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Chapter 181 (I) Trust [II]

People don't want to know what hides in the dark.

There's nothing wrong with that. There's nothing wrong with the fear, with the paranoia, with the ignorance. It's there to keep you safe. It's wired into us, evolutionarily or in our programming as well.

It's telling you: You don't belong there.

You know that if you did, you would be able to see, you would be able to move to the place. You wouldn't be so blind.

The things that live in the darkness? They're not blind. They can see you just fine. The dark is not the dark to them. It's just their own. It's just a shame that we don't get a choice anymore.

Ignorance is not enough, even if it's understandable. It does not protect us. Ignorance is everywhere, darkness is everywhere, darkness is light. That was the fluke.

I was taken during my time in the Abyss. Taken by something that crawled up from the deepest depths. A Primal Gate. To another place. A place that was ruled by the idea of darkness. A place of eternal cyclical decay. A place where shadows linger in a state of half-death. In this living void, I saw entire dimensions swallowed by shadows—shadows that feed on flesh and fear and screaming hearts.

They were changed. But beautiful. They were lightless. And they learned to survive even in this place of eternal darkness and deception. They did it by tapping into the dark. Wearing the dark. Hiding from the dark using the dark itself. I learned from them. I became like them. I understood that darkness has a darkness of its own.

Even the things that live in ignorance cannot possibly know everything. I hid in its body, and I learned how it moved, how it lived, how it understood the world. And as it stalked me, as it glided between worlds, latching and leeching onto sources of light, I changed. I learned from it, and slowly, I consumed it from within.

The other Ascendants think we changed with our final pilgrimage downward. We did not. They are blind to what happened to us. But I know. I saw. When I came back from my little jaunt, I was different, and I knew there was no way out, not even for a god.

There are too many bits of shadow, so there's only one way to last: be the one that lives there. Ignore the screaming heart inside your chest.

Damn what you don't know. Damn your life if you lose it. Just go deeper into the nothing.

Settle inside the flesh of midnight.

And never, ever come back out.

-Harlock the Midnight

45 minutes ago...

Going along with the Raven was an act of ugly calculus. Adam trusted Aviary as much as he trusted a bear to be gentle with his genitals if he dipped his bits in honey first. But an ugly chance was still a chance compared to the absolute certainty that the Ascendants intended to capture and then utterly defile his mind until he was an obedient slave.

Not that Aviary might not do the same things themselves, Adam thought bitterly. But still, his odds against the Ravens, Owls, and other birds were better than trying to survive the nightmarish hell pit that was the Rubix Well. With Legendary-Tier prisoners and Avatars running amok, it was only a matter of time before his luck ran out. And despite his nimble recruitment efforts, he didn't know Gone or Candles very well. All he knew was that there were prisoners here, and that they wanted out. That didn't mean they were trustworthy.

Still, without Shiv or Uva here, they were the best chance Adam had. And that realization soured his mood even more. He missed his friends. He hated the fact that he barely had any time with his family before they were taken away from him, and he constantly had to fight the depressing reality that the very gods and government he dreamed so much of serving were little more than monsters themselves.

It's all a godsdamned joke to you, isn't it, System? Having me believe and then giving me a reason to struggle against everything I had faith in. Does it amuse you to hurt me? To see me suffer?

No response came.

The Raven led them through the havoc of battle and brought them down into a vacant cell. For a moment, Adam's paranoia climbed. He wondered if this was a trap of some kind. But then the spell patterns began to move, and a blast of dimensionality swallowed him.

Adam wasn't a studied Jump Mage. He had his Dimensional Skill forcibly evolved and fused during his engagement against the Dragon Knights. Despite his lack of advanced education, he could still feel the way the mana was moving and noticed how a few spell shapes swapped places. The patterns interlocked with each other, and a few symbols were swapped between activated spells.

It was then that Adam understood how Aviary had such a presence in this prison. It was ingenious. They had managed to circumvent the spell casting process sustaining the Rubix Well itself, becoming part of the magical infrastructure. All it took was a few careful readjustments to the intent codifying the spell patterns, and then they were off.

The Raven vanished first. Then Adam, Gone, and Candles followed suit. Adam used his Dimensionality to judge just how far they were projected. He went approximately 800 meters away from the current position he was in before he suddenly spiked down another full kilometer. This continued several other times, with them zigzagging in awkward patterns.

Soon, Adam figured out that he was likely gliding along the magical structures lining the exterior of the many cubes that made up the prison. Then finally, rather than arriving at a concentrated pit of mana, they suddenly broke free from one of the cubes, and he found himself unceremoniously deposited in a long tunnel choked with steam and sweltering humidity.

"Come," that was all the Raven said, and Adam narrowed his eyes at his wayward savior.

The Gate Lord turned to study his two new companions. "Listen, whatever happens, whatever they offer us, it's important that we stick together. Aviary has their own interests. They might offer you—"

"I know what they're like," Gone interrupted him in a burst of snarled words. There was a look in her eyes that convinced Adam she hated Aviary more than he ever could.

Candles, meanwhile, looked on at the Raven with his head cocked. He didn't reply to Adam, and for a moment, the Gate Lord was worried that Candles might just burn the Raven for the thrill of it. Then Candles shuddered and relaxed.

"That was a close one," Candles muttered, chuckling to himself. A few stray motes of flame were drawn back into his body.

"Were you just about to burn the Raven?" Adam asked, incredulous.

"Hm? Oh, yeah, I got a bit carried away. It's just... They look so flameable, man. So burny. I wanna burn-burn-burn it all. Ah. Sorry, were you saying something?" The blazing Pathbearer held up his arms. "The fires, they... they were talking to me just now. They want me to set a few things aflame. They get kind of lonely."

Adam stared at Candles and wondered if the man's maniacal pyromania was a good thing or a bad thing for them. Well, if he's unpredictable to me, he's probably unpredictable for Aviary as well.

As they followed the Raven, Adam used his Seer of Horizons to scout out the structure he was in. His senses jumped down the hall they were walking, and he discovered the material of the walls was meant to be waterproof, or at least water-resistant. He wasn't sure what kind of material this was, though. It looked metallic, but there was a smoothness to the surface he wasn't familiar with. There was a great deal of moisture lining the ceiling, and that could be to Adam's benefit. If a fight were to begin, he could draw upon that watery essence to empower his Hydromantic Physicality.

However, the moisture itself seemed odd to Adam, especially with how the small dots of water were painting semicircular patterns along the ceiling. As he observed that closer, his Awareness skill leveled several times. Then he noticed the steam around him moved unnaturally. It parted and danced as his body passed through. That was normal, yet it kept moving upward, unnaturally upward. It was like the steam sought the ceiling no matter what. There was no curve, no bend to the steam that rose past Adam's head. They all just went straight up in perfectly symmetrical lines.

Furthermore, the steam wasn't affected by Candles at all. Candles was constantly radiating a staggering amount of heat, yet the steam didn't react to him.

That's how Adam realized he wasn't walking in natural steam, but rather skill-based steam. And if he had to guess, the steam was composed by a Pathbearer, considering it lacked any obvious mana enforcing its nature. That means there's no attunement at play here. Someone with a steam-related Physicality skill, perhaps, Adam thought to himself.

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Candles was muttering to himself with every few steps, giggling aloud as if a child in an amusement park. Adam decided that he didn't want to speak with the pyromaniac and left him to his own devices. Candles was of more use as a wild card than an informed party.

That left Gone. Adam made eye contact with the goblin again, and he gestured at the steam around them. Gone gave him a nod, and from her gaze, he realized that she was aware of their situation. Good, Adam thought. Her Awareness might be pretty high as well, or at least her deduction. But just because one was aware of an enemy didn't mean one could counter them.

Adam wondered if his new Physicality Skill Evolution could allow him to rip the moisture out of the air and hurt the enemy Pathbearer. Something told him not to get so hopeful. For one, he didn't know how powerful his enemy was or if they had more levels than him. For another, he didn't know what else this steam was capable of.

There's no reason to force a confrontation when your foundations are rooted in ignorance, Adam remembered his father saying. Understand the nature of your enemy first, and then engage.

They continued along the round tunnel for a few moments longer, until the Raven came to a stop in front of what seemed to be a maintenance doorway. A faint light flickered above, showing a symbol of an automaton wearing a hard hat. The Raven said nothing, and Adam realized he was communicating telepathically with his comrades again. About four seconds thereafter, the interlocking wheels sealing the doorway spun and snapped.

Suddenly, the door dropped down with a resounding clang, and a rush of cold wind splashed over him. Once more, he noticed another flaw in the steam surrounding him. It didn't pass into the doorway and instead drifted along by.

"You need to work on your understanding of steam," Adam muttered under his breath. The dense mist coating the air shuddered for a beat, and the Gate Lord just grinned. "Yes. I see you. And don't bother pretending otherwise. Mistakes don't get unmade."

The Raven passed through without reacting to Adam's words, and the rest followed. As they entered, Adam found himself walking along a grated bridge. To his left and right were inactive drones slotted into the walls. There were hundreds of them nested there, and a faint hum in the air indicated they were charging. They resembled mechanical insects of all varieties, and there were appendages lining their exterior, limbs with multiple tools attached to them. If Adam had to imagine their use, they would be used to maintain the structure, whatever it was. Judging by the suction cups on their legs, they were probably made to crawl upon the walls and seal specific sections of this place.

But why only automata and not people? Adam wondered. He got his answer as he looked over the Raven's head. This room was bathed in a neon-red glow from slanted lights built into the walls. It was about twenty meters in length and sixty across, and at the end of the room, the Raven came to a halt before a set of thick, lead doors. A large wheel was embedded on its center, but there was a symbol painted above it.

It looked like three fans surrounding a dot, and was colored a garish, faded yellow. Adam felt his anxiety rise. He remembered seeing this in a textbook somewhere. It signified something dreadful. Something from the long-distant past. He racked his brain as he stared at it, but he just couldn't remember what exactly the symbol stood for. He only knew that he was somewhere he really shouldn't be...

Candles suddenly began chuckling again, and when Adam turned to face him, the flickering white patches within his eye sockets had turned into those smiling half-moons again. "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here," the burning man sang.

Adam frowned at his strange choice of words, but the flaming Pathbearer simply shivered with mirth.

"You know something about this place?" Adam asked.

"No," Candles said. "But I can feel it. Can't you? Can't you feel the invisible fires? Caressing us? Joining us?" He stared at Adam, his eyes burning ever brighter. "It's burning its way into you, even now. But don't worry just yet. We're tougher than the ones who came before. Much tougher. It's gonna take a while for your insides to catch fire. But it's gonna take a lot shorter for me. I already feel it. It's like juice. Juicing me up."

With every word the burning Pathbearer spoke, Adam's apprehension climbed, and a strange, uncomfortable feeling welled up all throughout his body, like an itch, but also not.

"Shouldn't be here. Shouldn't, shouldn't. Need to leave as soon as possible. Need to leave," Gone stammered as she looked around frantically.

Then, there came a loud groaning noise as the wheel on the vault door turned, and the path before them opened with a resounding groan of aged metal.

An even, droning noise originating from in front of them made itself known just as the door slid fully open, one that was also unfamiliar to Adam. Forcing his apprehension aside, he stepped forward, with Candles strolling right after him, and Gone reluctantly following when she realized the others wouldn't turn back.

The Raven led them into a brightly lit, circular chamber that was hundreds of meters across, and Adam found himself standing on a concentric walkway that lined the edges of the room.

At the center of the structure was a massive rod that turned at dizzying speeds and emitted a constant roar. Adam's skin prickled with stabbing pain, and a steady heat began to build under his muscles. Just looking at the rod filled him with a building sense of nausea.

And then his Awareness picked up other shapes in the room. Other Ravens were standing on additional walkways above them. They looked down at Adam with their unnerving helmets, and the Gate Lord fought every instinct he had to keep his fear from showing on his face.

Someone cleared their throat beside Adam. When he turned, he nearly leaped out of his skin. The Raven was gone, but in his place was an Owl standing but a meter away from Adam—and he had appeared without the Gate Lord noticing at all.

"Don't be alarmed, Young Lord Arrow," the Owl said. "This isn't an ambush. Everything is proceeding according to protocol. Welcome to our humble sanctuary in this bleak, tragic place." The Owl gestured at the turning rod. "Here, there are few eyes on us. Here, we can speak with plain honesty and deal in matters of the forthcoming future."

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"To begin, I thank you for being open-minded," the Owl continued. "I know that the experiences you've had with my associates haven't always been pleasant, but I think this time we can come to a most agreeable accord, especially since we share an enemy."

"Sharing enemies doesn't make us anything, Owl," Adam shot back. He studied the Aviary agent. Unlike Harkness, this Owl was clad in a long coat comprised of gleaming white feathers. A few of the feathers had eyes painted on them, and they moved like ones of flesh. They also glistened with Divination mana, and try as he might, he couldn't peer into the man's coat. There was something repelling his senses, something that kept him blind.

"Indeed," the Owl agreed. "And please stop trying to peer at my small clothes. It's very inappropriate."

Adam barely held back a sputter. "I'm not interested in your small clothes. I'm interested in what weapons you have on you."

