups, with both the Endbreaker and Songbringer trying to protect you, you still couldn't understand basic instructions. What did I say about Adam Arrow?"

She loosened her hold on Stormhalt's throat slightly. He rasped for air, and his eyelids fluttered. The man had been close to unconsciousness, and everything inside Veronica told her to just finish the job. "I have no excuse... But all this... was for..."

"Don't say it!" Kathereine cried out. "Don't say for the Republic, Havel! Look at her face. Is this the face of a woman who wants to hear that?"

Stormhalt blinked and gulped painfully. Something threatened to break inside Veronica. "City Lord. It's not wise to come up with an excuse right after saying you have no excuse. It makes it seem like your words don't mean anything. And if your words don't mean anything, then I can't take you seriously. Do you know what I do to people whom I can't take seriously? Do you think I will spend time on them?"

"No, Legend-Avatar," Stormhalt managed with a rasp.

"Legend-Councilwoman," Veronica corrected. "Because you're clearly my grandmother's Avatar as well. That's why I couldn't call on her when this World Quest triggered, right? Because she was with you." Veronica's head whipped backward, and she glared at Kathereine from the corner of her eye. The ethereal figure of her grandmother looked so innocent. She had the gall to be blowing on a piece of jewelry to feign nonchalance, even after everything she did. "But let's not talk about that yet. That's for later. Right now, let's stay on track with what I asked earlier. What were my orders related to Adam Arrow?"

“To see him mended and left in isolation,” Stormhalt coughed.

“Oh, so you did hear me. Remarkable. So then, why didn’t you do as I ordered?” Veronica pressed her lips together as she waited for Stormhalt to give her an answer. When none came, she pulled him even closer. “Well. Say something. If you have a problem with me, I want to know about it. It’s important to know how other people feel about me so that I can self-improve.”

“I had to speak with him,” Stormhalt whispered. “I had to face him.”

Veronica closed her eyes. She nearly closed her summoned hands around Stormhalt’s neck too. No one would ever know the sheer depths of her Heroic willpower—how much it took for her to spare Stormhalt’s life. Three times she was tempted, and three times she held back from just killing him. “Stormhalt. I distinctly recall ordering you to seek a Psychomancer to resolve whatever fixation you have with Roland Arrow.”

The City Lord had the gall to sneer. “It’s not a fixation. He was a threat to the Republic. He intended to bring down the Ascendants! To elevate himself to the position of god!”

“Right. So you say. Just a shame that my belief is very lacking right now.”

Katherine almost said something, but Veronica whipped her head around and glared. “I’ll get to you later, grandmother.”

And for the first time, Katherine’s self-control slipped as well. “Do not take that tone with me, child.”

Something clashed between them. The table Veronica had been standing on turned into a spray of ash, and she gracefully dropped to the floor as the malice in their Rhetoric turned tangible. Their words greeted each other like colliding blades, and the room was filled by the ringing of steel in the aftermath. Neither Ascendant nor Avatar said anything thereafter, and neither was satisfied. Veronica knew she wasn't as powerful as her grandmother in most regards, but when it came to words, orders, and commands, she was a Legend.

And Legends existed to defy the reign of gods.

"We will be talking later," Veronica said coolly. "Officially. And then privately." She regarded Stormhalt once more, ignoring the narrowing of her grandmother's eyes. "Stormhalt. You disobeyed my direct declaration—one that all the other members of the council agreed upon."

"Technically, we ended the last emergency session at an impasse." Veronica's glare was ripped away from Stormhalt's pathetic face until it found the one that had spoken. Three seats to her right, Luminous Lantern, Enoch the Builder's Avatar, decided to add its two bits of mithril. The automaton's lantern-like head flickered with each word, while its Ascendant, Enoch the Builder, remained absent.

"Thank you, Luminous. But please be polite and wait for your turn to speak next time. Thanks."

The automaton flinched as if someone slapped it over the head. "I was merely being truthful," it said, slightly hurt. It fidgeted with its gold-tipped fingers, and still its absent-minded Ascendant failed to appear. "When we finished with the last session, we only agreed to refrain from doing anything with the Young Lord and treat the prison break in the Nadir as the priority."

"Yes. Anything. And City Lord Stormhalt decidedly did something. Something that led one of our own wardens—a Biomancer—to steal him from his cell and attempt an escape. Now, I have to ask the ugly

question of whether our Biomancer was actually an Aviary agent all along, if she was ideologically compromised, or if our City Lord here was so repugnant in terms of behavior that she thought freeing the Young Lord was the proper thing to do.”

Veronica paused for a moment and leaned in closer over Stormhalt. He tried to flinch away from her. “I also know that we have a dead Psychomancer. Which leads me to two more questions: What was a Psychomancer doing in his cell when we already had one do a surface survey for his mind, and what were you trying to do with him?”

“The surface survey was insufficient,” Stormhalt choked out. “I just wanted to see if there was any way we could learn about the Deathless’s behavior. And to use the Young Lord against him. I suspect there is a strong—”

Veronica slapped Stormhalt. The man’s head whipped off to the side. A cut opened along the edge of his scalp. “Heal,” the Councilwoman commanded. The wound tried to argue against her, but her Unique Feat and unbending ego decided otherwise. The injury she inflicted didn’t heal biologically. It was simply commanded to seal itself shut. The System tried to argue with her. Existence disagreed. She felt a brief pushback and rolled her eyes. “Heal, because you’re going to heal anyway. I’m not killing this sad waste of a Pathbearer yet. Just speed it up.”

Now things were more acceptable. Stormhalt’s wounds slammed shut and fused back together in an instant. Most of the time, when you got to be a Legend, the System wanted to help you do the impossible. Veronica just had to give it a few steps to follow.

“Councilwoman,” Stormhalt began. She smacked him again. His head snapped hard to the right, and he nearly passed out.

“Stay awake,” Veronica commanded. “Get over your concussion.” Stormhalt shuddered as he did just that. “Stormhalt. Being an Avatar lets you get away with things. Everyone in the room knows that. Some of us use our position to do great things.” She gestured toward herself. “Some of us use our position as an excuse to do nothing, like Anthony.” The older man didn’t even bother frowning. “Some of us are literal orphans bound to an unstable child monster because life and fate hate them. But do you know the difference between the ones that stay Avatars and the ones that get spent?”

Stormhalt swallowed hard and didn’t answer.

“I’m looking for a reply on that, Stormhalt. It wasn’t rhetorical.”

“Favor,” Stormhalt said. “Service of the divine.”

Veronica couldn’t help it. She laughed. “No, you poor, simple man. It’s saying no. It’s telling your Ascendant that they cannot do something. That they cannot use you in a certain way. Because there is a big gulf between Avatar, servant, and slave. I know you despise Roland Arrow. And that matched up with what my grandmother feels toward the Starhawk. But the reason why we managed to stay a Republic so far is because everyone knew to listen to me!”

And with that, she snapped Stormhalt’s neck. The man wheezed desperately. His limbs shot out along his sides—but black lightning burst free from his twitching form.

“Stop,” Veronica said. A few of the forking bolts sank into her—but touched nothing due to her veil of Dimensionality. “Live. I didn’t break your neck completely. Get over it. Get better. Snap back into place.”

Stormhalt let out a pained cry as his neck popped back to a stable state. Halsur was glaring down at Veronica now, but she ignored him as she always did. Of all the Ascendants, she cared about him the least. Mainly because Halsur was kind of like Stormhalt in a way. The bastard was obsessed with her grandmother and didn't really have a will of his own when it came to her. It just made him like a hollow vessel. And there was something especially pathetic about a god acting as a slave.

Veronica sneered at Stormhalt before releasing him. The armored City Lord hit the marble floor with a resounding crash. Veronica's summoned hands of Orichalcum receded into Dimensional rifts. She glared at Ascendants and their Avatars. Then she strolled away from Stormhalt, clasping her hands behind her back.

"Fellow council members, Great Ascendants, I see we have to talk about a few things again. I see that we need to be reminded of the rules we abide by. Mainly, how our politics are supposed to be inflicted on our enemies rather than each other."

"Then we must speak of our wayward brother," Kathereine began.

"We will not speak of the Starhawk until he and his Avatar are in our presence and properly accounted for. Not before that. Never before that." She made eye contact with Kathereine again, and a pressure built between them. The chamber groaned. The gilded walls cracked apart, revealing Orichalcum behind. Paintings were ripped down the middle, and glass shattered. Even the marble floor came apart in an expanding web of fissures. "Never before."

Veronica began circling the chamber. She eyed the Ascendants more than their Avatars, and she enjoyed their silence. Yeah. That's right. You know I'm right, but you never listen. You never listen until one of you actively shits the bed. Despite the burning frustration nested within Veronica's bones, she quite liked this—the feeling of being the pillar of the Auroral Council and the tiebreaker between the gods.

“She is right, you know,” Maiden’s voice sounded forth from the clockwork golem she used as her vessel. The massive entity was a collection of snapping gears and hissing steam. Yet, beneath the metal were patches of biomass that melded with the inorganic exterior. “You were always impatient, Kathereine. We know that Matthew has grown unstable as of late, but the goal is to convince him. Or bind him to us. Not to be rid of him. That is not the consensus we came to.”

The Ascendant herself appeared in the golem’s metallic reflection. She looked as she always did, a shadow sprouting far too many limbs hunched over a crafting table. Sparks flew out as she worked, and between the flashes of light, Maiden’s full glory was shown. She was as much of an art project as all of her creations. Only patches of flesh remained of her. The rest was a jigsaw of glass, metal, crystal, and more. Yet, despite the filigrees of contrasting matter comprising her form, there was still a gorgeous presence to her. Maiden’s face was like cracked clay lined with whorls of gold. Her hair was a nest of copper, and a faint smile lined her lips. Pits of shadow existed in place of irises, and there was a boundless intellectual hunger in her expression as she worked on.

Kathereine’s beauty made her fellow Ascendants look plain, but Kathereine was ultimately human. A bit too human for Veronica’s tastes—but gods came in all shapes and personalities.

“Oh, the consensus,” Kathereine retorted with mockery. “Maiden. I do so admire your willingness to abide by the rules when none exist.”

“But one does,” Maiden replied. Her clockwork golem lifted its face at Kathereine as the gears it had for eyes snapped and turned again and again. “There is a single law that determines all our fates: The Great One. Should our connection to them be damaged, should the skills we crystallized in their mind be affected, then there is no us.”

“And such is what I was trying to prevent,” Kathereine said, gliding across the room. Her white dress flowed and flapped behind her, turning into the faintness of wings. But then the wings broke apart into petals, and a fragrance filled the room. The Songbringer hummed as she circled the clockwork golem like a snake preparing to wind itself around its prey. Then, she struck. She wrapped an arm around the

golem, and for the first time, Maiden looked up. It was a strange sight—though one infused with aesthetic.

Maiden stared up at an angle, looking past the shell of her golem like a portrait of someone looking beyond their frame. Meanwhile, Kathereine grabbed the golem by the arm and grinned amiably. “Why, if Matthew had his way, there would be no Republic. There would be no us. We all know what he intends to do.”

Chapter 179 (II) Councilwoman

“No. We really don’t.” And thus came Harlock’s voice, rushing through the room like a whistle of wind long after sunset. The Ascendant of Midnight seemed absent, but he was all around them, beyond anyone’s ability to perceive. Only when he willed it could another notice him. And right now, the taciturn Harlock had much to say. “We don’t know anything for certain. Because we don’t talk to each other anymore. I warned you. I warned all of you this would happen. I told you to avoid breaking the mono-worship that sustained us before. Now, we are all held up by cults unto ourselves. And so we turn insular.”

“Worthless,” Halsur the Endbreaker spat. His voice sounded like thunder crashing upon the land, and his glare fell on both Veronica and every inhabitant in the room itself—including Stormhalt. “All of this is worthless. The Starhawk is finished. He will never accept the ritual. He has declared his intent. So must we. There is no relationship between us. Not anymore. He is not who he was.”

“We are not who we were,” Harlock shot back. “And it is not worthless. We do not decide anything alone. That is not the way of things. To choose to reign as one will see us fall apart. And the jackals are all around us, waiting for us to fall apart so they can rush in and rip the flesh from our people's bones.”

A low hiss of crackling coldness hardened the very air itself. Veronica tried not to wince as the faint shroud of Hermit the Coldness revealed itself. An aged woman with a face lined with countless wrinkles and skin carved from blocks of ice glowered at everyone through the building steam lining the ceiling. “Which is why we should strike first. Folly after folly. Wait after wait. You are a coward, Harlock. This is known, and the only reason why you are burdened by the repeal of mono-worship is your own lacking congregation. You are waning.”

“We all ebb and grow,” Harlock shot back, with just as much ice in his own voice. “Some of us are patient.”

“And some of us do not delude ourselves,” Hermit declared. The Ascendant of Enslaved Winters whispered something to her Avatar. Hermit’s vessel was a stout goblin woman who almost never said anything. Instead, she simply offered her presence when Hermit had something to say. This time, however, Hermit’s Avatar directed a frigid glare at Anthony, who served Harlock the Midnight.

Veronica hid her urge to scream and bang her head against the wall and decided to sigh aloud instead. “Ascendants. Please. We’ve been through this.” As several of the Ascendants prepared to continue pushing the issue, she decided to play hardball. “Let’s move on.”

Her voice struck the Ascendants and their Avatars at once. It didn’t hurt them, but it did rattle their souls a slight bit. None of them appreciated that, but no one retaliated. That was because Veronica occupied a unique position on the council. She was the ultimate tiebreaker. She had her own Ascendant, but Kathereine couldn’t compel her the same way the other gods could bend their Avatars. That meant that everyone had to curry her favor if they wanted to get something done.

And that gave Veronica influence.

She wasn’t nearly the most powerful Avatar on the Auroral Council, but she was the most important.

Kathereine had taught her that lesson when she was but a babe. Control was more than just strength; it was the ability to command what someone else wanted. Always.

“We’re not doing this,” Veronica said sternly. A low groan came from Stormhalt, and she wrinkled her nose in disgust. “We are not airing old grievances and fighting with each other right now. There isn’t the time, and we have problems to resolve. We are going to start with Young Lord Arrow. I am going to find and secure him personally. The rest of you will work with me. That means, Daughter, that we don’t disappear suddenly to aid Cripple.”

“B-but I was helping,” Daughter whimpered. The Waif she controlled this time was a rail-thin thing, and when she raged, the skin on her face was drawn taut, revealing the outline of her bones. “I was! I was!”

She really needs to start picking from a better caliber of orphans, Veronica thought distastefully. These ones are getting sicker and weaker faster. Or maybe she’s just getting worse. They can’t survive her tainting for long, regardless... We need to get to the ritual. Sooner rather than later.

“You were,” Veronica said with a sarcastic nod. “Great. So. Is the Deathless secure? Is he back in his cage, ready to be interviewed?”

Suddenly, both the Waif and the Daughter fell silent. “No! Because Cripple was useless and—and stupid!”

Veronica hummed in doubt. “Okay. Fine. But he’s still out there. You failed.”

“I am a god!” Daughter screamed. She erupted from the sobbing Waif’s form in a blast of tar. A mess of arms extended out from her like a coiled mess of tendrils. Each hand she possessed clutched a glistening blade. Someone more paranoid would imagine themselves to be in danger, that Daughter might strike them. Veronica wasn’t that someone. She knew the girl was throwing her fit still, and something else drew her attention instead.

There was a scar on Daughter's malformed face. A fist-sized gap lined her deformed skull, and vitality kept seeping out. Daughter seethed, and her horrid, serrated teeth glinted even in the light.

"You're a wounded god," Veronica commented. "Come here. I want to see what the mean Deathless did to you."

And that was a relatively simple rhetorical trick. Daughter never did anything you told her to. Not unless you were Maiden or Enoch. That stopped the Ascendant of Darkness and Omens from following through on her usual hysterics.

Now for the next part.

"Come on," Veronica said, holding her arm open, beckoning the oversized, overpowered child over. "Let me see. I just want you to get better. I'll make sure no one bullies you."

A loud sigh came from the side.

Veronica turned her head to stare flatly at a floating spear. Its head was dense and golden, a blade that could pierce someone across time. Carvings were etched down its shaft, and a wisp of radiant flame extended from its very haft like a tail.