"Here. An end to the mystery." The Owl pulled his cloak open and revealed two short swords, a dozen or so daggers threaded through a plated vest, what seemed to be a whip studded with broken glass, and a skull that had Necromancy leaking out from its eyes. The sight of the skull reminded Adam of Valor, and that simply increased the feeling of isolation burning inside the Gate Lord.

Speaking of burning, the uncomfortable heat inside his muscles continued to build. It had started when Candles mentioned the invisible flames, and he didn't know if that was insanity or if there was actually an unseen flame burning at him, but the wrongness kept growing.

"Are you satisfied now?" the Owl asked.

"I'll be satisfied once I get out of this blasted place," Adam replied tersely. "So, what's your bargain? You want me to convince Shiv to go along with you? Or to sell ourselves to Aviary as willing slaves rather than being unwilling prisoners to the Ascendants?"

"We prefer the term 'agents,'" the Owl said with a hint of humor. When Adam didn't smile, the Owl carried on with a shrug. "You will find that this is the best offer you and your friend will have. The entire prison will be hunting him soon once the escapees are pacified. And then they will come after you. Legendary Pathbearers will stalk and try to slay him for the thrill of the challenge and the wondrous prize that comes with claiming his head. Even without the ten Legendary Skills offered upon his death, Legends hunt new Legends by nature. They do not suffer competitors easily, and in this place, there is nothing but wolves feasting on other wolves. He will not last long here."

Adam sneered at the Owl. "Would you like to bet on that? Because I think the other prisoners are trapped in here with him instead of the other way around."

The Owl laughed. "Such faith in your friend."

"No," Adam said, shaking his head. "Faith is a thing of hope. Faith is wishing it wouldn't rain even when there are dark clouds on the horizon. This is just empirical expectation. Have you ever killed an Outsider before, Owl?"

The Aviary agent fell silent for a beat. "Have you?"

"Yes," Adam said. "And I had no business doing so. Shiv had no business doing so. But we did it anyway. You can dislike his odds all you want, but I'll raise you our survival against a lance of Dragon-Knights at Master-Tier, against a Heroic-Tier Recollector, and against a Tarrasque in general. This is just another of the System's many attempts to kill us. And since we keep surviving these nightmare situations, well, I think the odds are with us rather than against us."

"Luck runs out," the Owl noted.

"How many times can a coin land on its edge before luck leaves the scene and is replaced by something else?" Adam shot back. "It wasn't luck that saved us. Not once. Luck is not enough. And you know it."

Now the Owl went entirely silent.

"Let me explain something to you," Adam said aloud, glaring at all the Ravens present. He counted them before he continued talking. Nineteen, including the Raven. Small group. Ngh. I feel... sicker. Need to make this quick. "I am not here because I am desperate."

"Yet, we are your only way out," the Owl hummed.

"You're the easiest way out," Adam corrected with a frown. "And that remains to be seen. I have no assurances that you yourselves are not trapped here by the Ascendants. Furthermore, I think you're

desperate to capture the Deathless for yourselves as much as you are driven to deprive the Ascendants of their great prize. And don't tell me that one of your nobles won't just take his head to claim unparalleled power for themselves."

"That is not the way New Albion functions, oh dear cousin across the great waters," the Owl said. "A few among our number will be tempted by greed, and a few will be cut down. Aviary does not suffer from paltry ambitions. We do not want 10 Legendary Skills. No. We have Legends. And they are sufficient for what is needed. No, we look further. Far further. A little bit like your Ascendants, but we prefer to do things with a more gentle hand."

"Is that what you call your operations in the Abyss? Gentle?" Adam leaned in close. "Do you know, in the short time I've been in contact with your people, I've stopped no less than three different plots, killed System knows how many Ravens and other birds, all in the span of a few months."

"We're aware of the travesty that happened at Passage," the Owl said, waving him off. "And I'm aware that one of my fellow Owls has decided to be flippant in her responsibilities. She will be punished in due time."

"In due time?" Adam almost choked, and then a hunch struck him. "Wait. Harkness... She's not actually back with you, is she? Has she even reported in?"

"That's not important to our current conversation."

"No, what is important to our current conversation is trust," Adam spat, "and I don't trust you. I don't trust any of you. The only reason I'm here is that I trust the Ascendants even less. I know what they intended to do to me, but that doesn't mean I trust what you intend to do, either. I don't need words, I need reassurances. Reassurances that you won't just kill me and then take Shiv after. Reassurances,"

Adam pointed at Gone and Candles, "that you'll be able to get all of us out of here. Out of this miserable pit of misery and back to the surface."

"Reassurances," the Owl echoed, as if he'd been expecting this of Adam. "Very well. Have you ever conducted a skill-binding ceremony before?"

Adam thought back to the ritual between Uva and the Starhawk. "I've seen it," Adam said. "I've seen it turn out well, and I've seen it turn out poorly. But there's a problem, you see."

"And what problem is that?" the Owl asked with a hint of annoyance.

"I don't think you care that much about losing a few skills if it gets you a greater reward. What do you all want with Shiv? Tell me exactly. And don't lie. I'll know. I'll hear it in your voice."

The Owl nodded, as if accepting Adam's terms. "Oh, that's very simple. We want to make more of him. In fact, we want him to pass his Path down to our little chicks. Imagine that. Countless undying spies, capable of learning and growing from death after death. That's a far more exponential reward than simply murdering this golden goose. We want him to lay eggs for us. And for that, you will both be well taken care of. Imagine. Peace, for once. Instead of this perpetual escalation cycle of violence the System demands of you."

The Owl's admission inflicted two different feelings on Adam. First, he realized the Owl was speaking the truth. Aviary didn't want Shiv dead. No. Instead, they wanted him to be a perpetual prisoner, a perpetual means of offering them more Deathless. They would probably experiment on him to boot. Shiv would be going from one prison to another.

The second was satisfaction. Adam understood the game the Aviary agents were playing now. And if he knew what they wanted, then he could potentially turn it all around on them. It wasn't a good choice, but so far, it was his only choice to escape from this prison. And it's a choice that can be affected, Adam thought to himself. If I manage to involve the Ascendants at the last second to pit them against Aviary during our escape, then we might be able to make a clean break.

But there was going to be a cost to this. If he was going to bind one of his skills to the Owl, then he would see part of himself broken upon enacting his betrayal. Even so, it was a choice Adam would gladly make. If it meant setting himself free, if it meant making sure Shiv would go unshackled... He wouldn't enjoy it. But he would do it. He would. I'm not scared, Adam lied to himself slightly. Okay, I'm slightly scared and very, very terrified of being crippled, but I'll do it. We can do it, Adam. Just... We can survive it. Shiv can fix it. It's just pain. Just pain.

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"Does this sound reasonable to you?" the Owl asked. "If so, I can see it agreed upon through ritual and Biomancy."

"Biomancy?" Adam repeated. A low groan escaped him. His muscles felt like they were on fire from the inside. Something was wrong with his body. Beside him, Gone was starting to shake as her breathing grew more labored, and Candles was burning ever brighter.

"Yum, yum," Candles hummed absentmindedly. He was staring at the spinning rod as if it was dessert.

"Of course you're going to need some Biomancy," the Owl said with a faint chuckle. "You're irradiated."

"I'm what?" Adam asked.

"Oh. I suppose our Raven didn't have time to explain. There is a reason why we operate here. This is a fusion core. One of the few functioning ones left over from Pre-Integration. I'm not sure why it has maintained its stability for all these eons, but it has. And the old drones here still have functionality as well. I estimate that will come to an end sometime in the near future, but not quite yet. Its nature disrupts the flow of ambient mana to some degree. Not enough to stop it entirely, but it does choke the ambience, doesn't it? Doesn't it make you feel a little bit nervous, a little bit hot? Well, the nervousness is the lack of ambient mana, and the heat, that's the radiation settling into your cells."

Adam clenched his teeth. He had heard of the word, mainly because certain automata Skill Evolutions allowed them to harness such a power. It was usually gained by evolving Pyromancy in a specific way, but he'd never encountered anyone with such a skill, and the details regarding the lore were never taught in any of his classes. "Invisible flame," Adam muttered to himself, and he understood the game Aviary was playing even better now. "You godsdamn bastards." Anger burned inside of him, but it didn't burn nearly as badly as the searing sensation consuming his organs. He felt nauseous, and his vision was beginning to blur.

"I wish to state one thing very clearly. This isn't a trap," the Aviary agent proclaimed. "This is simply the most secure place in the entire prison, and it also doubles as an incentive for you to think things through with the proper gravity settling upon your shoulders. It's a grave choice, and you should make it in grave circumstances."

Suddenly, there was a blur, and the Owl was pinned against the rails. Gone was pressed up against him, the edge of one of her claws halfway into his throat. The Owl held both hands by his sides, not bothering to fight back. The other Ravens looked on as well, and their cool, reserved response made Adam feel even worse.

They expected this.

"Now, now," the Owl said with a slight grunt of pain, "no need for that. Besides, if you tear my throat out, one of my associates will trigger the dumping protocols for the core, and after that, only one of you will still be alive. But he'll not be very sane. Won't you, Pathbearer Candles? Your Legendary Pyromancy Skill is a Fusion that affects your intellect. It makes it harder for you to stay sapient. Am I correct?"

Adam gawked as the burning Pathbearer beside him started making grunting noises.

Adam groaned as he glared at the Owl. "There's always a dagger in the other hand with you people, isn't there?"

The Owl shrugged. "It makes it easier to convince other people to accept our open hand instead. So. Let's talk about which skills we are to bind to one another. I do so want to see this done in good faith, after all. Mind slaves are such a disgusting concept. So. Please don't make me break my own heart."

Muffled screams filled the inside of the cube. Beneath a layer of shadow, dozens of Legendary prisoners struggled, unleashing magic and strength, but failing to pierce through. They pressed and fought, but they remained entombed in a dense nest of darkness, like insects trapped beneath a heavy spider's web.

Only if the spider was the web itself, however. For Harlock the Midnight was the darkness, was the shadow, was the unseen hand that seeped from his equally circumspect Avatar. There was nothing he left untouched in this cube. Nothing unconsumed by his presence, his power. Nothing unconsumed by the void that had consumed him so long ago.

The only source of brightness was the Avatar of his fellow Ascendant, Harlem the Truthful. He walked the shadow-choked valley as a beacon of Divination, and a violet brilliance spilled out from him, painting echoes of the battle that had transpired here mere minutes ago. The ethereal form of Harlem radiated over its Avatar, Connor, standing in contrast to the darkness of Harlock. Harlem was a lighthouse that cast its glare, sweeping the valley below, painting moments from the past into vivid detail, overriding the present, using pieces of evidence its Avatar collected.

"This one." White flames spilled out from the young Pathbearer's eyes as Connor's voice echoed with Harlem the Truthful's. The valley prison was a nightmarish parody of itself, but Harlem's Avatar remained untouched. For where shadows and ignorance reigned, truth would not abide—and Harlem was truth incarnate.

At least when it to investigating the truth.

Beneath Connor's feet, an overgrowth of darkened tendrils receded, and a defeated Legendary prisoner was released back into the brightness. They shuddered then, their mind more sundered than their body. This one resembled a towering humanoid partially fused with bits from various serpents. The Pathbearer's arms were long snakes, and their lower body was a mess of lashing vines, each tendril twitching as they suffered in the throes of an unending nightmare. Darkness leaked out from the eyes, darkness Harlock burrowed into their flesh and mind as well as his very soul. He wasn't just consumed physically; he was consumed mentally as well. There was no release, no release from ignorance.

Not until truth willed it.

Connor placed a hand upon the Pathbearer's forehead and focused the beaming glare of Harlem's lighthouse upon the serpent-fused Pathbearer. Soon, everything around him faded, leaving only the serpentine Pathbearer in existence. The lighthouse swung its beacon and painted a trail leading back in time, back before Harlock had consumed everything, back when the battle was still ongoing. Though the Legendary prisoner himself was shown in great detail, everyone he faced was merely a shadow, a faintness constructed by Divination itself. They went over every detail, every person he'd faced in the prison after the breakout began, until Harlem finally halted his beacon.

Now, the serpent-fused Pathbearer was passing through the valley, and there were several shades around him. Shades of other prisoners, and of wardens. And among those shadows was a brief glimpse of someone wearing tattered rags that resembled a warden's uniform, someone that shouldn't be here at all: Adam Arrow.

"Stop!" Harlem's Avatar cried aloud. The lighthouse flashed and turned its gaze upon Adam himself. A pulse of Divination mana crawled through the world. Normally, such a leap would have taken an obscene level of power. Even Legendary-Tier Diviners—the few that were sane and capable—would be hard-pressed to jump from one narrative to another. But Harlem was a god, a god of mysteries, a god of the inquisition, and a god of truth. And so, using the first clue, they jumped to the second, watching as the Young Lord struggled, as he fought and evolved and gained allies during the battle as well.

"Prisoner Gone and Prisoner Candles," Harlem recited, speaking through his Avatar. Harlem never forgot, and what he didn't know, he would uncover through whispers and details stolen from the System itself. "He has aid. And he was extracted by Aviary. The flock has finally shown itself."

Harlock had to admit the Young Lord was resourceful and clever. He might have made a good Avatar. If only he were more submissive. Perhaps that could be engineered...

You think this all the time, another voice echoed within Harlock. The old man's tone was cynical but indifferent. We've been together for too long, Harlock. You keep thinking that you might be able to branch out, but the truth is, no one likes to deal with your darkness. No one likes to hide in the black, in the traumas and ignorance that dwell at the heart of man. None but you, and none but I.

Harlock tried to find his wayward Avatar, but he couldn't, and once more was he reassured in his choice. Anthony De Diego had been Harlock's Avatar from the very start, his one true vessel. Harlock had tried

to find others, as Anthony said, but they wouldn't do. They didn't last. The dark ate them. But Anthony? The dark couldn't find him at all, and that made him perfect. And in the dark recesses of Harlock's mind, some part of him knew that Anthony likely deserved the position of Ascendant more than he himself did.

"I have him." Harlem's voice resonated with the clarion call of ringing bells. The white-plated Avatar, bound to the Ascendant of Truth, stood over a patch of blackness. That patch receded at Harlock's command, and soon they were looking down into a prison cell. At first glance, there didn't seem to be anything amiss inside, but then Harlem let out a gasp. "It's worse than I thought."

Harlock moved a few shadows, wielding them as eyes and limbs. They seeped into the Orichalcum cell once more and caressed the sides. "I don't understand," Harlock said. He didn't notice anything awry.

"That's because you hide too well and see too little. Centuries of blindness have left you lost. Look again." Harlem pointed a few times, and finally Harlock noticed that some of the spells were wrong. Those spells were out of place. He hadn't shaped them himself, but Harlock had been alive long enough to have experienced and developed every single Magical Skill there was. Some of the shapes that comprised the spell patterns were out of place. A switch had been conducted. Soon, Harlem poured his Divination into them as well, and he began restructuring the whole thing. Magical shapes slipped from one pattern to another, and soon a pulse of Dimensionality began spilling outward.

"He jumped here," Harlem said. True to his word, the reconstruction of Adam descended into the Dimensionality, following someone: a Raven-helmed agent of Aviary. "I have their trail."

"And I will carry us across," Harlock declared. "Ascendants. We hunt." And with a casual exertion of his power, he drew the other Ascendants and their Avatars into his blackened embrace. The darkness within the cube grew even deeper, and from its depths emerged ten other presences, ten other Avatars. "We do this as the family we are. I will claim the space first. Find them in the dark. Daughter. Cripple. Kathereine. Prepare. Everyone else, support."

And a melodic laugh echoed through the world. “Finally. It’s been fun, but I think we should bring the travesty to an end. Say, perhaps when we finally bend our dear Starhawk back to the light, we can see about tying him to the boy, Adam. He seems to have potential, and he doesn’t look half—”

“Grandmother,” Veronica hissed out from the darkness. “Not another word.”

Chapter 181 (III) Trust [II]

“Why aren’t any of you bastards affected by this radiation?” Adam growled. He could feel his muscles spasming, could feel the faint prick of needles plunge in and out of his skin over and over again.

“Oh, we are,” the Owl said. “But we have modified ourselves to endure such environments. Tragic thing is, the Raven that was tasked to bring you here was one of our best Biomancers for anti-radiation treatments. Now, we’ll all have to settle for a bit of pain. But what is a little pain? We’re Pathbearers. Cancer takes time to kill. Time that our bodies can sustain. Do you know that cancer was once considered a death sentence just a few centuries ago? Back when our Biomancers were weak?”

Adam swallowed. “I am aware. But it wasn’t weakness. It was ignorance. The Unified Theory of Biology was not standardized yet.”

The Owl just laughed. “Unified Theory of Biology. You say that as if it is a new discovery, rather than us relearning the wheel. Let me tell you, Hero Arrow, that Forbidden Africa has long since known how to treat this condition. And without mana. The ancients knew how to help themselves without magic, and

they could do such wondrous things. But they fell. They died. And their knowledge, their glory, their wonder died with them. I simply want to prevent that. For all of us.”

“For New Albion,” Adam said.

“For someone to survive the next calamity,” the Owl corrected. He held up a hand, and Gone looked at Adam. The goblin was shivering and twitching too—she was radiation sick as well. “And there will be another calamity. The conflicts are rising again. An incursion is on the horizon. Even without the presence of your chaotic friend. There is no escape from the future. But there may yet be a way for us to survive any disaster, any death. For what we are to endure eternally.”

“Gone,” Adam said, waving the goblin off. She hesitated for a beat but did as he gestured. In a blink, she was standing next to him again, and only then did Candles react.

“Did someone move?” he rasped.

Adam ignored the burning Pathbearer and stared the Owl down. “How do you intend on getting us out?”

“Ah, finally, the silent agreement,” the Owl said. “We have means. The prison is still in an uproar, but the Ascendants will secure control again soon. During this period, we intend to penetrate the mana core and cause a minor disruption. It will not be enough to destabilize the entire core, but it should make the Chronomancy it outputs unstable. After that, we will be free to move beyond the loop and make for Exfiltration Point Prime.”

"I know we're below the Yellowstone Supervolcano," Adam cut in. "Just because we can escape from the bottom of this prison doesn't mean we will be free."

The Owl hummed. "Correct. However, we have means of moving undetected through the volcano. Technological means on loan to us from our aforementioned friends. Technological means that masks us from the System's eyes."

Pure technology was a rare thing in Integration. Adam knew that. But he also knew that New Albion had fought more than a few wars against the Forbidden Ones. Of course, they would have salvaged some equipment and weaponry. But to claim to have something that allowed them to hide from the System itself seemed hubris absolute. The System was everywhere, in everyone, and knew everything. But maybe that was just an exaggeration. Maybe it just hid someone from Divination.

"I want to see it first," Adam said. "Some proof of your technology. I want to be certain and..." Adam paused as he felt a hint of coldness seep into the room. The Owl's posture changed as well. Both of them turned and regarded the doorway Adam had just come through. There came loud footsteps that sounded like war drums. Gone and Candles faced the door as well, but Adam called for them to move out of the way.

For the first time, the Ravens reacted. A few turned into puffs of steam—just as Adam suspected they could earlier—and they reformed before the door.

"Secure the premises," the Owl said. And once more, he was next to Adam in a blink. The Gate Lord didn't even see him move.

Chronomancy! Adam realized. This wasn't stealth. It was time magic.

The Owl held out a hand to Adam. “The other two can take my arm. We need to leave, we need to—”

“Adam!” Shiv’s roar shook the room and made the vault door rattle.

Adam’s eyes widened. “Shiv?”

Once more, the Deathless called out his name, and the Owl waved a hand at two Ravens standing before the sealed door leading to the fusion core and sent them out. They vanished into steam once more and slipped out of the room. “Well, this is a surprise. I didn’t expect our wayward Deathless to find his way to us so soon.”

“Surprise is what he does,” Adam said, a faint smirk pulling at his lips. “Just to warn you, he won’t be nearly as accommodating as I have been.”

“Oh,” the Owl said. “But I suspect he’ll be willing to go along with us as well.”

“I suspect you don’t know him very well,” Adam said.

“Perhaps. But we know him well enough to have a good understanding of the people he cares about. Including one Uva Mettabon—last spotted with the stolen town of Blackedge in the Dreamtaker’s dimension.” The Gate Lord found himself silent. The Owl continued. “The thing about Aviary, Hero Arrow, is that we have friends everywhere. And I suspect that our good Sister will not be able to navigate her way back, considering the compromised state of her soul. Such an ugly thing, Metamorphosis.”

“What do you mean?” Adam asked.

But the Owl said no more about her, for the vault door suddenly groaned and swung open once more. From the bleak red ambiance of the adjoining chamber came the Ravens first, and the battered form of Shiv thereafter. With them also came a billowing coldness that clawed its way into Adam’s very bones.

“Shiv. You godsdamned cockroach, you—” Adam made it three steps before he started to slow. Something was wrong. Something turned in his gut. Shiv was grinning at him—but there was something off with his smile. His face was a mask of blood and wounds, but there was something missing in his eyes.

“Adam,” Shiv grunted, letting out a faint growl of pain.

And that made Adam take a step back. The Owl noticed. “Is there something wrong, Hero Adam?”

“Aw, come on, don’t be like that,” “Shiv” said, letting out a faint whimper. “I know I look like hammered meat right now, but I’ll live. Even if it hurts like hell.” The Gate Lord nodded slowly, but took a few more steps back. The Ravens weren’t slowing. And neither was Shiv. “Adam—”

Adam Arrow shot his favorite bastard in the face with a Veilpiercer. He did it on instinct. He did it without thinking. “Shiv’s” skull splattered apart into a sprawling mess of shadows. Only half of his head remained, and his left eye twitched at Adam before darkness erupted from him.

Everything went to hell after that.

The two Ravens accompanying Shiv burst apart into fountains of blackness as the other Aviary agents struck. The Owl flung himself against Adam and reached out for his two companions. When Adam finished blinking, they were back in the steam-choked tunnels outside the reactor core.

A wet cough sounded beside Adam as the Owl slumped against him. The Gate Lord's eyes widened as he realized the Owl's chest was completely shredded. The man's insides spilled out in an instant as he nearly collapsed, but Adam caught him before he could hit the ground. "Owl! Shit!"

"Oh, dear," the Owl muttered, looking down at himself. He gave another ragged gasp as he tried to reach for his mask, but missed as his limbs failed him. Adam helped him. As soon as Adam removed the Owl mask from the agent's face, he winced. Part of the man's skull was punctured—and pierced deep. He was leaking blood from deep within his head. Adam could hear the flowing blood, smell the brain matter, and see the glistening red beyond the pale flaps of the Owl's skull.

"What in the hells just happened?" Adam asked.

"Ascendants," Gone groaned beside Adam. He turned and noticed how the Legendary-Tier goblin was covered in injuries as well, her blood already pooling on the ground beneath her feet. Deep cuts lined her body, but she was rapidly healing. Nearby, Candles shivered as he looked around. He tweaked like someone coming down from a high as Gone continued explaining. "Owl and I tried to pull us away. Ascendants aren't bound by time. Their Avatars hit us. Hit us hard. Daughter went for you. Owl got her in her way. Got shredded. Both of us got shredded."

The Gate Lord's mouth opened and closed several times.

A wet laugh came from the Owl. "How is this for an expression of goodwill?"

Adam winced as he looked at the Owl's face for the first time. He looked... plain. Like anyone Adam might see on the streets of Blackedge. Elf. Well-groomed. No distinguishing marks. But a person. "It's a good start. You're badly hurt. I'll see if you can—"

"No," the Owl said, placing his hand on Adam's arm. "I'm already dead. But you aren't. Finish me and run. And when you get out, find Aviary. Talk to us. Do it because you owe me. Do it because you're desperate. Do it. Just consider it. We are many things, Gate Lord. We do terrible things for our people and safety. But we are not the monsters you think we are. We are not slavers. We are not so bad."

He coughed softly. "We just wish to live. And the world does not. There is much that we can offer one another... Much that..." He sniffled. "I really thought I wouldn't be so scared when my time came. Oh, well." His eyes snapped to Adam's. "You need to leave. The steam will guide you. The others know—they know. This place is compromised. This cell is finished. We must see you spirited away. Find your friend. My birds will shroud you, help you. And when you get out, look for the dark spot in the magma. You have such good eyes... You'll see them."

The Owl shook as he blinked. "Now. If you would please..." He lifted his head and exposed his neck. Adam hesitated.

Gone didn't.

The Owl's head was halfway severed before Adam could respond, and he dropped to the ground.

“Come on. Come on. Let’s go,” Gone said insistently. She dragged Candles along by his leg, and for the first time in a while, the burning Pathbearer seemed coherent. “What! What just—”

“Ascendants. Coming. Follow. Fight. Don’t think.”

Adam looked down at the Owl for a moment longer, watching as the man’s eyes dimmed entirely before he pivoted on his feet and dashed after Gone. Once more, the Gate Lord was covered in blood, and he fought to keep his hands from shaking. He tried to remember the last day he hadn’t seen death, hadn’t had to kill someone, hadn’t had to face the blunt horror of existing in the world.

He had a hard time remembering.

The steam glided along the walls and ceiling, accelerating more and more. “Go faster!” a voice hissed from every direction. “We’re hiding you as much as we can. But he will know! The darkness is no longer our ally. Our lives are forfeit. Do not let them take you! The Midnight is coming! Run, Little Hawk! Run!”

Adam’s vector wings flared as he tore along the tunnel. Gone kept pace easily, and she dragged Candles right behind her. As they fled, the goblin spat a question at Adam, but said it too quickly for him to process at the start.

“How did you know it wasn’t him?”

“Two things,” Adam answered after a few seconds. “First is the lack of a notification. The System always marks him as a target now.”

“And the second?”

“He complained about pain. But those wounds? The actual Shiv wouldn’t have even noticed.”

Gone regarded Adam a moment longer. “I look forward to meeting this Deathless.”

“Gone,” Adam said. “Please don’t try to kill him. I don’t know you very well, but I already owe you my life many times over.”

“I am uninterested in slaying your friend,” the goblin spat out, her voice almost drowned by the whistling winds. “I just wish to be free.”