"Not a word, Terminal," she said, threatening the Avatar who had literally fused himself into his grand weapon. Another sigh sounded in the air, and a towering, scale-skinned man with a hundred wings sprouting from his back, a mess of slithering snakes extending in place of a lower body, and an even grander spear in his hand pressed his lips together as her gaze fell on him. "You neither, Longinus. Silence."

Longinus the Wanderer grunted with disgruntlement. "I don't understand why we keep treating her this way. She is centuries old, like the rest of us. Why we kept this creature, I do not understand."

"Why I cured your heart condition while we were still mortal was a question I often ask myself as well." Maiden's voice was devoid of emotion. Instead of working on her bench, she was staring out from the golem's body, directly at Longinus. Her eyes glowed with the flames of her inner forge, and the spear-bearing Ascendant of Distance and Journeys scoffed, but said no more.

Daughter struggled against her stubbornness for a moment before she wandered over to Veronica. She lowered her face and let out a snuffle, trying to gather more sympathy. Veronica studied the girl's wound, and her frown deepened. "This is a soul-wound."

"He used an Animancy evolution on me! He tore into my vitality as well." Daughter stomped her feet, and splashing tar washed through the room.

"Miss," Veronica declared off-handedly, and the tar curved around every last person to splatter against the walls. She extended a rush of her own Animancy mana. As she dipped her magic into Daughter, her eyebrows rose as she realized the depth of the damage. "It's deep. And it's healing slowly."

"I tried reverting time," Daughter whined. "I tried cutting the hurt away. But it just says. It doesn't get better! It doesn't!"

"Isn't that curious?" Veronica commented. "Heal faster. Souls mend, and vitality stabilizes. It just takes time."

Warning: Unable to countermand Causal Scargiver (Unique Feat)

The notification took Veronica entirely by surprise. “Causal Scargiver? A Unique Feat? Well. Looks like you’re getting a bit of a lesson this time, Daughter. I don’t think I can shout the injury away.”

“No!” Daughter shrieked. “I want you to fix it! Fix it! Fix it! FIX IT!”

Veronica couldn’t do anything about the injury—that might need to resolve itself. Frankly, she wanted Daughter to stay injured a while longer. It would keep her more hesitant when it came to performing acts of violent stupidity, and Veronica wanted to investigate the exact nature of this wound.

That didn’t mean Veronica could resolve what was actually bothering the girl, though. “There, there, it doesn’t hurt that bad, does it?”

It was like the breaking of a fever. One moment, Daughter was about to stomp her feet again. The next, she froze and felt at her face with her mess of tangled arms. A few of her knives sank through her skull, but she wasn’t bothered by that at all. In fact, she wasn’t bothered by her soul wound, either. “Still there, but it doesn’t... hurt anymore.”

“I told the pain to go away,” Veronica said. She reached out and patted Daughter on her ugly-looking head. It took much of the Councilwoman’s willpower not to frown at the tar drenching her fingers. “The hole will take a little longer, but I think it makes you look tough and scary.”

“Really? You think so?”

“Oh, yeah. I think I’m even a little scared of you now. But I’ll have to take another look later to be sure.”

Daughter straightened herself and loomed over Veronica. “I’ll be sure to—”

“Stay here and don’t run off alone again,” Veronica interrupted. “We don’t want you to get another mark, now, do we?”

Daughter’s posture sagged, and she let out a childish grumble. “Okay. I’ll be a good girl. Good, good girl.”

“Great. That’s all I can ask for. Now. The rest of you.” Veronica turned to address the room once more. “We’re going to follow in Daughter’s example and be good boys and girls as well. That means we do things together. With focus and precision. That means that we don’t follow in City Lord Stormhalt’s example and—”

A pocket of Dimensionality popped as a new figure entered the room. It was a large automaton with a rectangular body evolved to carry equipment. Faint wisps of incandescent mana painted its form in a corona, and the towering presence of Cripple flared into being. The other Ascendants greeted their comrade of Might and Sacrifice, but few acknowledged him with anything approaching warmth.

“Cripple,” Veronica said. “Glad to see you have bound yourself to a new Avatar so soon.”

“Apologies,” Cripple said through the Avatar. “I was indisposed after my encounter with the Deathless. He caught me off guard with one of his Unique Skills. It will not happen again.”

That was definitely absolute bullshit. Veronica could smell bullshit like she was a bloodhound. It came with being Kathereine’s granddaughter. And that’s why Kathereine was smelling it too. They shared a look as Cripple’s newest Avatar stomped its way across the room, its footsteps crunching against the broken marble with every stride.

“Again, this is why we act together,” Veronica said, choosing to let it go for now. She didn’t fully trust Cripple that much. Not in this matter. Cripple was a reliable ally to have when she was trying to get something legal or ethical done, but when it came to matters of honor or anything related to the Starhawk, Cripple was a bit too emotionally compromised to be a true ally. “The System wants the Deathless dead for a reason. I don’t. Not until we understand what he can do and why he’s growing so fast.”

“Right,” Charity the Bountiful spoke through her Avatar. “It absolutely has nothing to do with the fact that he might be related to you.”

Veronica paused. Something inside her tightened. “Excuse me?”

“Please,” Charity’s Avatar, Pauper—an elven priestess clad in cheap rags and covered in filth—said. “You are not the only one with the capacity to do research. We all know you were close to his father, once upon a time.”

“As one is with a treasured student,” Veronica declared, trying to keep herself from lashing out.

“Treasured student,” Anthony echoed. The old man took his round-rimmed hat off and rubbed at it a bit. “I was always curious about what you saw in him. He had no talent. Not like Roland. A competent Pathbearer, but not one of significant note.”

“There are things beyond power, Anthony. We can deny that, but we all betray ourselves emotionally at some point.” Veronica sighed. “And understand that I was his teacher when he was but a boy. He was a bright child, and—”

“And you stayed in touch even as he got to the academy,” Charity hummed through her Avatar. The Ascendant of Theft and Wealth chuckled loudly. “Such a touching story. You’re a noble woman, Veronica Chandler.”

Don’t let her goad you....

Of all the Ascendants, Veronica hated Charity the most. You couldn’t make everyone like you. Not even with a Legendary Rhetoric Skill. But that paled before the fact that Charity just seemed to be good at seeing through her.

“Everyone has a moment where they wish they were someone else,” Veronica said. “But that’s the blissful past. Let’s get back to the ugly present. We need Tanner Lowe back. And the best way to get him to cooperate and not just blink out of existence using that Outside Context Problem Skill of his is through Young Lord Arrow.”

Chapter 179 (III) Councilwoman

“It seems like more than just your own history is repeating, Legend-Councilwoman Chandler.” Stormhalt wheezed as he forced himself back to his feet. Veronica felt a begrudging bit of respect for the man. Despite all his flaws and foolishness, Havel Stormhalt was always a do-or-die kind of Pathbearer. There was no retreat in him, not cowardice or unwillingness to endure humiliation if it got him what he wanted.

Unfortunately, her respect was balanced out by annoyance as he continued speaking. “Roland’s spawn and the Omenborn have decided to echo their parents. The Young Lord cares for Udraal’s abomination. I must ask that you offer me a chance to redeem myself, Legend-Councilwoman. All this—”

“No.”

It was not Veronica that spat those words, but Cripple. Loud clanging followed as Cripple’s Avatar marched across the room. Stormhalt turned away from Veronica and clutched his chest. He did his best to hide a wince as he glared up at a massive automaton. Meanwhile, Cripple stood before Halsur as the two Ascendants faced each other down as well.

“You will do nothing but submit yourself to a cell of my choosing and face judgment for all the wrongs you have committed upon your fellow citizens.”

“My failures are only practical. My actions are virtuous!”

Stormhalt’s snarl enraged something in Cripple. Its divine mana flared. Stormhalt’s lightning surged. Veronica knew what was coming. No amount of Rhetoric was going to stop two very unreasonable gods if they decided to have another brawl in another meeting room over some other bit of stupidity.

“Grandmother,” Veronica said. “Stop them. Before we end up wasting more time. This is pointless.”

Katherineine was as much to blame as Stormhalt or Halsur for the mess they were in, but she was the hardest to deal with. Mainly because she functioned as the peacemaker between most of the Ascendants when she wasn't personally feuding with the Starhawk herself.