Adam chuckled faintly. “I’m not worried about you killing him, Gone.”

Chapter 182 (I) Dark [I]

I despise those who dub themselves gods after claiming a paltry pittance of power. “God” should mean something more than just being a Pathbearer. Some argue that ascending to Legendary ascends you to a sort of demigodhood. I would retort that some are simple-minded creatures who are easily awed by charlatans conjuring flames and spitting pretty words.

A Legend is not a god. A Legend is merely someone who is capable of affecting the concepts sustaining their Legendary-Tier Skill. As a Legend of Physicality and Theft, I can steal other people's greatest feat of strength and use it against them. It can do this against almost anyone in existence. Does this make me a god? I would say not. It merely makes me powerful.

Gods are not powerful. Gods are absolute. Gods create new things. Things that are entirely unique—or at the very least, rare.

The Great One is a god. This is beyond debate. Should you walk the Lowest Paths, you will experience wonders grave and beautiful, and be claimed by them more likely than not.

Should you enter the realm of the Challenger, you will experience war like no other, struggle like no other, and bloodshed and carnage like no other.

Gods possess domains of power above simple skills. These domains are Axiomatic. Self-evident truths from which new worlds are born and shaped.

And due to this, there are gulfs between even the gods themselves.

But just because one faces a god does not mean they are doomed. For some gods are less than others, and some gods are but gods in the narrowest of senses. And life is about breadth. Life is about learning, evolving, and expanding yourself beyond your limitations.

This, more than anything, is why the gods can be defied—and why unworthy gods should be defied. Why should a Legend kneel before a God of War when his heart is so easily wounded by a bladed tongue? Why should a God of Lust command us to betray our virtues when our minds are stalwart and our ideals are true?

Remember this, Pathbearer: There is a truth before all other truths, an axiom above axioms, and a divine beyond divinity.

The System demands struggle, and to rage against the impossible is the finest form of struggle there is.

-Valor Thann

Shiv eyed the faint glint of Necromancy charging Adam's arrow and tried to keep himself relaxed. He didn't know what had Adam this spooked, but he could guess. Probably a damned shapeshifter running around here.

Instead of saying anything, Shiv summoned a swirl of Vitae atop his palm and then blinked out of context for a moment. When he returned, Adam did a double-take, and the notification registering Shiv as the Deathless flashed as well. "How's that? Can fake-me do that too?"

A haggard breath escaped Adam as he let his bow go slack. He marched toward Shiv, and the two Pathbearers following in his wake trailed behind. Both of them had their eyes locked to Shiv, and the Deathless stared back without any hint of fear. The burning bone guy looked a bit out of it with how the two bright spots he had for eyes kept flickering, but the Chronomancy-quilled goblin had the vibe of a proper killer.

Go for it, Shiv communicated through his flat stare. She was unimpressed. That changed when Shiv drew upon his Shape of Monstrosity and activated his Dread-Tainted Feat. Then, the goblin's eyes went wide, and she started vibrating at intense speeds. She caught a glimpse of what he did to Daughter, and when she took a step back, Shiv couldn't help but offer her a near-feral grin. Yeah. Keep yourself alive. Don't make me add you to my next Delve.

“Young Lord Arrow,” the Raven leading Shiv said, trying to intercept Adam. “Please, hold. I wish to know what has happened with—”

Adam walked through the Raven as his body briefly turned fluid. Shiv blinked before letting out a laugh. “Shit, Adam. Did you evolve your Physicality? Is that why you’re all soggy now?”

“Shut up, you bastard,” Adam said with an exhausted sigh. After he passed through the Raven, he released the Hydromancy comprising his body in a burst of moisture. It didn’t splash down around Adam like a waterfall. Instead, it formed a faint shroud around him—became something he could call upon at any moment.

Shiv was about to ask Adam what kind of Skill Evolution that was when the Gate Lord slammed into his chest and hugged him. Shiv blinked. He was usually the one to initiate these, the rare few times they happened. The mocking smirk on Shiv’s face faded, and in its place came a grin of genuine joy. “Rough day, huh?”

“The godsdamned worst,” Adam replied.

Shiv patted Adam on the back, indifferent to all the eyes on them. He didn’t care that there were dozens of Legendary-Tier prisoners who knew how much he cared for his friend. He didn’t care that they were still in this miserable shithole of a prison. He didn’t care that the Ascendants were probably right on Adam’s ass, and another ugly fight was coming their way.

The Deathless had found his favorite asshole again, and now, some of the loneliness inside of him winked out like an extinguished candle.

“Shiv. Telepathy.” Adam’s muttered request made Shiv cock his head, but he didn’t hesitate beyond that. He projected his Psychomancy into Adam, and then found himself surprised as time itself seemed to stop. Yet this wasn’t a feat of Chronomancy but an accelerated perception of some kind, as his body was still frozen. More importantly, it was Adam doing it.

“Shit, Adam, just how many skills did you evolve?”

“Four, technically,” he replied. Shiv could feel the Gate Lord’s skull slowly fill with building strain and heat. The cost to this skill was making itself known. “This is Commander’s Foresight. It evolved from my Tactical Overseer Skill. It gives me time to think and... Well, I have figured all of it out yet. I wasn’t even sure if you would be included when I pause the world outside my head, but it seems my guess paid off.”

And these were the times that Shiv remembered Adam was a prodigy. If not for my Path, how would I match up against him? he wondered.

“Like a sparrow trying to flee a hawk,” Adam suggested.

And then Shiv remembered their minds were linked. “Yeah. Sure thing, little bird. Keep moving your beak.” Shiv made the noise of a chicken, and felt Adam’s annoyance rise.

For this moment, at least, all was good in the world.

Adam quickly caught Shiv up on everything that he’d missed. As the Gate Lord recounted Blackedge’s escape and his near-death at the hands of the Tarrasque, Shiv shuddered with fear. That shudder became a trembling avalanche of building rage when Adam told him about what Stormhalt had planned to do.

“I’m going to skull-fuck that skill-broken bastard with his own cock,” Shiv said casually.

“As much as I would love to hold him down while you do that, I think we need to finish planning our escape first. Listen, Aviary supposedly has a plan to get us out.”

“Really? What a surprise. I got a plan to get us out too. It’s called putting you and everyone that matters in my cape and slipping past the damned time loop surrounding this place.”

“I considered that, but there are a few problems. The first is the Orichalcum cubes that—”

“Ah, that’s not an issue. I’ll just rip my way through them.”

Shiv felt Adam’s mind churn with confusion and then with disbelief. “You’ll just what?”

“Rip through them. They’re not that hard to punch through. You just need to outpace its climbing Toughness with your Legendary-Tier Physicality and Magical Resistance Skill Fusion.” Shiv hummed thoughtfully. “It’s really not that complicated. If you have the right skill, you know.”

A low growl of agitation and amused disbelief came from Adam. “I regret ever worrying about you, you absolute shit. Magical Resistance? Physicality? Skill Fusion? That’s just...”

“Bullshit?” Shiv provided.

“Will you tell me what poor monster you stole this skill from so I can hate you properly?”

“You know about Void Leviathans?” Shiv asked. A pang of absolute disgust came from the Gate Lord.
“Oh! You do!”

“Shiv. Just kill yourself. Kill yourself a thousand times painfully. What was Udraal even thinking when he twisted your soul?”

At the mention of the Udraal’s name, Shiv’s mood darkened. “I don’t know. But if I had to guess, he probably wanted to use me as a weapon against the System itself. Maybe even Integration. I feel like a tumor, Adam. Like I’m something that shouldn’t exist. The System put a Hidden World Quest on my head. I think that’s a pretty clear sign that it doesn’t want me to exist.”

“Perhaps,” Adam said, sounding less certain than Shiv. “But it hasn’t tried to strike you down directly. You’re still evolving more skills. You’re still getting Quest rewards. If that’s the case, then... I can’t tell what the System wants when it comes to you.”

Shiv grunted with displeasure. “Me neither. Alright. Who are the two crazies you’re with?”

The world had switched to a sort of top-down view that pierced through the ceiling. From there, Shiv eyed the goblin and Pyromancer that accompanied Adam.

“The goblin is called Gone, and the burning one is Candles. I managed to gain their aid and trust while I was escaping myself. They’re reliable, for now.”

“They made eyes at me earlier. Managed to get the goblin to look away.”

Adam sighed. “I warned her against that. What about you? You seem to have recruited a small army.”

“Yeah, well, they’re not mine. It’s more like they’re a group of enemies I managed to talk into uncertain allies instead. Had to beat the shit out of the Chronomancer elf first, though.”

“Chronomancer elf? The one standing near you?”

“Yeah. That’s Kura. The other few you should know about are Five—he’s the wolf-guy. Also an Aviary agent.”

“What? Just how many bloody agents do they have in this place?”

“Knowing the answer might make me go Berserk and break something or someone,” Shiv said. “And the guy who’s half-man, half-automaton is Rebis. He’s apparently supposed to be a future Avatar for one of the Ascendants, so he’s not doing that well either.”

“And who’s the Vulteg?” Adam asked.

Shiv paused and winced. “That... is High Marshal Urri. Shit. He’s, uh, probably going to make a go at you soon. I can’t believe I forgot about his ass.”

“Oh, good. See, Shiv. The System wants me dead too. What solidarity I feel right now.”

“Yeah. Us against the entire world, huh?”

Adam didn’t reply to that with his usual vim. Instead, a faint hint of the depressiveness boiling inside him spilled over. A headache was beginning to build in Shiv’s skull as well.

“Seems this skill allows for cognitive strain to be shared when there’s a telepathic connection. Good to know.” Adam sighed.

“You alright?” Shiv should have asked this question earlier, but he had a feeling he knew the answer.

“Not really,” Adam replied. “Everything I believed in was a lie, Shiv. The Ascendants. The Auroral Council. All of it. All my life, I’ve dreamed of serving the Republic, of being a champion of its people and guarding them from harm. I never thought the source of harm was hiding within the Republic, though. Within and at the top.”

Shiv nearly spat something thoughtlessly reassuring when his Psycho-Cartography stopped him.

Psycho-Cartography: Shut up. Don't spit out the first words that come to your mind. Adam wants you to listen right now. You might have never cared much about the Republic thanks to Roland, but Adam loves Yellowstone. Adam believed in the Ascendants. Adam would have died for them. Now, he's here, and he's fighting against them and willing to die for you in this miserable dungeon. Just listen first. You cannot fix a broken heart. You know this.

"I'm sorry, man," Shiv finally said. "I know I—it's not the same for me, but I know it mattered a lot to you. I'm sorry our gods are bastards."

Adam hummed listlessly. "Indeed. I think I am sorry as well." It was only then that Shiv felt the sheer amount of stress and trauma Adam was holding at bay. "I'm... I'm tired, Shiv. I really am."

"I know. I'm tired of a lot of this shit too. I guess all I can say is that we can be tired together? I don't know."

The Gate Lord laughed. "I wish I had your constitution right now."

"I wish I had your morals earlier. And your education. We're probably going to need that soon because Cripple—Oh, shit! This might cheer you up a bit. Cripple might be willing to work with us."

Surprise bloomed in Adam. It was the heat of hope veiled by a fog of doubt. "Are you certain? Why?"

“He helped me survive Daughter’s ambush earlier. I got a way to contact Cripple—or for it to contact me. I was supposed to call it when I found you or something. It can help us escape. And yeah, I was paranoid too, but there’s really no point in Cripple betraying me. It could have helped Daughter in the fight earlier. I barely survived her. Both of them would have torn me apart. Anyway, Cripple wants to speak to us and then the Starhawk as well. I think it's about as tired as this shit as we are.”

And soon, something was burning inside Adam: A realization that not all of his gods were heartless monsters, aside from the Starhawk. “Alright... Alright! So, we have options now. And if everything fails and you can get us out of this prison, Aviary has its own extraction point as well. Something that can help us hide from the eyes of the Ascendants; a piece of pure technology.”

“Pure technology? Like what? Something from the Forbidden Empire?”

“Exactly.”

And now Shiv was beginning to feel excited. Before this point, he was stumbling around blind with vague plans. Now, with Adam back and their knowledge combined, possibilities and options were branching out before Shiv’s very eyes.

A spike of pain cut through both of their rising hopes.

“Shit!” Adam hissed.

Shiv frowned slightly. “Yeah, this skill feels like mana strain without the mana part, doesn’t it?”

“Now that you mentioned that, it does. Bloody migraines.”

“You know, once we find Uva again, she might just be able to keep it from hurting us entirely. Or delaying it for a while by connecting us to even more people. Wait, hell, think of connecting to an entire army like this.”

“I think that’s how the skill is meant to be used, Shiv. Right. So. I say we get all the prisoners in order, escape from this place before the Ascendants or Avatars are upon us, try to meet with Cripple, and then move on to getting out of this prison entirely after that.”

“Sounds good to me. You gonna do the telepathy Commander’s Foresight thing when shit goes sideways?”

“Absolutely.”

“Great. See you back here in about an hour.”

“Try five minutes, Shiv,” Adam scoffed. “An hour of peace. When did you get so bloody optimistic?”

“Just trying to imagine a better world where I can spend a few seconds cooking instead of murdering every third person I come across.”

“What a beautiful dream. But I think it’s time to step out of it. My headache’s becoming borderline unbearable, so let’s see if the Vulteg tries to kill me in a moment or not.”

“Better not. For his own sake. Let’s see if I can bullshit him.”

Adam ended his Commander’s Foresight Skill, and time resumed. As soon as Adam pulled away from Shiv, a loud gasp came from behind Shiv. He winced.

“Wait... What did you call him? Adam? Young Lord Arrow?”

Shiv spun on his heels and held up his hands to Urri, whose eye was wide open as he stared at Adam. “Yeah,” Shiv said. “Young Lord Adam Arrow. One of the many Young Lord Adam Arrows in the Republic.”

“A very common name,” Adam added, peeking out from beside Shiv.

The huge Vulteg stared at the two of them as Shiv continued his bullshit spree. “Way too many Adam Arrows. Honestly, his dad’s... just a dumb piece of shit for not choosing another name. Could’ve called him anything. But his dad is just... not a smart man. Hells, I’d even call him kind of a massive dick.” Something sharp hit the back of Shiv’s head. He ignored it.

Urri’s stare turned into a glare as he studied Adam Arrow some more.

Incoming message from Lord Scorn:

ARROW! YOU FUCK! YOU THINK YOU CAN GET AWAY FROM ME? I CAN FEEL YOUR ASS, NO MATTER WHERE YOU ARE! I DON'T CARE IF YOU'RE HIDING UP AN ASCENDANT'S ASSHOLE! I'LL KNOW! MY HATE HAS SPROUTED FREE FROM MY BODY AND GROWN EYES AND NOSES AND EARS TO TASTE YOUR FESTERING MANA SIGNATURE YOU BOW-FUCKING FUCK! AND NOW, YOU'RE GOING TO SUFFER. SLOWLY. SWEETLY. FOR-FUCKING-EVER!

"Oh, hells," Adam muttered.

"Damn," Shiv said, trying to maintain a facade of ignorance. "I don't know who this guy is, but he really sounds kind of pissed off about one of the many Adams in—"

Urri moved. Shiv intercepted. And a flare of azure light consumed by the tunnel they were in. The huge Vulteg crashed hard against Shiv and stopped dead once more as all the force he exerted was converted into Overflow Tides.

"TREACHEROUS HASLAGH!" Urri screamed in Shiv's face.

Chapter 182 (II) Dark [I]

The Vulteg pushed harder. The ground beneath their feet groaned and deformed. Shiv sent all his Shapeless Tides back against Urri—and found his vectors a magnitude stronger than they were at baseline, thanks to Adam's Unique Skill.

The huge Vulteg let out a frustrated roar as he was driven back. He tried to headbutt Shiv—only for the Deathless to intercept him first. Shiv channeled a burst of innate tides through his forehead into Urri's

massive eyeball. The Vulteg let out a snarl as Shiv pinned him against the wall. As the two Legendary-Tier bruisers struggled, Shiv felt his strength climb while blue flames seared Urri's very being.

The Vulteg flung himself against Shiv over and over again, but however his Physicality Skill functioned, it wasn't a good match-up against Shiv's Leviathan of the Shapeless Tides boosted by Adam's Righteous Dawn Prevails.

"Urri," Shiv growled, activating his Dread-Tainted Feat and channeling it through his Shapeless Tides. "Stop. You don't want this." With every vector he directed into the Vulteg's body, Urri flinched slightly. The shadow of Daughter came into shape at the center of his eye, and he let out a groan of fear. Even so, the High Marshal was made from some stern stuff. His fear chain hardened, but only slightly. Like before, the other Legendary-Tier prisoners were spectating, but there was a new reason this time.

A row of golden shadows stood before them, barring the other prisoners from approaching Shiv or Adam.

The Deathless noted the stern-faced elven Chronomancer from the corner of his eye and noted how Kura was standing guard herself—with one of her arms shape-changed into an extended blade, no less.

Well, she's taking her oath pretty seriously. Shiv chuckled internally. Who says violence doesn't get you friends?

"Urri will gouge your feeble eyes and drink your fetid blood," the Vulteg spat.

"Yeah, I've had worse," Shiv deadpanned. "Look, Urri, we don't have time for this shit, and there's a lot that you—"

The Vulteg had no interest in conversation. Instead, his single eye came aglow with a pitch-black light, and Shiv saw the magical attack coming. A wave of Dimensionality struck out at Shiv. A static-black hand exploded free of the Vulteg's eye and tried to drag Shiv into the High Marshal's gaze. Shiv's enhanced Shapeless Tides held the Dimensionality at bay while the two continued their struggle.

Yet, it wasn't just Dimensionality that the Vulteg assailed Shiv with; it was also Geomancy. A layer of grain-sized pebbles pressed against Shiv's flesh. They almost burrowed into his skin before his Shapeless Tides drove them back. Urri writhed, and the wall behind him folded inward. Before he could throw himself backward and escape from Shiv's grasp, the Deathless inverted his tides and whipped the massive Vulteg over his hip. Free-flowing vectors made it easy for Shiv to control the Vulteg's center of gravity, and with Urri's struggles feeding Shiv with more Overflow Tides, he effectively had him at his mercy. He drove the High Marshal against the ground and kept the big bastard there with a grunt of exertion.

"Don't have time for this shit," Shiv grunted. He applied tides against the Vulteg's neck and began strangling Urri. The High Marshal released several snarls of displeasure as he failed to break free from Shiv's hold.

The Deathless brought his Vitaemancy and mana-hydras into the fray as he struck Urri's Magical Resistance from all sides, but Shiv's magic broke apart against the Vulteg's soul like sand.

"The hells?" Shiv tried again, but he found himself unable to crystallize any spells against the Vulteg at all. Urri wasn't just durable against magic; he felt destabilizing. And that's when Shiv realized the Vulteg was vibrating beneath his carapaced skin. A loud scream sounded from inside the Vulteg's body, and Shiv snarled. "Inertium bones? Seriously? That's a Skill Evolution?"

"No," the Vulteg spat. "Not Inertium. More than Inertium. Let Urri show you."

And show Shiv Urri did. The Vulteg flexed, and a rush of nullification traveled out from Urri's body. Shiv blinked as his tides scattered like dust claimed by a passing gale. Urri twisted back and flicked an elbow at Shiv's head. A rush of water intercepted the blow on Shiv's behalf. It didn't stop the Vulteg's strike completely, but it slowed it just enough for Shiv to dive off Urri's body.

Shiv's Shapeless Tides returned to normal. He got to his feet at the same time Urri did. A crazed look filled the Vulteg's eye.

"I thought you were a proper warrior, Deathless, but now I see you are a mongrel beast that seeks the company of monsters. Urri will see you punished for trying to stop this Quest of justice. Urri will—"

Shiv left context.

Outside Context Problem 94 > 95

The next thing Urri—and anyone else for that matter—knew was Shiv driving his fist right into Urri's eye. A spray of dark red blood squirted out from the corners of Urri's eye. The Vulteg's cry became a shriek as the Icon of the Painrinker flared over Shiv. The Deathless winced as well, as he found himself with a torn elbow. Between his Shapeless Tides and his Inertial Overdrive, the stress afflicting his body was building to a point of collapse.

The inertial sheath coating Shiv's body thundered with every movement he made, and his Shapeless Tides only fanned those flames higher. He was faster than he had ever been before, but he was also starting to come apart. Instead of juggling three different skills at once, Shiv reverted his personal timeline by three seconds and rendered his injuries a thing of retro-continuity.

He also decided that he was done trying to fight or knock Vulteg out. By this point, Shiv guessed Urri's Physicality wasn't Legendary, but his Toughness and Magical Resistance damn sure were. It was like he nullified any physical or magical attack he noticed.

Just a shame he didn't have a good counter against Shiv leaving context again.

The Deathless seized the Vulteg once more, and as he unleashed a surge of vectors into his chest, he sent Urri blasting down the tunnel at an angle. The Vulteg struck a wall and tore right on through. Then, he punched through another wall, and a chain of holes was left in his wake. He finally struck something he couldn't break through after a good five seconds. A resounding crunch followed, and a mess of destruction followed as the tunnel around them shook and groaned.

Shiv turned to the other prisoners and sighed. "Alright. Anyone else wanna start a fight on behalf of a foreign god? Because I'm not taking you out of this prison with me if you do."

"DEATHLESS! ARROW!" Urri's voice made the entire structure tremble. "I WILL HAVE YOU! I WILL... Oh, Oh, no—Not the darkness again! Not the dark again! Harlock! Give Urri mercy! I will serve! I was merely—"

A bloodcurdling scream sounded from the distance instead of further words, and Shiv felt his gut tighten.

"Five, teleportation. Get us out of here. Now."

"I can't," Five said. "Not without access to the right mithril support. One with the correct Dimensionality spells flowing through it."

"Godsdammit. Alright. We're getting out the direct way. Everyone with me."

"Lord Arrow," the only surviving Raven said, sliding beside Adam as Shiv tore through the walls. "What happened to the others? What happened to—"

"Your Owl is dead. This place is compromised. The Ascendants—"

"The Midnight is coming!" the steam around them whispered. Slowly, a putrid blackness began filling the white vapors. "He's here... I can't... Run! Run now! Flee!"

Patches of darkness burst out from the steam like pimples popping off flesh. It began to spill across the ground and crawl upon the walls. Shiv caught a glimpse of more darkness spreading out like branching fingers, and his instincts told him coming into contact with that was a bad idea.

"Everyone! Move! Through the walls!" Shiv called out. "Bonk! Rebis! Five! Cape. Now!"

He shifted his Forest of Alloy in position and was about to call for Adam when the Gate Lord merged with the moisture he was carrying. "Candles!" Adam called out. "Burn us a path."

“Where’s my keys?” Candles said. He came alight as if a conflagration was contained within his body, and it exploded out in a rush of focused Pyromancy that turned everything before him to slag in an instant.

Shiv and Adam shared a nod as they both plunged through the leftmost walls of the tunnel to escape into the crawlspace beyond this cube. The other Legendary prisoners were punching through as well, with all group cohesion lost. However, as Shiv hollowed a new exit into the structure, shredding through the smooth metal impeding his path, he felt a faint heat building inside his bones. A strange prickling sensation tickled his skin, and Shiv wondered if this was some kind of subtle disease skill unleashed by the Ascendants.

This thought was promptly lost to him as he ripped through the final layer of wall and pushed his way out from folds of bending metal. Regret filled Shiv as soon as he did, as a tide of deepest black came crashing toward him from all sides. It was an animated darkness. An active darkness. A living darkness that festered with hunger and ill intent.

“Well. This is convenient,” a cold voice echoed out from the blackness. “It seems that both of our escapees have found themselves in the same place. How useful. There is no need for me to continue assuming your guise, then.”

“Oh, shit—”

Strands of darkness crashed into Shiv. He was flooded with Overflow Tides as a massive tendril of shadow stabbed against his flesh. The blackness pulled at him. Shiv pointed his vectors backward and resisted. More tendrils whipped and lashed at his body from all sides, and Shiv cycled his Shapeless Tides as best he could. The onslaught the Ascendant unleashed against him was physical, mental, and spiritual, and Shiv found each whipping limb of darkness carving small cuts upon his body, slicing through his Voidmantid armor with ease. Needles of pain were driven into his mind, and a building sense of despair and malaise washed through Shiv. Even his soul ached with every blow. In the corner of his eyes, he saw the first of the prisoners burst out—and get driven back by the ocean of blackness.

This is your fault. You led them the wrong way. You led them into the jaws of the beast. You never think ahead. You never do the right thing for other people. They always suffer and die when they try to follow you. Still just an Omenborn. Never anything more than just an Omenborn.

Psycho-Cartography:Shiv. Stop thinking. The darkness is laced with negative emotions. Don't think. Just react.

But— Shiv wanted to argue against his skill, wanted to say that he deserved this. Yet, that thought was a step too far for him. Shiv had known hunger, cold, loneliness, discomfort, and all manner of misery. But he had never gone against himself. Whatever he faced, he stayed his own pillar. He had to be, because there was no one else for him.

For him to use his own voice to abuse himself was unnatural, no matter the feeling. And so he turned away from the feeling and focused on his actions. In the depths of his depression built a burning rage as well. A rage pointed at the shadowy Ascendant.

It was one thing to rip into his body. It was another thing to make Shiv feel pathetic about himself. To have your sense of self changed was a kind of death as well.

Psycho-Cartography 67 > 68

Philosophy 17 > 18

The shadows tried to overtake Shiv, but he drove and battered them aside. His tides scattered the dark and opened a path of retreat for him once more. As soon as he cleared a patch of space for himself, his depression also abated, and his mind cleared. Shiv cast himself back in time using his Chronomancy, but the darkness followed him immediately. As he winked back through one of the many holes he'd made in the walls, Shiv found Adam and his two new companions rushing along the exit. "No! They're already there."

"What?" Adam cried aloud. "What do you mean they're already there?"

"I swallowed this place within myself," the cold-voiced Ascendant proclaimed once more. His words passed along Shiv's ears like a traveling whisper. "There is no escape. You are no longer in the world. You are within me. Traveling here has damned you to the void, and soon, I will take you. All of you will vanish beneath my embrace."