"That's enough," the Songbringer sang, her voice spiking the air with calmness and bliss. Both Halsur and Cripple went still as their Avatars staggered to a halt. Stormhalt's face twitched, and a dopey smile crawled over him even as he tried to fight it. The cargo-automaton Cripple used as an Avatar right now let out a loud sigh and stopped moving.

Both Halsur and Cripple were still raring for a fight, but Katherineine turned her attention to them thereafter. "And should you deny me this decency, I will make you recount dreaded shames past."

And that did the trick as usual. Another thing Katherineine had over the other Ascendants was her ability to remind them of their ugliest histories. Her songs carried the weight of Psychomancy, Empathy, but also History. What Katherineine could recall, she could make someone else relive.

And there was a great deal that the Ascendants didn't want to relive, considering the centuries they'd endured.

"I will not let this be," Cripple said, its voice a reverberating drone. "Not the City Lord. Not you, either, Halsur. And Katherineine, I know your breath was the wind that drove the sails of this madness. This cannot be forgiven. What you have done cannot be undone. Loyal citizens lay dead because of you. A town has been—"

"Destroyed because of the foul actions of a vengeful Abyssal Lord," Katherineine finished, placing the back of her hand on her head.

“One that you aided!”

Cripple snarled.

“Such accusations!” Kathereine clutched her chest in mock offense. “This will require proof, and you have none. I demand you recant these disingenuous assertions, Cripple. I understand that you are emotionally unbalanced from losing another one of your dear Avatars, but I will not endure such slander.”

“You—”

“Enough,” Veronica said. And now it was time for her to counteract her grandmother. “Whatever happened, we will face together, as the mature, focused, and capable leaders of this great Republic. And that means finding Young Lord Arrow, recapturing him, recapturing the Deathless, and securing this prison before we form a proper after-action discovery committee. No more accusations now. Or provocations. Now we all listen.”

Cripple wanted to say something, but she intercepted its grievance. “Cripple. I know. Later. I promise.”

Veronica felt the weight of her own Rhetoric impact her own soul as she shuddered. Legendary promises were terrible things to break. Terrible enough that they might just kill her if she did. And that’s also why Cripple let it go for now. Because it knew she was serious.

Kathereine tutted. “You must stop using yourself as a pawn, granddaughter.”

“Your fault, not mine,” Veronica shot back. Now. With everyone present and the stupidity mostly contained, she took in a breath and began strategizing. “Okay. The breakout has mostly been contained to the Nadir, correct? Cripple. Report on the current situation.”

“We are fighting to regain control of the Zeroth and Zenith Cubes. At present, there are over forty Legendary-Tier prisoners still unaccounted for.”

“And my vessel?” Enoch’s voice suddenly crashed out from Luminous Lantern like a collapsing building. “Where is the Rebis?”

Cripple hesitated. “Unaccounted for, at present. The prototype was present at—”

“It cut me!” Daughter interrupted with a loud cry. “It tried to sting me! It was helping the... the...” The Daughter actually radiated with fear and stopped herself from saying the Deathless’s name. She shot across the room and splashed back into her Waif. Soon, she was enjoying the comforting arms of her mother’s Avatar once more.

“Unacceptable,” Enoch declared. “A great deal of investment and effort has gone toward creating the vessel. We must reclaim it.”

“Your stabilized Avatar is a secondary matter before more pressing concerns,” Longinus said with a sneer. “Why, if you hadn’t attempted your little ritual before we fully understood how it worked, you wouldn’t be in this situation. Once more, we have to subsidize the folly of our most impotent members.”

“What do you know of competence, drunkard?” Enoch snarled. “All you do is wander from place to place, scribbling routes on pages, burning your divinity away in taverns, brothels, and other dens of pleasure. Places built through my blueprints, from my teachings.”

“Right. Your teachings. The teachings you managed to hallucinate all on your own—after the Great One served as your level scaffold.” Longinus scoffed. “Let’s not all lie to ourselves here, we know what we are. Some are just more honest than the others. I can accept the lie, unlike Matthew. Do not mistake me for that broken wretch. But still, why deny what we are? Is it not a triumph in itself to take from something mighty as well?”

“It would be more of a triumph if we could stay on track,” Veronica added with practiced ease. “Enoch. We will try to reclaim your Rebis if we can. Longinus. Please.”

“Fine,” the Wanderer said, sighing. “I will play the mute so that Enoch is spared the role of whimpering wench.”

“Thank you,” Veronica said. You over-sexed snake-fetish-having manchild. She didn’t say the last part, but she always thought it. “Whatever the case, we have a few mysteries to solve. The first being why Pathbearer Bethany broke Young Lord Adam out of his cell. Then, where did he go? After that, how do we get him back? My personal answer is that Bethany is likely compromised—or was an agent of Aviary—for the first.”

Several Ascendants turned to glare at Cripple. Even though this wasn’t really its fault at all. The recruitment for the Rubix Well was done by a specific department in the Prismatic Guard. And Cripple wasn’t the only one to miss the fact that there were Aviary agents in their midst. That applied to all the other Ascendants and their Avatars as well.

Rule one of politics. Veronica sighed internally. Cover my ass, and everyone else be damned.

“If that is true, then we likely have an entire cell under our noses,” she noted.

“I will see them found and delivered to the light,” a new voice proclaimed. Harlem the Truthful’s Avatar was a young man clad in pure-white plate, the same color as his hair. Whatever name he'd once had was lost to the purifying fires of the absolute truth burning behind his eyes. A rusted shackle ran along his arm, binding him to his dark-armored twin—and fellow Avatar. The latter served Dollus the Deceiver, the supposed thirteenth of the Ascendants.

Veronica knew a bit more than most, but there were other things about Dollus that bothered her. Mainly, she wasn’t sure if he actually existed at all, or if he was just a split personality of Harlem himself. She never really heard Dollus speak, after all. And Harlem operated in whispers and hints, usually visible only in someone’s peripheral vision. Even now, she could only see Harlem lurking, with no sign of his criminal twin.

“Very good,” Veronica said. “We will secure Young Lord Adam’s last known position and let Harlem take charge of the scene.”

“I will assist the Truthful,” Harlock spoke through Anthony. “The rats of Aviary dwell in darkness. I will see it turned against them.”

“Then I will proceed to the cube first,” Cripple declared. “To ensure all threats are pacified.”

“Not alone,” Veronica cut in. Cripple turned its single eye on her, but she refused to bend. “You said the Deathless caught you off guard with his Unique Skill last time. That’s not going to happen again. We do things as a Council and a pantheon now. No more independent operations. We treat this matter like how we dealt with the Tarrasque.”

“Beating the hells out of the thing until it's stunned enough for us to fling it at the Southern Continent?” Longinus jested.

“Dealing with it together. As a collective. Making sure we cover for each other’s mistakes,” Veronica answered. “The Deathless will be coming for his friend. And we will take advantage of that. But it’s time to stop treating him like a side note. His capture is not assured. We are not in control of the situation right now, and the longer we refuse to face these facts, the faster the situation might spiral. Right now, he could be anywhere in the prison, and from what we know about his Outside Context Problem, tracking him is hard, but trapping him is reliable. We just need a lure.”

“And I suspect Aviary is going for the very same strategy,” Kathereine mused.

That sent a rush of coldness through Veronica. “Very likely. I think they wish to learn the same things as we: Why the system wants the Deathless dead, how he was made, and how to create more of him.” Her eyes fell on Daughter. “Make no mistake, he is worth far more alive than dead. Especially if we can get him to bestow his path on our chosen candidates. Or have him lend his extreme System-favored status to all of us. I don’t know about the rest of you, but I have a hard time remembering the last time I gained a level in any skill.”

The other Avatars present shuffled in place, and she knew she had them. “So. I will be the one that makes contact with him. Not because of distrust, but because of means, methods, and outcomes. From what we know of our Deathless, he has a Legendary Skill now that allows him to contend with an Ascendant in a direct confrontation and rip through Orichalcum and magic in equal measure. But he lacks proper social defenses. And so we will use that to pacify him.”

“Putting yourself in place to be the one that claims him, I see,” Charity muttered off to the side as she chuckled.

“Yes,” Victoria replied, unashamed. “Because I am most suited for the task. And we cannot risk letting him slip our chains any further. I know what you all suspect about my relations to him, what you don’t say openly but hint at with your words and eyes. I turn this around on you and ask: Do you think you can stop him with your words? Because I can. I can make this simple and direct. So. Yes. It will be me.”

The room fell silent. No further comments assailed Veronica. She almost sneered in triumph. Despite everything, Kathereine looked upon her with the faintest hint of pride.

“We work together, and we do this properly. Together. As one. Now. I cede my chair to you, Harlem. Direct us as you may, and let’s find our missing Young Lord, shall we?”

The Ascendant acknowledged her words and called out to Harlock and Cripple. As the room broke apart into subfactions among Avatars and Ascendants, Kathereine drifted closer to her granddaughter.

“Tell me,” Kathereine began. “Is he ours? Because if he is... I don’t really want to do anything wretched to our bloodline.”

The thought was disgusting enough. “He’s already too young for you, regardless, grandmother.”

The Ascendant smiled. “Oh, that’s not up to you. Or him. But it might be up to our blood.”

Veronica didn't. "You. Do. Nothing. Until. I. Have. Him."

"Don't worry, dear girl." Kathereine laughed softly. "I'll let you relive your original sin. And when you are done, when you find yourself hurt once more, I will take him from you. As it goes. As it has always been."

And in that moment, Veronica quietly begged that she wasn't Tanner Lowe's grandmother after all.

Chapter 180 (I) Trust [I]

Most people do not truly understand their own flaws. It is easy to notice what weaknesses you have on a surface level, but past that, your problems are usually systemic and structural, majorly influenced by your environment and the context you face. This is where things get complicated; it is why many Pathbearers, even those who attain great power, are cut down in battle.

Oftentimes, we say someone is clumsy or inattentive. These things can be generally true. These might indeed be weaknesses, yet in an active war zone, they suffer from no issues. In fact, they seem to be tuned into the battle itself. This is because they are not clumsy or inattentive in the proper way. Their focus jumps fast, taking in stimuli, moving from one moment to the next. This allows them to process the battlescape around them, meaning that their so-called weakness was actually structural strength. Then, in the same circumstance, someone who is extremely attentive in their daily work is overwhelmed. There is too much detail for them to sift through, and they are cut down in a moment of hesitation.

This, then, is systemic weakness, and this is what many Pathbearers miss. They think simplistically, and there is a great benefit to doing so. If you make things that are complicated simple, you reduce the cognitive load you have to bear in combat and allow yourself to become more efficient. But this does not let you understand yourself, and you cannot afford to have a shallow comprehension of your own capabilities to the limits when you become a Legend. Before this point, everything else can be sustained by a single superior skill.

Overwhelming Physicality will allow you to get far, but there is a term for a Pathbearer that is Legendary in terms of Physicality and lacking everywhere else: a tragic corpse.

Because, despite the potential lingering in their immense strength, they will not be able to wield it properly, because one skill cannot be a pillar. No, it has turned into a post, and everything else has become a liability. The structure must be strong; the structure must be everything.

-Valor Thann

The prison cell that the elf led them to looked no different from any other. Shiv stared down into its Orichalcum length and saw a moving spell pattern gliding along its cylindrical shape. He tried to make out differences in the spell shapes that comprised the patterns, but failed. Each of them resembled specific symbols, codified expressions of intent. Even as he used his Farsight skill, he couldn't tell anything wrong with them. And once more, Shiv experienced the problems that came with an incomplete education.

Most of what he knew about magic was instinctive. He'd picked up a few pointers from Adam, Uva, and Valor since his arrival in the Abyss. But past that, his formal education remained nonexistent. He had no idea why spells became specific patterns when one composed them. He had no idea how spell patterns were layered into a physical object beyond their caster.

He was about to internally vent about Roland Arrow again when his Psycho-Cartography Skill pulsed inside his mind. Instead of saying anything directly, it fed him a single feeling.

Don't.

A sour taste crawled over his tongue and stung his very mind. Shiv stopped himself from complaining. He understood what his evolved Psychology skill wanted from him. It wanted him to move on. He was allowed to feel things, but the more he fed its feelings, the more he would reinforce those feelings. Being angry at Roland Arrow forever would lead him nowhere. He wasn't any stronger for it, any wiser, and the problem wasn't anywhere near solved.

And where Shiv was lacking in education, he had more than enough experience working with anger. He could hate someone and still be useful while hating them. And that's why he decided to pay attention rather than sink deeper into his mental malaise.

"Are you sure it's here?" the elf asked. She kept a few meters of distance between herself and Shiv, and he noticed around three golden shadows lurking to his right and left. Bonk had alerted him to the Chronomantic constructs, and Shiv thought he was about to get ambushed again. Yet they kept their distance as well, and eventually Shiv understood that they were means of preemptive defense. The fear chain connecting him to the elf remained as hard as ever. She owed him his life, but he took from her respect and fear. He caught her looking at him then, and she ripped her gaze away, unwilling to face him for longer than a fraction of a second.

Psycho-Cartography: Georges once told us it was best to be feared and respected at the same time. Fear made you able to make someone do things for you. Respect made them want to do things for you willingly. We have the former. It feels good. But I think we should build toward the latter.

Psycho-Cartography 66 > 67

Five leaned over the cell door and grinned. "Yes," Five said, "this is the right place."

The Aviary agent waved a hand, and the automata heads on his back flared to life. All of their optics were flickering, and a rush of electricity and mana flooded through his limbs. The spell patterns gliding within the cell came alive with activity. Mana pulsed out from them. They began circulating faster and faster. Shiv watched, trying to understand what the wolf-man was doing. He felt a strange pull in the atmosphere. Five was clearly trying to rearrange something in the cell's spell patterns, but he wasn't sure how or why.

A few glowing shapes intersected as some of the revolving spells twisted at an angle. They collided on a perpendicular axis, and when mana kissed mana, a few fragments and geometries were swapped. Shapes belonging to one spell pattern were inherited by another, and the insides of the spells pulsed. It was then that Shiv noticed the burst of Dimensionality spewing free from the top of the cell. It overflowed like water gushing out from a bottle, and it briefly crashed against Shiv's ankles, but it couldn't push through, and instead it rebounded from his Shapeless Tides, countered entirely by his vector-shaped Magical Resistance.

"What are you doing, little wolf?" Urri asked.

Five didn't respond to the Vulteg. Instead, he continued waving his hands, pinching at the distant spells as if they were right in front of him. He moved a few more of the patterns, intersecting them, and then swiped, switching a few pieces over. As Shiv observed, he began to gain an intuitive understanding regarding the spell patterns. Intent could be exchanged between each chain of spells. They weren't swapping mana. Shiv knew that because he could see a few Biomancy spells acting below, and they didn't get any weaker. Instead, it was like the commands guiding the spells were being alternated.

"It's a bit like the prison, isn't it?" Bonk said. A wry grin painted the orc's face, and Shiv took a moment to realize what he was hinting at.

Yeah, it kind of is. Shiv thought about the cubes, how they slid beside each other, how they all swapped positions, as if pieces of a moving puzzle. The spells were the same. And something told Shiv that there was no coincidence. Magical Skills were designed to follow certain lores. Lores were shaped by people's understanding of the world; their beliefs. That was what Valor had said. Perhaps this spell that was

being assembled had something to do with the very architecture of the Rubix Well. It made sense. They were probably going to teleport somewhere using the Dimensionality mana powering the spell.

With every passing second, Five's hands moved faster, and even Rebis seemed to be having a hard time following what the wolf-man was doing. Soon, the Dimensionality mana within the spell began erupting outward, spraying higher in bursts of static black. Shiv looked around briefly and felt his hair begin to stand inside his Voidmantid armor. The Avatars have been inactive for far too long, and there were no wardens here. He didn't believe that they were just being let go, so there were only a few other possibilities besides that.

The first was that the Avatars were busy, trying to handle the rest of the prison. Once they gained control, they would come back for him in force. The second was that they had other problems to deal with beyond the prison. That was just as likely. Shiv hadn't seen the Tarrasque Quest come to a close yet, so he knew the giant creature was still alive. There was every possibility that the Tarrasque had returned to the Republic's territory and that the Ascendants were busy trying to fight it off.