Adam grimace. "Oh, gods."

As the darkness came surging toward Shiv, he pushed Adam back and seized the nearest wall with his tides. He bade the vectors twist, and soon the alloy became a dense knot that sealed the darkness from an easy approach. But then, as he looked over Adam's shoulder, he saw more tendrils already seeping in from behind, crawling along the tunnel walls they were just in.

"Shit," Shiv muttered. "Adam. Brainstorm."

The goblin accompanying Adam narrowed her eyes at Shiv. "What are you two—"

Shiv cast his Psychomancy into Adam's mind, and the Gate Lord triggered his Commander's Foresight again.

"Not even five minutes," Adam grumbled mentally as they were both placed in a top-down view.

"Hey, eat shit. I wasn't the one who led the Ascendant here. How was I supposed to know this was coming? Godsdammit. Uh, you got any ideas on how we can get out of here? Because if we stay here, the darkness is going to eat us. Or give us depression. Depends on whether your mind or body is weaker."

"Give us depression?" Adam murmured in horrified disbelief. "Are you joking?"

"No. Even getting hit a little just now had me feeling all kinds of low."

The Gate Lord shuddered. "Magical?"

"Yeah. I think so. My Shapeless Tides resisted it pretty good, but the darkness just keeps coming, and I don't really have any way to hurt it."

"Right. No idea how the darkness works. So. Best that we avoid it entirely. You can hold it back for a while, yes?"

“Yeah,” Shiv answered. “Why? What’s the idea?”

“Okay. We do this quickly and in bursts. I need you to hold the darkness at bay while I try to get Candles to use his flames. If that can disrupt the darkness, then our chances might not be as dire as they seem.”

“Got it. Oh, wait. I got these boots right now that let me dive into darkness for a while. You think that might do anything?”

“I have no idea, Shiv. But we best not experiment in the midst of battle unless we’re absolutely desperate. So. Maybe in about a minute.”

“A minute? Yeah, right, you optimist. Give it twenty seconds.”

Adam snorted. “I hope the Ascendant eats you and gets the shits.”

“Let’s keep that as Plan F for now,” Shiv replied.

Adam ended his Commander’s Foresight as Shiv launched himself at the encroaching darkness in a rush of activated vectors. He crashed into the black and braced himself in both mind and body. As the Ascendant clawed at his being once more, Shiv was prepared. Prepared to endure. And prepared to strike back.

“This is futile,” the shadows declared, driving themselves as if bladed lashes against Shiv’s body. He gripped a few tendrils and activated Dread-Tainted.

“Yeah. Daughter screams to differ.”

For a moment, the darkness around him shuddered as the trauma of another Ascendant pulsed through the black. A gasp sounded, but that gasp became a laugh of wry amusement after no more than a second.

“Quite the Feat. I see why she’s so scared of you now. Veronica was right. You’re worth keeping alive—”

A crackle sounded behind Shiv, and then there came a roar of flame. A loud moan of euphoric pleasure came from the burning man Adam called Candles. His Pyromancy carved a brilliant lane through the darkness now flooding the tunnel, and Shiv caught sight of a few Legendary-Tier prisoners writhing within a tightening nest of shadows. Yet, despite parting before the fire, the darkness mended itself nigh-instantly thereafter.

“Shiv! Sync!” Adam’s call came from behind, and Shiv cast his Psychomancy mana out as a net to trap Adam’s mind so they could continue their scheming. Time went still just as a wave of blackness curled over Shiv. A loud scream of bursting metal sounded from behind as well, and Shiv knew the knot of metal he’d made was compromised, and they were about to be pincerred from two directions.

“Well, the fire did something. Just not enough. Can you get Candles there to spit out more?” Shiv studied the burning Pathbearer, and his jaw was open in an expression of delight as he rubbed his own shoulders. “Because the noise he made earlier didn’t sound like he was spent. It sounded like he had a lot more to give. And, uh, he kind of liked giving it. Where the felling hells did you find this guy, Adam? He doesn’t look like he’s all there.”

“Shiv. Don’t be rude. Are you all there?”

“I don’t sound like I’m about to empty my balls when I’m using my Pyromancy, so yeah, I’m more there than this guy.”

“It’s probably because your Pyromancy is too weak and soft,” Adam sneered. “Whatever the case, this is a good thing. Light does affect the Ascendant. We just need a sustained burn for a moment. Maybe if I can get him to channel it outward as a sphere...”

“I managed to hit the Ascendant with some of my Dread-Taint too.”

“Your what?”

“Dread-Taint. New Feat I got from scarring Daughter’s soul.”

A beat of silence followed. “You... scarred one of the Ascendants. And got a Feat for it?”

“Yeah. Legendary Feat. I can sprinkle a bit of fear into all my skills now. Lets anyone I target with it get a little taste of what it’s like to be Daughter.”

“Shiv. That’s absolutely vile. I... I love it. Damn the Ascendants. But... did it feel good? When you scarred Daughter?”

The Deathless grimaced. “Not really, man. She started screaming like a kid. I don't think she's really all there either. And she uses a bunch of kids as her Avatars. I didn’t like that shit at all.”

Adam’s enthusiasm dimmed immediately. “Ah. Sorry. I expected a more triumphant tale with you as usual, I suppose.”

“I didn’t really have a choice, and I was pretty pissed at her while I was doing it, but that didn’t make it any easier.”

“Because you’re not nearly that much of a bastard, Shiv,” Adam said. He spent a few seconds considering Shiv’s capabilities and sighed. “Alright. So. There’s something else we can try on top of Candles’ flames. If he can keep the dark at bay, I need you to dive in and out of context in the dark. Is your Dread-Taint Feat cumulative? Does it add up each time you use it on someone?”

“I... don’t know.”

“Well, time to find out.” Adam sighed. “And we’re desperately experimenting already. I think that took about 15 seconds. Fantastic.”

Commander’s Foresight came to an end. The curled wave of shadows crashed down upon Shiv, but failed to fall completely as Shiv caught it with a pair of raised hands. He was a man holding a falling tsunami at bay. The mass was immense. Shiv’s bones creaked, and his spirit shuddered. It wasn’t nearly

as bad as trying to contend with Cripple, but whichever Ascendant he was facing right now was far stronger than Daughter in a direct clash.

The Deathless gritted his teeth as he tried to keep the dark at bay. Smaller tendrils erupted from the wave he was wrestling and stabbed into his torso. Pangs of hopelessness spread through him while blood spilled down his body. Instead of succumbing, Shiv struck back at the Ascendant's mind in return. He channeled his Dread-Taint through his Leviathan of the Shapeless Tides over and over, and the darkness he gripped twitched.

"Candles! Make a ring around us. Or a dome!" Adam's frantic cry echoed in Shiv's ears, and he felt the repeated shudders of someone using their Chronomancy Skill repeatedly.

"OR A CASTLE!" Candles screamed. "Don't mind the heat!"

"Wait! Don't burn Shiv too—" Adam's yell went ignored as something smashed into Shiv from behind. If not for his Shapeless Tides, he would have disintegrated in an instant. Because of it, he only suffered third degree burns. The back of his Voidmantid armor dissolved into nothing, while his skin turned to a raw-red stretch of pulsing boils before sloughing away in patches. Shiv winced and grunted with something between pain and annoyance as the new Innate Tides he generated finally arrived to drive the Pyromancy back.

My Legendary Skill still has openings. Times when I'm slightly vulnerable to magic. I gotta keep cycling, and cycle faster.

A colossal, blazing structure with the rough outlines of a castle exploded out from Candles as he laughed manically, his voice booming like the heart of a burning star. Massive stretches of the structure surrounding them were outright vaporized, and Shiv thought that the entire thing might come crashing down on them if this kept up.

Adam and the golden-quilled goblin were mostly spared, as Candles seemed to half have a mind to direct his burning mana around them. Darkness dashed itself against the flame, but the sheer brightness unleashed by Candles became a near impenetrable bulwark against the Ascendant's foul touch.

But that didn't mean Adam was safe. Even without standing directly in the pulsating inferno, his Hydromantic body was turning to steam at a staggering rate as he protected the goblin within himself, and Shiv doubted Adam's evolved Toughness was going to hold up to this even at Heroic-Tier.

Need to work fast. See if I can get us an opening.

He left context. As soon as he did, the darkness pressing against him faltered briefly, unable to remember who or what was holding it at bay. The answer returned with Shiv as he blinked in and out of reality, ripping through the shadows around him like they were shrubs. Though the dark was fluid, Shiv's blows carried with them doses of fear, and slowly, the Deathless felt a rising swell of terror rush into him like fuel.

He was injecting bits of terror stolen from one false god into another. And it was working.

Shape of Monstrosity 121 > 123

Then, there came a flash of azure light that cut through the dense walls of fire surrounding Candles, Adam, and Gone. For a moment, Shiv thought Adam was trying to empower the Pyromancer some more, just like he did to Shiv earlier. Instead, Adam's Unique Skill slashed into the shadows, and for the first time, Shiv heard the dark-born Ascendant let out a weary gasp. "What... what is this?"

"The wicked get burned, asshole," Shiv sneered. He vanished back into his Vitae once more and felt his lifeforce veer toward the cold precipice of oblivion. Okay. Time to see if I can take a quick sip of Vitality from the darkness too. Can't really sense any lifeforce there, though...

Outside Context Problem 95 > 97

Shiv surfaced once more and reached out into the darkness. As soon as he did, he felt a rush of warmth wash into him. A feeling of elation lit his soul as he discovered the darkness was rich with vitality indeed. Yet, somehow, it masked that fact from him. The Ascendants were capable of all kinds of strange powers, and so were their—

Shiv's stomach dropped. "Shit. Where the hell's is your Ava—"

And from the darkness before Shiv emerged an old, weathered face. It was the last thing Shiv saw in that life as a needle-thin rapier was thrust up under his chin and out through his skull.

"Nearby," the old man said with a low chuckle. "And the name is Legend-Councilman Anthony De Diego, at your demise."

Inertial Overdrive 137 > 140

Farsight 60 > 64

Outside Context Problem 97 > 100 (Skill Evolution Imminent)

Chapter 183 (I) Dark [II]

Harlock the Midnight claims to be a God of Darkness and Stealth. I would believe him if it weren't so easy for me to slip unnoticed through his domain as a shortcut between worlds.

Darkness is not stealth. Darkness, at its simplest, is an absence of light. It makes things hard to see. Conceptual darkness is an idea of something being hidden, an obfuscation against the senses. But this is where Harlock's childish notion of the unseen collapses. Because, prior to his transformation and false ascension, he had only lived as a man. And human senses are quite pitiful.

Do you know what it takes to mask yourself from a human? It's quite simple. You stand beyond their field of view and make no sound. A trifling feat. But for you to avoid the notice of a god in their realm? That is a struggle worthy of a Legend, and it is not something Harlock managed to achieve.

He boasts about wandering the Void as if it were a grand achievement, but his survival came at an extreme cost. He twisted himself into a thing of the dark to blend and camouflage himself. The first time I ventured into the Void, I was barely a man, and I found the hungering black to be sloppy, predictable, and ultimately blind. Because though it yearned to sup vitality from the living, it loathed the presence of light and flame, and I used that against the darkness. I created a grand wildfire and vanished into the flames, where the dark could not follow.

For what is stealth but the obfuscation of one's senses, hm?

No. Stealth is more than that. To be unseen means the mastery of another's ignorance. I did not need to submit to the dark and surrender the shape of my body. I simply bothered to learn the nature of the Void and how it interfaced with Integration.

Do you know how I managed to achieve Legendary-Tier Stealth? By successfully hiding from an Omniscient being. Or a so-called Omniscient being.

Uulthathed the All-Seeing was a far grander foe than the bestial Voidlings, and true to her word, she could see all within her realm, notice everything happening across that little stretch of reality she owned.

But though she could see everything, she was blind to herself. To her own thoughts. To her own mind.

And when you are evolved enough in terms of Stealth, you learn that there is nothing you can't use as a potential disguise. And this is a lesson that a god should have learned.

Power stolen is not power seized, Harlock. You know this. And someday, you will suffer for this.

-Valor Thann

Even as Shiv's Vitae tore free from his corpse, he could still feel the cold length of Anthony's dagger pressed up against the roof of his skull. Pulsations of pain radiated through the Deathless's senses, and he felt like he was going to drown beneath a tide of suffering. The wound that was inflicted on him was

more than material, more than even mental; it was metaphysical as well. His spirit had been gouged open, and as such, Shiv was in no condition to resist as the darkness collapsed around him.

Faintly, he heard Adam scream his name, but the Gate Lord's voice was muffled, as if Shiv was underwater. As tendrils of darkness burrowed into Shiv's red-white form, a sense of overwhelming doom consumed Shiv. Things were beyond hopeless. He knew that he was facing an Ascendant he had no true counter against, along with their Avatar. And with the wound he'd just sustained, fighting back meant little to nothing at all.

Should have just stayed in my cell, Shiv thought. The weary ache of depression soaked his mind, and soon he found himself utterly despondent. It was foolish of him to think he could escape from this prison. Everything he managed to do was a little less than a fluke. An undeserved set of possibilities engineered by the Path he was on. If he weren't the Deathless, he would be nothing at all.