But something wriggled inside his flesh. Something uncomfortable. For the first time, he wondered if Adam was truly all right, or if something had happened to him by now. If the Ascendants had captured him, or if—

Shiv didn't finish that thought. He didn't want to finish that thought. He'd faced horrors beyond his ability to comprehend—and killed them anyway—but the idea of Adam being dead bothered him. It bothered him enough that he had to burn off some of his anger before his Berserk Skill triggered.

He channeled it into his Psycho-Cartography, and immediately the skill began talking to him, indeed at length.

Psycho-Cartography: Valor told you about this before. He called it the wound. The scarring. You're going to lose people in this life, Shiv. You know that.

Shiv tried not to lash out in denial. It was his own skill that was telling him this, after all. But something inside him just couldn't accept it.

Psycho-Cartography: You can't accept it because you're desperate to maintain some control over your own life. For most of your existence, you've lived under Roland Arrow's thumb. But he was too soft and weak to press. So you lived under the thumb of a reluctant tyrant. Everything you suffered was from indecision. Indecision is entropy. And you want something more than rot. You want control. You crave it. Anytime the System or the world tries to take something from you, it sinks its fingers into your wound. And you're tired of being hurt.

I can get better. I can get stronger. I can make sure that nothing happens to anyone or anything that I care about.

Psycho-Cartography: You are growing stronger than most people can ever dream of, and it still won't be enough. You know this. I'm telling you this because this thing you face isn't logical. It's emotional. And I'm going to say something else that you're not going to want to hear. You don't want to deal with this right now. You're not going to beat it right now. You don't have the emotional bandwidth to process it right now. If I tell you the truth, you will push it aside, and it will hurt worse once you experience it. Hopefully, we won't suffer this with Adam, but it's coming. The blow is coming. If we live long enough, we will lose more people.

The System is not going to let us go, the skill whispered in the back of his mind.

Shiv wanted to continue arguing, but he didn't know what to say. A feeling of dread climbed up inside him, and it corresponded with a loud cackle that sounded from Five.

"Oh, those tricky, tricky Ravens," the wolf-man hummed. He brought his hands together, and with a final click, the insides of the cell turned into a large whirlpool of Dimensionality. Swirling tides of static black began to churn, and soon they solidified into a dense shape. Shiv no longer saw the cell itself. Instead, there was a solid tunnel forming before, leading to another place. As Shiv looked across, he saw that red-gold texture of Orichalcum, but then it was drowned by Dimensionality once more. Whatever place he'd just seen, Shiv guessed, was still part of the prison. It wasn't just an easy escape.

And why would it be?

Shiv thought to himself. Nothing is ever that easy. Not in this life.

"I must go across first," Five declared. He regarded the Legendary prisoners and then Shiv thereafter. "There is a code in the spell. Morse. They wish for me to identify myself and confirm who I am. If I do not, they will not establish a proper connection, and we will not be able to find them. One of you should come with me, just so you feel a little more at ease. You wouldn't want me running off with my own people now, would we? And leaving you all lost and abandoned?"

Shiv frowned. "Are you trying to make us suspect you or something, Five?"

"It's what several of you are thinking. Why avoid it?" Five was studying Urri's face. The large Vulteg just grunted with annoyance. And that's when the Deathless realized that a few of the prisoners were paranoid about a lot more than just Shiv. "I can't say I blame you," Five said. "However, I can give you a reason to trust me. Or at least a reason to think that I am a controllable variable."

Despite how thoughtful Five seemed, the way he operated made Shiv ever more wary. Bonk leaned down and whispered to the Deathless, "Be careful of this one. They are a clever operator. Spies often are."

Shiv wanted to volunteer himself, but stopped when he realized how that might look. He was in league with the wolf-man, at least from the other prisoners' perspectives. If he said that he would make sure the wolf-man wouldn't betray them, it just might cause a bit more of a problem.

Instead, he decided to extend his trust and mercy to the only Legendary prisoner he'd faced in battle so far.

"Elf," Shiv said. His tone was rough and direct. "Go with him."

The elven Legend's head snapped around to stare at Shiv. Her mouth was slightly agape. "You would rather me go?"

"Yeah," Shiv said. "I got your measure, don't I? It's why I trust you more than most anyone else. Besides, you have those Chronomantic clones. You can send them to scout for you for something. It's more effective than what I can do. If something goes wrong, just swap places with one of the clones like you did earlier."

She didn't know what to say for a moment, but slowly she nodded. "Very well." Her gold eyes flashed once, and she let out a sigh. "I am called Kura the Omen. I have been placed in this prison due to a series of assassinations I performed within this Republic. I've killed a great many nobles for benefactors whom I cannot remember nor will I name, and today you have given me back my life. Despite my discomfort, despite my shame for failing to slay you, I acknowledge your mercy and your clemency. I will do as you say."

"I, uh, okay," Shiv said, uncertain why she was stating all this out loud.

"I will serve your interests until you are satisfied. I see that you are of the honorable sort." The elf shuffled uncomfortably. "I might have misjudged you in my past, but I find myself at the mercy of you now. Whatever you desire, I will do my utmost to make manifest. Such is the debt I bear."

One of the Legendary prisoners snorted. It was the man with blades growing out of himself. He scratched his chin. "Shit, you know, I get it. If you wanna fuck him right now, go ahead. I've been pent up in my own cage long enough that I wanna fuck him too, and I'm not into men. But since you're willing, we could all use a show."

And then something cracked him across the back of the head. Shiv saw a golden shadow materialize and then fade in the same instant. The man turned. A few blades exploded out from his body, cleaving through the air. It struck the Orichalcum walls and left faint dents in the surface. Shiv blinked, barely reacting to what just happened, and the elf's expression didn't change. Most of the other prisoners responded the same way, and a few laughed.

The blade-covered man snarled and prepared to push his way free from the other prisoners. Kura tensed, ready for combat, but both of them flinched as Shiv yanked on their fear chains. The bladed man jerked to a halt, planting his foot hard against the ground and using a skill to root himself in place, stopping himself from being dragged forward. The elf, meanwhile, switched position with one of her shadows and got free of Shiv's grip.

Before Kura and the bladed man could continue their scuffle, the Deathless snarled. "Knock that shit off!" All eyes were on him now, but he just glared at the two troublemakers, unamused. "Alright, I'm gonna put this plainly too. If anyone has something funny to say about me, it had better be actually funny. And my metric for funny is making me laugh. I also would like to say that you'd better all start acting like fucking Pathbearers and not worthless thugs from some back alley. You're Legends. Felling act like it. If you're going to act like children, then I'm going to beat you like you're my stepchildren. We don't have time for this shit. We can't be fighting amongst each other if we want to break out here. There's still Avatars and wardens waiting for us. Save it for them."

A tension entered the air, and the other prisoners watched as the bladed man began to twitch. He glared at Shiv, and the Deathless' Psycho-Cartography Skill realized why.

Psycho-Cartography: You've offended his sensibilities, and more, his ego. Threatening him makes him look pathetic. If you don't adjust what you said, he might have to fight you just to prove that he is the greater Legend. Weakness is fatal in this place—and you have failed to give him any respect.

Shiv struggled not to sigh. So far, the Legends he'd run into in this prison, aside from the Avatars, had been uneven. Some were absolute monsters, while others are seemed like little more than overpowered children. The bladed man was closer to the overpowered child side—but Shiv really couldn't afford another messy fight right now.

"Consider it a favor to me," Shiv added, trying to soothe how the man was feeling. "I'm asking, not telling."

The blade-covered Pathbearer considered Shiv for a moment, and then he let out a scoff. "Asking. Fine. Sure, Deathless. Seems I can be merciful too. With the right people." He eyed the elf and spat on the ground. "Fucking bitch."

Kura was about to respond, but Shiv cut her off. "Don't talk to him, don't look at him, get in the portal after Five. We've wasted enough time."

She seemed like she wanted to resist, but then remembered that she'd just sworn a long oath of loyalty to Shiv. Finally, she let out a brief sigh and took her position behind the wolf-man. The wolf-man jumped down, and she followed thereafter. In her place, however, remained a golden shadow. It glistened in the air, and it lacked any detail, but Shiv could still feel the vitality seeping out from it. More importantly, he could see a faint trail of Chronomancy painting the world. He hadn't noticed that before, mainly because the trail was almost transparent with how thin it was.