Nothing. Not even a chef. He was a bastard born of murder and bloodshed; a wretch shaped from misery itself.

"It's alright," Anthony whispered through the darkness. The Legendary Avatar sighed as he guided Shiv deeper into the blackness. Compared to the lashing limbs of shadow wielded by the Ascendant, Harlock's Avatar was comparatively gentle. His tone was grandfatherly, and he even seemed slightly reluctant about this whole matter. But slightly reluctant didn't mean he was going to let Shiv go. "There's no shame in it. Come along. I can still feel you fighting. But there's no fight anymore, not after I pierced your soul. Your skills will be compromised soon, as will your memories. It won't feel so bad in a moment. Harlock will release you once the rewrite takes full effect. Just let it happen. Give yourself mercy."

The shadows around Shiv parted, breaking like shifting waves, and through a sudden gap, Shiv caught sight of the old man once more. He was dressed in a gray ensemble, looking like someone heading for a formal gala of some kind rather than the battlefield. He wore a wide-rimmed hat, and a dusty double-breasted coat swayed around his waist, but it was his silk shirt and slacks that drew Shiv's full attention.

Veins of mana circulated through the silken threads, and a faint hint of interwoven magic made itself known, pressing against Shiv's various mana fields.

In the man's right hand was a dagger bearing the shape of a porcelain needle. Beyond the brightness of its metal, there came a faint glow of soft blue. It was the color that Shiv had seen before. It was the color that was imprinted over what remained of the Recollector after its brutal defeat. The old man bore an Animancy blade, and Shiv had suffered a wound that was now rewriting the fabric of his very soul.

Inertial Overdrive [Error]

Aegis of Assimilation [Error]

Frictionless Vector [Error]

There was something wrong. Something was prying and twisting inside Shiv, battling against all his skills. Yet, even though it brushed through his body like a spreading infection, clawing and mangling his deeper architecture, it failed to twist him entirely. Instead, searing bursts of agony pulsated from random spaces within Shiv.

His skills were under assault, but even as the Animancy tried to reshape them, the skills resisted, and the skills remained, for Shiv was different from most Pathbearers. His vitality and his soul were fused together, and one couldn't reshape one without harming the other.

By now, a frown pulled at the old man's face. The wrinkles that defined his aged features grew ever more creased. He stopped pulling at Shiv for a moment and simply observed the Deathless. He held on to a branch of Vitae while dragging the rest of Shiv's sprawling mass across the ground.

The Deathless was practically catatonic with depression now. He thought little and felt only the overriding sensation of defeat. But where his mind had succumbed, his Vitae fought on, and that bade the aged Councilman to stop, to consider just what was going wrong with his dagger.

"Should have taken effect by now," Anthony muttered to himself. He looked down at his needle-thin blade, and then there came another flash of blue—a blueness that slashed through the shadows around him.

The Ascendant of Darkness let out a brief breath of discomfort as a raging azure dawn cleaved through this realm of absolute black. The azure sun vibrated with building power, hovering near the ceiling, and slowly drew closer to Anthony and Shiv. Beneath the defiant star born of Adam Arrow was another raging fire cast forth by a Pyromancer of unparalleled potency. Candles laughed like a madman as tumbling waves of scathing heat licked at the writhing shadows.

The Ascendant pushed back with his own considerable power, and two concepts went to war. Light against dark, despair against hope, flame against the coldness of oblivion.

"It seems you have some good friends," Anthony commented.

Shiv didn't reply. He was still wrapped tight in the grip of the Ascendant, but just then, he felt the old man let go. A resounding clash of steel on steel echoed through the air, and Anthony tumbled back, letting out a ragged cry of surprise. Blood spilled over Shiv then. Blood stroked free from the elderly Avatar's face and neck. Shiv caught sight of a flickering shape blinking from place to place, striking and flashing at Anthony as if a half-meter-tall whirlwind of unstoppable violence. The Avatar threw himself backward, diving into the embrace of his Ascendant. Curling fingers of darkness collapsed around Anthony just as the small shape tried to strike at him once more.

Finally, Shiv saw his savior for a brief moment as she kicked off the dense shadows guarding the Avatar. It was that Legendary goblin that accompanied Adam, Gone. Her quills vibrated with electric-like Chronomancy, and whips of shadow cleaved through her body over and over again, but they never struck her true form. Instead, they were always a second behind, always a second displaced.

Shiv saw Gone's skill for what it was. He, too, was a Chronomancer, and he realized that her Reflexes and Chronomancy were likely fused together based on how she moved. She wasn't in the present, not entirely. It seemed like as she moved faster, she simply cast herself further into the future. There was a displacement between her visible self and the Chronomancy field that outlined her silhouette. But more importantly, the Chronomancy field was filled with life force instead of her body still trapped in the present.

That made Shiv realize he was looking at something of a temporal afterimage, and with just how fast Gone moved, even without Chronomantic enhancement, it was little wonder why the dense jungle of darkness couldn't claim her as a victim. But it was only a matter of time before she made a mistake, before the darkness encircled her and drowned her. Even the fastest swimmer would grow tired, and there was no out-swimming the ocean itself. They were Legends, but Legends were no different from other insects when it came to the overwhelming might of a god.

Shiv's depressive thoughts were cleaved asunder as a beam of righteous essence slammed into his very being. The Deathless felt his Vitae strands twitch as the shadows coalescing around him were banished. Rage and disgust ignited within Shiv as he realized how much the Ascendant had distorted his thoughts, had twisted him into a pathetic creature so willing to surrender itself as a slave to the enemy.

Shiv wasted no time exacting his revenge. He drove a branch of Vitae into the shadows, but instead of contending against them using his shapeless tides, he left context once more, ignoring the fact that he was on the verge of running dry of vitality. For a moment, the darkness lost track of him. He could tell by the hesitation, how the shadows went still.

He knew the Ascendant had once been a human. Freezing, after all, was a very human habit when one was shocked, and Shiv ripped away the vitality hidden inside the darkness. He burst out into existence in a splash of red and white, and those colors only grew brighter as he absorbed more and more vitality, refueling himself in an instant. Gods were like bottomless oceans of life force, but Shiv had felt the same way about the Tarrasque as well.

Where Shiv couldn't drink an ocean alone, the world would gulp in his stead.

When he connected the god to Integration itself, he was sapped as well. He was hollowed of that precious resource which kept him in existence. Such was why the Ascendant flinched back, unveiling a massive patch of stable space amidst the coiling darkness.

As Shiv hatched free from his Vitae once more, he reached out with his strands and ripped the Orichalcum dagger he dropped upon being killed from the ground.

"Touch my mind again, motherfucker!" Shiv snarled at the retreating blackness. "Do it!"

But the Ascendant hesitated. The Ascendant stayed away. The Ascendant left a clearing for Shiv and a few Legendary prisoners to recover, unwilling to suffer another vitality drain.

The color flickered in the corner of Shiv's eye, and he saw the faint static of an opening dimensional rift come into existence beside him. Adam emerged, and soon there was a swell of near-unbearable heat. Candles followed the Gate Lord, chuckling all the while, muttering things about how pretty the flames were, how he yearned to see the dark itself come ablaze.

Shiv was pretty sure Candles was not all there mentally, but considering the enemy they were facing, Shiv didn't mind someone not being all there. One probably needed to be a little insane to face the Ascendants, and Shiv wasn't about to complain about the help right now.

"Shiv," Adam said, patting Shiv on the shoulder. "You alright?"

The Deathless briefly regarded Adam and gave a nod. "Yeah. Probably wouldn't have been if it wasn't for you. Felling shit, my skills..."

Leviathan of the Shapeless Tides [Error]

Pillar of Orichalcum [Error]

He still didn't feel all that good. It was like his insides were swirling. Just what kinds of enchantments does that knife have?

Just then, Shiv felt something leave his cape, and he saw Rebis and Bonk take their positions to his left.

"What fresh hell have you gotten us into this time, insult?" Bonk said with a wide, vicious grin. He stared at the curling shadows dancing before them.

The clearing they held was approximately twenty meters wide, barely any space at all, but from the receding black were several Legendary prisoners that had once been trapped. They rose with groans

from the ground and found their flagging spirits bolstered by the glow of Adam's Righteous Dawn. Among them were a few people Shiv recognized.

Kura scrambled to her feet, shaking her head. Three golden shadows stepped free from her body and formed a defensive perimeter against the dark. A loud groan sounded nearby, and Shiv looked down to see the blade-covered prisoner rising not far away from him. The Deathless leaned down to pick the man back up. As soon as he did, he felt a jolt of surprise flare through him as the blade-covered Pathbearer suddenly turned, swinging an arm out to claim Shiv's life.

Two blows were delivered in that instant. The first was the blade-covered Pathbearer. He thrust a gleaming sword toward Shiv's skull, attempting to impale him through the right eye. The second was Gone. The goblin proved her staggering speed once more, bringing her claws up to intercept the blow. But where her Reflexes were Legendary, her strength was lacking. She was knocked aside—flung backward past Shiv's peripheral vision.

But she'd slowed the strike enough for the Deathless to react. By the time he caught the blade coming to claim his life, Adam had loosed six Veilpiercers into the blade-covered prisoner's chest. Then, a golden length burst out from the back of the man's head. The blade-covered Pathbearer let out a rasping gasp as his body went rigid. His legs kicked and twitched, and with another swipe, his head came free.

Behind him stood a golden shadow. A few meters away, Shiv saw Kura looking at him, offering him a nod. The Deathless reciprocated, and he realized that she was relatively serious about this whole honor-debt thing.

Beat the shit out of the right person, you might make a good friend, Shiv thought to himself with a feeling of odd disbelief. He then looked down at the blade-covered Pathbearer and snarled. "Really, asshole? I was trying to help."

Just then, Gone appeared beside him. She prodded the unmoving body of the blade-covered Pathbearer and spat on his corpse. "Think this one saw his opportunity. Tried to take it. Tried to take it by playing possum." She looked Shiv up and down and shook her head. She was constantly vibrating from the sheer amount of speed rushing through her. "You don't go near anyone. No, you never go near anyone. Too much risk. Can't afford your death right now. We'll unbalance the fight right now."

Her words came in rapid bursts, and it took a while to decipher them. At the same time, Shiv noticed how the shadows were still held at bay.

That was when he noticed the shield wall comprised of golden shadows standing guard against encroaching blackness. Though the darkness lashed at them, the shadows of Kura appeared and dissipated, only to be replaced by another the moment after. Shiv guessed that the elven Chronomancer was constantly replacing her magical clones to avoid a buildup of depression.

As the fight reached a brief stalemate, Shiv looked at Adam and cast out his Psychomancy. The Gate Lord triggered his Commander's Foresight, and the two of them began to plot once more.

"Okay, so I managed to run into the Ascendant's Avatar."

"You did?" Adam asked. "Is that who killed you? I had no idea when you went down, just that you did."

"Yeah. Calls himself Anthony. Just walked right out of the black and stuck a knife up my chin." Shiv felt his vitality spasm. "Whatever he did jacked up some of my skills. Feels like I have a soul flu of some kind. Bastard has an Animancy dagger."

“He does?” Adam hummed with building disquiet. “Well, we know a few things now. First, this Ascendant isn't that good with Divination. Or at least, he has a hard time using it.”

“How can you tell?” Shiv asked.

“Because he can't seem to track you very well. I noticed how a few of the others were looking in your general direction back when we were fighting the Tarrasque. I felt their Divination mana as well. They were powerful. There's still some Divination mana coming from this Ascendant, but it seems reduced somehow, as if the dark doesn't conduct it well.”

Shiv thought about that for a moment and added his own observations. “Well, it hides the Ascendant's life force pretty good too, but it's there. You can't really see it, but I managed to drain some of its vitality.”

“I guess there are costs to hiding too well,” Adam commented. “All right, so our fires work, my azure sun works, your shapeless tides can hold the black at bay, and it despises your Vitality Drain, so we have means of repelling it, but we can't just hold them in place. There are probably other Avatars coming as well.”

“Barely handling this one, I don't want to think about how we'll do against two, or three, or twelve,” Shiv grumbled.

“Or twelve,” Adam agreed with a shudder.

“So we don't wait for them to come,” Shiv said. “Listen, I have a skill that's about to evolve.”

“Again,” Adam cried aloud. “Really?”

“Yes,” Shiv said, entirely serious. “It's my Outside Context Problem.”

Just then, a few of his other skills flickered. The error notifications appeared before his vision, and something assailed his memories. Things changed in his past, and then reverted to normal. He remembered losing to the elemental golem inside Passage, burning to death within the teleportation anchor.

His Physicality skill briefly winked out, and his Legendary-Tier Leviathan of the Shapeless Tides changed to something else. Something that was little more than a stream of nonsensical letters and errors. But the change wasn't just visual; it was quite literal as well. His strength left him for a moment, leaving him as weak as he was as a Pathless, but then he was fine again.

Yet, it wasn't just his Legendary-Tier skill that was affected; his other skills were also compromised. One after another, from his Reflexes to his Toughness to his Magical Skills, his vision was filled with error notifications.