As the wolf-man and Kura remained gone for a few moments, Shiv stared at the prisoners and tried to shrug off the awkwardness. "So, do you all know each other or what? Before the whole prison break thing, I mean?" He gestured at the group.

Several of the prisoners looked at each other, and Urri simply folded his arms. "We have laid eyes upon one another during our allotted activity time. But we were not allowed to socialize."

"We are made to change cubes and cells every few months," the glistening, column-shaped Pathbearer said. Shiv still had no idea what kind of creature it was or if it was simply someone who had evolved into being a crystal column. "It prevents us from establishing lasting connections. When freedom came, we burst out and found ourselves faced with a shared foe. That is why we are together. When this moment is done, we will be strangers to each other once more, but for now we are a horde."

"More like a gaggle of fools without any better options," the binaric crown-wearing automaton declared. "It is purely calculus that we are standing together. Alone, we might be able to overcome a few wardens, but they know our capabilities, and this prison was built to keep us inside." The automaton paused. "What you said earlier, that you have a Unique Skill that will allow you to trespass beyond the temporal loop, is that true?"

"Every word," Shiv said. "It's the same skill I showed you guys earlier. The one that kept making you forget where I was over and over again."

"How does it work?" Urri asked. The Vulteg was trying to be slick. Too bad he had about as much social finesse as Shiv did during a blind rage.

"Don't know how it works," Shiv said, shrugging. "It just does. Do all of you understand every single one of your skills?"

A chorus of affirmative agreements greeted Shiv, and he tried not to wince. There was a faint hint of judgment in their eyes, and slowly, they were beginning to understand that Shiv might not be a conventional Legendary-Tier Pathbearer.

I don't know how to feel about most of these prisoners being more refined and well-learned than I am, Shiv thought. While also being barely more than emotional children at the same time. How the hells does that even work?

Psycho-Cartography: Settle for using that as motivational fuel when you begin making up for your lacking education.

"So I've got another question for you," the blade-covered Pathbearer said. Instead of staring at Shiv now, he was looking at Bonk. "How'd you get an orc bodyguard?"

"Bodyguard?" the gray-skinned brute said with a laugh. "I'm no bodyguard. I'm simply serving my Insul."

And a flash of comprehension passed across the bladed man's face. "The Vaketh-Insul. Shit. You actually did the ritual." The man threw his head back and began laughing. Slowly, his laughter climbed higher and higher until he finally shook his head and let out a breath. "You know, I'm beginning to regret not taking that myself. Might have led me down a different path. Hell, Lone Star might still be after me, but at least I would have someone fighting by my side instead of being a fugitive in this forsaken shithole."

"The Challenger offered you the deal too," Shiv said, surprised.

The man nodded. Several other prisoners muttered about getting certain offers as well, and suddenly Shiv didn't feel quite as special.

The Challenger is amused by your jealousy.

"And most of you didn't agree," Shiv confirmed. The Legendary prisoners scoffed or just shook their heads.

"Becoming the Insul is more venom than one," the blade-covered Pathbearer said. "Mingling with orcs? Oh, that's an eventual death sentence. Besides, now that you're a Legend, you're going to probably draw the attention of the Culturist at some point. And let me tell you, that's not a bastard that you want to get to know."

"Who the hells is that?" Shiv asked. "Never heard that name before." Or had he? He couldn't recall everything that was exchanged between him and his orcs. But then he noticed a look on Bonk's face. It wasn't the look that Bonk usually had. If Shiv had to describe it, it was as close to true awe as an orc could muster.

"The Culturist," Bonk breathed. "Insul, if you'd ever met a Legendary-Tier orc, you would understand that we contain even greater multitudes. Multitudes that sometimes leave us feeling..." Bonk trailed off as he tried to recompose his speech. "He is an aberration. I wish to kill him someday and be the reason he must reincarnate."

"You sound like you admire this guy, in a fucked-up orc kind of way," Shiv said.

"I find him deviant. I find him incomprehensible. I find him terrifying." The orc drew in a long inhale. "And I find that intoxicating. Imagine one of your own kind, but you can't understand them. One of your own kind that has drifted so close to the races you face, to the peoples you hunt, that they have become almost like them in certain ways. He experiences true sympathy, true empathy. He learns their emotional baselines and briefly understands what it means to hate us, but then he returns to himself. He becomes the orc of orcs, and when he leads, we win. If he leads, that is."

"If?" Shiv repeated, not understanding why the orc used that word.

"If," Bonk confirmed. "Because sometimes, the Culturist turns on us. For that, he is also known by another name among our kind: Anzeth-Insul. It means Arch-Traitor."

Bonk's gaze turned distant, as if stuck in a fantasy or a memory. "Often, the Culturist learns how best to improve our species by betraying us first. He fights on the side of the enemy and learns how they approach our extermination. He teaches them how best to kill us if he deems them interesting, and then, when the balance is tipped, he will return to see if he can figure out how to let us win anyway. Like war vaccination."

"And the Challenger is fine with that?" Shiv asked.

"The Challenger delights in it," Bonk replied. "The Challenger loves nothing more than to see us grow, and to grow in any way possible. The Culturist has taken the exo-school of thought to the extreme. In fact, he is the paragon of that entire clique: to steal from other cultures and races and adopt their virtues for our own. Why, it's someone like him that is half the reason we orcs have non-orc skills anyway."

"It's most of the reason why you bastards have any culture," the blade-covered Legend added. "Without the outside, what are you?" He grunted with displeasure. "You're all just a bunch of mimics. You see how we act, you see what we do, you see how we dress, and you take from that. You take from that or you decide to fight against it. You don't have any culture otherwise. Your kind isn't real."

Bonk frowned at the man. "It's very reductive. I have my violence. That is culture." The words were meant at least partly in jest, but the man just sneered.

"No, you are violence. It's a psychological flaw for you, not culture. You are just a copy of the Challenger, a copy of everyone you fight. And that's why I decided against picking up what the Challenger was putting down. I'm already a weapon, and I got no use for a bunch of weapons pretending to be people. You get me, creature?"

Bonk responded to that by smiling serenely, yet Shiv caught a glint of something in the orc's eyes. The bladed man shouldn't have said that. Somehow, in his bones, Shiv knew that Bonk was probably going to try to kill that man at some point. It didn't matter that he was a Legend. It was just that he identified himself as a worthwhile target. And worse, he made this racial thing. And that simply escalated the scale of dominance.

Before any other barbs or words could be exchanged, the dimensional portal pulsated again, and Kura blinked into existence where her shadow stood and looked towards Shiv and the others. "It's done. But there's something you need to do."

She sounded uneasy, and the next moment, the portal splashed with Dimensionality mana, and Five emerged from within. He crawled up from the edge as the Dimensionality behind him turned turbulent. Before Shiv could ask for more details, the mana settled and slowly began to swirl.

"Alright," Five said, "I managed to negotiate our passage. Believe they have the one you're looking for. You're in a lot of luck, my friend," Five stared Shiv down. "They managed to reach your companion just in time. Any moment later, and he would have likely been recaptured by the Ascendants. One of our deep-cover Ravens helped him escape, but she unfortunately perished in the process. A shame, but that is life. Whatever the case, the operatives inside wish to see you. They want proof that you are actually with me, instead of this being a desperate attempt on my part to be extracted from this prison."

Psycho-Cartography: Subtle. Sneaky bastard is trying to get you to feel bad. To feel like you owe them something. I caught that sympathy growing inside you. He's trying to compromise us.

"See me?" Shiv said, and now his paranoia was beginning to climb. He knew that he had a price on his head, one that made him a tempting target for all the prisoners, but likely the agents of Aviary as well. Considering how Aviary worked, Shiv didn't think an individual agent would try to kill him. It didn't seem to fit their way of operating. Instead, he wondered if he was about to trade one prison for another. He could see Aviary capturing him, experimenting on him to figure out how his soul worked.

Shiv left a temporal anchor in place and made eye contact with Kura. The elf turned away but confirmed Five's words. "That is what they said. There is no lie in his words, but their intent cannot be discerned."

Even so, Shiv didn't know what better to do, and waiting was an action in itself. However, waiting meant that he ceded his initiative to the Ascendants, and that wasn't going to work out. "Bonk, if I don't show up again in about 30 seconds, you know what to do."

The orb gave the wolf man a grin, and Five's expression remained placid, to his credit. That placidity faded as he realized Kura was glaring at him as well.

"Same goes for the rest of you," Shiv said to the prisoners. "If I'm gone, that means someone has me. And there's no guarantee they'll be as easy to deal with as I am."

And now everyone was staring at Five.

"I speak the truth. This is not an act of betrayal," the wolf-man called from behind.

"Guess we'll find out in a second," Shiv said. He looked down into the twisting tides of Dimensionality and let out a breath. "All right, either I'll be speaking to Adam in a few seconds, or some Aviary assholes are going to try to kill me or capture me. Let's see which. Never a dull moment."

He hopped then, before he had a chance to regret, and as he splashed down into the mana, a tightness gripped him. However, the tightness was abated as the magic found itself held at bay by his shapeless tides. Shiv had to remind himself about how his Legendary skill worked. He kept his skill still and let the Dimensionality take him.

For a brief moment, he surged, squeezing across a narrow tunnel until he finally emerged in a new space. His body was rematerialized as motes of Dimensionality mana molded him back together. And it was that final emergence that left Shiv groaning with slight discomfort. He couldn't see any spell patterns nearby—no teleportation anchor. This wasn't the Orichalcum chamber he'd seen earlier. Instead, everything around him was bathed in steam and coated by clammy heat.

Something felt off about this place. Like his teleportation shouldn't have ended here, that it was intercepted by something. Or interrupted.

Shiv looked around and found himself standing in what seemed to be an oval tunnel. This place reminded him of a channel of some kind. Air constantly flowed around his body, causing a loud trill as it

rushed ahead. He pressed his hand against the nearest wall, and he realized it was made from aluminum or some kind of softer metal. Not adamantite; definitely not Orichalcum.

This wasn't a place meant to hold prisoners. Something told him it wasn't even meant to contain people.

"Greetings, Deathless."

Shiv turned, responding to the threat. He pointed his Orichalcum dagger at the ambusher and found himself staring at a shrouded figure bearing a helmet styled after a Raven's head. The Deathless couldn't help but sneer underneath his own helmet. "We're glad to see that Operative Five has not deceived us in his desperation to escape from this prison. It saves us the trouble of trying to locate you ourselves."

Shiv didn't trust a single thing the Raven was saying, but the words mostly fit Five's story. "Where's Adam?" Shiv asked. "Bring me to him. I wanna see how he is. Whatever else you want to talk about happens after that."

The Raven didn't speak for a moment, and Shiv looked over his shoulder, wondering if now was the moment he was going to be ambushed. Instead, the Raven nodded, and Shiv realized he was having a telepathic conversation with someone. "Follow me," the Raven said.

"Wait," Shiv replied. The Raven froze. "Need to go back for a moment. I told some of my people that if I don't show up, they could deal with Five. I don't think him being dead helps either of us right now, does it?"

The Raven studied him for a moment and bowed his head slightly. "Make it quick. And tell the others with you to come along. We can accommodate more than one."

Shiv really didn't know how he felt about the Raven's words, but he didn't have time to dwell on it. He blinked back over to where his anchor was. As soon as he appeared, half a dozen faces swung toward him.

"We're good," Shiv said. "He wasn't lying."

The wolf-man hummed as he let out a breath. "Sometimes trust goes a long way."

"Yeah, not with Aviary," Shiv shot back. "Never with Aviary."

Once more, he descended into the dimensional portal, but this time, the rest of his group followed. The Raven had accepted Shiv's request quickly—as if he was expecting it. And that had the Deathless feeling some kind of uneasy. If it was Shiv, he wouldn't be so accommodating. Letting a small army of Legendary prisoners into your hidden safehouse was an act of extreme trust, and that meant the Raven wasn't worried about being compromised or slain at all.

Shiv and the other Pathbearers blinked into existence the strange, humid tunnel once more. The first among which was Urri. He was so large that he barely fit in the tunnel and let out a grunt of displeasure as a few other prisoners slammed into him from behind.

"Alright," Shiv said, staring the patient Raven down. "Now we can go."

The Raven led Shiv's convoy of Legendary-Tier companions without any complaint or hesitation. If that was a good sign or bad, Shiv couldn't tell. What he could tell, however, was that the steam around him

was unnatural. He knew how steam moved, how the wisping smoke could be disrupted by something passing through it. This steam resembled smoke more than anything. It constantly went upward, and it didn't vibrate the right way. Shiv guessed that the steam wasn't actually steam, but probably a hidden Aviary agent. Shiv learned that assumption was right when it came with a massive spike in levels for his Farsight Skill.

Farsight 57 > 60

Yeah, really need to keep paying more attention and guessing. Having good awareness is pretty felling important.

The Raven led them down the widening tunnel, and Shiv continued studying his surroundings. Every few seconds, he would feel a vibration shudder under his feet, and in the distance, there was something humming, something that rattled aloud. Suddenly, Shiv had a vague guess about where he was. This might be some kind of mechanism, some part of the prison that controlled all the moving wheels, that might explain the constant vibrations and all the air rushing through it.

It might also explain why it wasn't made out of Orichalcum, or why the Ascendants weren't here. If it was built deep into the infrastructure of the prison, maybe it was overlooked entirely, or maybe this part was so critical or fragile that someone couldn't come here without compromising something essential. In the end, Shiv was just guessing, but he thought there were good guesses, and the exercise of thinking came with its own rewards.

"Hey, where are you taking us?" the blade-covered Pathbearer said.

"You will find out shortly," the Raven replied without turning his head.

The bladed man sneered at the Aviary agent and casually plucked a few short swords free from his anomalous flesh.

"We are in a turbine of some kind," Kura said from beside Shiv. He looked down at her, waiting for her to keep speaking. "I sent a few of my shadows out. They've walked the length of this place. There is a large mechanism that sweeps through these tunnels, pushing and displacing the wind and heat. It is meant to generate electricity. I suspect that it's used as a power source for the automata that dwell inside the Well."

Shiv didn't say anything for a moment, mainly because he didn't fully know what a turbine really was, or why the automata needed such a large structure to keep them powered. Kura took his speechlessness as understanding and continued.

"It's also lined with mithril. There are so many spells passing through this structure that it is completely choked with mana, but there's less of it the further we go. I suspect we are near the core. That might be why no one has noticed our presence—why the Ascendants have not found us. It is a place of absolute density. It is—"

A faint, azure glow emerged ahead. There came a loud crash elsewhere, followed by a heavy tremoring beneath Shiv's feet. The Deathless stopped walking. The others with him followed suit. The Raven's head snapped to attention as the outlines of three figures materialized in the dense mist.

"Move!" a voice cried.

Shiv's eyes widened. "Adam?" He started walking forward, moving toward the azure glow. "Adam! I'm here! I—"

There came a flash of color as humidity turned to dryness in an instant. Shiv froze as a massive Veilpiercer flared into existence thirty meters away from him—pointed in his direction for some reason. As it did, Adam’s haggard face was revealed for the first time. A bloody gash lined his forehead, and beside him were two Pathbearers Shiv didn’t recognize. One was a limping, skeletal figure comprised of sputtering embers that groaned with each step and looked ready to fall over. The other was a goblin missing her left arm. Her body was veiled with quills of Chronomancy, and she vibrated even while idle.

Adam himself was coated by a dense shroud of water. Waves crashed over his body, and his body became fluid and turbulent. But his face remained, and there was a tension to his expression that disquieted Shiv.

“Adam,” Shiv called out. “It’s me! It’s Shiv—”

“Prove it!” Adam snarled back. “If you are Shiv, then prove it!”

The Deathless was startled. What the hells does he mean prove it?

And he wasn’t the only one with questions.

“Gate Lord Arrow,” the Raven said. A Veilpiercer was loosed. It struck the ground right in front of the Raven, and the Aviary agent flipped back.

The Legendary-Tier prisoners and Rebis all tensed as Adam drew another arrow back, but Shiv stopped them before they made this already chaotic situation worse. “Stop! Let me talk to him! I—”

“Shiv, if that’s really you, just don’t move,” Adam rasped. “All of you... just stay there. No one move until I get a good look... Until I am certain about who you are. Start with you, Shiv. Show me your Vitae. Do it. Do it now.” And just then, a flash of corrosive mana bled into Adam’s new Veilpiercer. “Or I find out the other way.”