A groan escaped Shiv, and Adam's mind filled with worry. “Shiv! Shiv, are you alright?”

“No, it's the godsdamn Animancy dagger,” Shiv groaned. “My skills are acting weird. It's not affecting my Outside Context Problem, though.”

Despite all the skills that had been compromised, Outside Context Problem was untouched. It was untouched, primarily, because Shiv was practically part of Shiv. It was unique. Shiv couldn't find it in himself, even when he rooted through his very soul using his Vitaemancy. And right now, in the heat of battle, he didn't have time to isolate whatever damage Anthony did to him.

However, he could evolve the skill, and he could take a gamble and see where that led them. It didn't seem like they had any better options anyway.

"Alright, so next steps are evolving the skill, and..." Shiv trailed off. "Well, that's all I got, Adam. I'm going to see what I can get if I evolve this skill. I'll be honest, the situation's looking kind of fucked. The dark's all around the entire cube, so we can't exactly break out and make a run for it. Five might be able to tap into some of the Dimensionality flowing through the entire prison, but we need to find the right mithril column, and it needs to have the right spells running through it. I don't think we're going to have that opportunity when the fighting gets started again."

"I have doubts as well," Adam said. "Wait, you said you have a means to contact Cripple."

Shiv's thoughts ran still. "Yeah, yeah, I do."

"Give it to me," Adam said. "I'll see if I can communicate with it. Let's see if it can offer us any aid. In the meantime, how are you going to level your skill quickly?"

"I was kind of hoping that you or one of the other Pathbearers could kill me," Shiv muttered. "Most of my other skills are out of whack right now. My pillar's on and off. I don't think we're going to get a better chance at putting me down than right now."

“Alright, best let me do it.” A shudder ran through Adam's being, and Shiv realized just how much killing him might bother Adam.

“Thanks, Adam. I'd prefer to be you than someone else anyway.”

“Don't mention it,” Adam said. “Fingers crossed that the Skill Evolution will be a new level of bullshit.”

Shiv chuckled. “Well, that's a first from you.”

“It's probably not going to be the last, either.”

As their conversation came to an end, Shiv called out to the others nearby. “Hey. Adam's going to kill me now. Don't get spooked.”

Candles nodded sagely. He offered Shiv a flaming grin shaped from pure-white flames—which disappeared as he tilted his head in confusion after a second. “Huh? What you say?”

Adam then fired a Veilpiercer through the back of Shiv's head as his Pillar of Orichalcum stopped working. Several of the other prisoners nearby flinched, and Shiv held out his branching Vitae before Kura. He cast a telepathic thought into her, calling out, stating that Adam was doing what Shiv asked, but the telepathy broke down halfway as Shiv's skill was compromised. Even so, Kura blinked as she looked between Shiv's corpse and Adam.

"It's alright," Adam said. "We're just testing something right now."

"You have an odd way of testing things," Five noted, looking down at the gore-ridden hole in Shiv's head.

Ten strands of Vitae stretched out and drank some vitality out of Bonk. The orc winced slightly at the Deathless's touch but just hummed to himself with amusement.

"You can take from me," Adam offered.

Shiv waved a hand in his face. Need you in top condition, Adam, Shiv thought to himself. The Gate Lord understood and pulled his hand back. As Shiv grew closer toward resurrection, a series of notifications appeared, and his skill went over the threshold.

Pillar of Orichalcum > [Error]

Outside Context Problem 100 > 101 (Skill Evolution Reached)

Skill Evolution: Outside Context Problem (Unique) > Non-Sequitur (Unique)

Chapter 183 (II) Dark [II]

Outside Context Problem began changing inside of him, and Shiv's vitality grew fainter and fainter. Yet, it didn't feel weaker. His life force didn't fade from his being. Rather, it simply felt like it was stretched, spread apart, and made more flexible. He couldn't fully describe it, but a metamorphosis was taking place at the core of his soul.

Shiv emerged from his Vitae once more, but rather than seeming like a dense fluid, it became as if a curtain of mist. He passed through a haze, and the Outside Context Problem Skill felt like it was turning into something sublime.

Shiv looked down at his hands as he felt an odd sensation pass through him. His fingers, bones, even his very blood vessels felt disconnected from his body, and as he waved his limbs around, trying to reorient himself, he saw something. He saw his vitality rip free from his flesh, saw that white and red matter that comprised his existence slip out from the confines of his material form.

More importantly, as it slipped free, it barely cost any vitality at all.

Adam blinked at Shiv.

A sounding crash echoed from all around, and Shiv noticed the darkness was slamming into the golden shadows over and over. Kura directed her temporal clones to strike back; their bladed limbs cleaved gaps into the darkness, displacing the black using waves of Chronomancy. At the same time, their shields unleashed pulses of counterforce that sent the darkness reeling back.

Even so, the struggle came at a cost. The elven Chronomancer began shaking, her legs were quivering, and Shiv could see how much strain she was under, trying to contend with the might of a god.

"Alright, skill," Shiv said, mostly to himself. "Please don't be shit."

He triggered his new skill for the first time and suddenly felt himself unlatch from his body entirely. It was a disturbing sensation, a bit like birthing his bones out from his parting skin. As he emerged, he looked behind. There, he still stood, his gaze vacant, his body frozen. Everyone else could still see him as well.

Worse, Shiv felt himself lose a fourth of his vitality doing all that. The damned skill was expensive to maintain.

So far, it seemed like a downgrade. He wasn't out of context. Everyone else knew where he was. And right now, he was simply a mass of Vitae that faintly resembled his humanoid form. He could move freely, yes, but even so, he didn't know why that was better. Maybe it reduced the vitality he spent, but all the advantages he had before were gone.

"Shiv," Adam said. He reached out and prodded the Deathless's left arm. But Shiv couldn't feel it. In fact, he couldn't feel anything at all.

"Hey, Adam, I'm over here," Shiv called out. Yet, even as he waved in the Gate Lord's face, Adam didn't look away from Shiv's material body. He couldn't notice his Vitae form. Neither could anyone else, for that matter.

And suddenly Shiv changed his mind. Maybe this wasn't a downgrade. Maybe his material body was something like a decoy. Still, no one could notice his Vitae form. What if they destroyed my material body? Shiv wondered. Would I just die?

But something told him otherwise. He consisted of Vitae. It would only kill him for good if all his Vitae were destroyed. And right now, it seemed like breaking his living body would do little more than cost him some already expended vitality.

Tentatively, Shiv moved away. He strode past Kura, who was also looking at the unmoving Shiv, past the golden shadows keeping the dark at bay, and once more walked into the black. Apprehension rose within Shiv as he reached out to grasp the lashing darkness. Yet, as soon as he touched the black, a rush of determination rushed through the Deathless. It wouldn't be like before. He would make the Ascendant pay for everything he suffered.

Shiv prepared to surface into existence once more. He expected something to happen, for his material body to snap into place where he currently was upon making contact with the darkness, or something along those lines. Instead, Shiv managed to touch the blackness and still remained submerged in his vitality regardless. His eyes widened. His breath caught. He gripped the darkness tighter, and the surrounding shadows were clenched so tight they went still.

"What is this?" the Ascendant's voice rumbled in confusion and worry.

Shiv pushed his luck further. He tore into the black, striding deeper as he circulated his tides through his body. Pushing through the shadows was a rough process, especially with most of his skills still compromised. Every few moments, his vectors would flicker out, and he would be caught as if a fly trapped in a web. But without any hint, it would return to its stable state, and Shiv would be Legendary-Tier again, allowing him to rip his way through the shadows, progressing like a machete hacking through dense foliage.

Alright, so I can interact with the darkness without surfacing for myself, Shiv thought. Useful. But what else can I do?

He swept his surroundings using his mana hydra, trying to find where the Avatar was. Luck was on Shiv's side, as he felt one of his hydras impact something hard, something impossibly dense. A loud gasp sounded from the shadows, and Shiv flung himself in that direction. He arrived a moment too late as he caught sight of Anthony's right leg sinking into the deeper darkness beyond. Shiv cleaved out with his Biomancy again, stretching his mana-hydra as far as it could go—but the Avatar was gone, without a hint of where he went.

Shiv didn't continue any deeper; he had already pushed his luck far enough as it was. But since he could use both his attuned and unattuned skills, there was something else he wanted to try.

Let's see if I can top myself off while being out of context. Shiv reached out and drew in the vitality empowering the Ascendant. That caused him to surface. A burst of white and red expanded from Shiv's body, but it rose free from his back like curling fingers of mist rather than spraying fragments.

He was a softer, subtler, and freer presence now compared to before. At the same time, his original body turned into a puff of vitality as well. Shiv guessed that was technically an upgrade. Part of him was still out of context, but part of him remained in.

But it wasn't a perfect upgrade, for there were times Shiv didn't want to be noticed at all. Like right now, as the darkness collapsed around him like the maw of a great beast.

Shiv used his Shapeless Tides to hold back a few slashing tentacles and triggered Non-Sequitur once more as he made his escape. The moment he did, the darkness overwhelmed his abandoned body, and it burst apart in a spray of vitality.

Suddenly, Shiv felt his life force drop precipitously. He was growing cold and at an alarming rate. And that's when he understood that the bodies he left behind weren't just for show. They were stability anchors for his vitality.

As soon as the body was destroyed, however, the surrounding darkness went still, as if it couldn't remember what it was doing. And Shiv couldn't help but laugh as he fled behind the golden shadows holding the clearing's perimeter. It was Outside Context Problem and then some.

As Shiv stumbled back into place beside Adam, he surfaced once more, and a sheen of white and red lifted free from his body. The world around him spun as a bout of lightheadedness took him, but Shiv managed to stop himself from falling over. "Okay, the skill is kind of bullshit, but I'm not sure how we're going to be able to use it to escape," Shiv managed to say. He was shivering from how cold his insides felt. He needed to drain from someone again, and soon.

Adam stared at him with eyes glowing violet and shook his head. "Took a while for me to figure out what you just did, but did you just unlatch your literal soul from your body and go on a jaunt?"

"Yeah," Shiv said. "Something like that."

"And after that, when your body gets destroyed, are you still moving around? I can't seem to remember who you are when your body is lost."

"Yeah, the body lets me do things without surfacing into reality. It's like a stabilizer or something."

Adam shook his head and let out a sigh. "It's confusing as hell when you get new skills."

"Yeah, it's pretty weird for me too, but something like that."

"Alright, good, good. I have an idea. It might be enough to repel the Ascendant for a while, but you might not like it."

"I don't know, Adam. You said repel the Ascendant. It's got to be pretty shitty of a plan for me to hate it."

"It's going to involve me hitting you with the Necromancy arrow."

Shiv should have seen this coming. "Yeah, okay. It's shit, but what did I expect? To hells with it. How are we doing this?"

"I want you to run back into the blackness again," Adam said. "But not too far. Maybe just a meter. As soon as you do, leave part of yourself exposed. The Ascendant will wrap his tendrils around you, so you might be able to blunt some of the blast."

"Should be?" Shiv asked.

"It's my best guess. If it goes sideways..." Adam winced. "It'll hurt, but I think most of us will survive. I'll just use a smidgen."

"Alright. How are you going to track me?" Adam's eyes flared with Divination mana. Shiv nodded. "Got it."

"Elf!" Adam hissed. Kura turned and narrowed her eyes at the Gate Lord. "When I draw my arrow, I need you to pull your Chronomantic clones back from the space ahead of us."

She stared at Adam as if he were insane, but Shiv gave her a nod. "Just do it." To the elven prisoner's credit, she simply swallowed and didn't complain any further.

"Candles! Gone! Get the others together and set up a perimeter of fire again. We need a final point of retreat if everything goes to hell. Which it probably will." Adam sighed. "Shiv, whenever you're ready."

"Yep." The Deathless coughed. "Just give me a second." He placed a hand upon the thin sheen of vitality infusing existence and began to refill himself as well. Slowly, a rupture opened above them, and Adam looked up nervously.

"Shiv..."

"I know. I'm not going to tear it open all the way. I just need a bit of energy right now."

"How about—"

"No," Shiv said, rejecting Adam's offer. "I need you as healthy and capable as you can be. Besides, the rupture might serve a purpose in a few moments. If everything does go to hell, and without any other options, I'm going to tear it wide open and let chaos do its thing." Adam stared at Shiv with a wide-eyed look of disbelief. "It's that or getting eaten by the depression shadows."

A deafening roar shook the air itself as a massive shape exploded out from the wall to their right. The golden shadows shielding a hole left in the shredded tunnel walls were knocked aside as the massive form of Urri barreled through them. However, Uri had changed. Darkness seeped out from his eyes, from his head tentacles, from every single pore of his body.

Gone and Rebis intercepted the massive Vulteg, but though they were fast, their blows bounced off Uri's body as if pebbles skipping off the hide of a charging bull. Darkness followed in Urri's wake, crashing down into the perimeter, just as Shiv prepared to go Non-Sequitur once more. The Deathless strode forth to stop Urri, but just then, his Inertial Overdrive and Shapeless Tides skills broke down. Shiv's Reflexes went back to Pathless levels, and his death came so fast he didn't notice what happened at all.

Inertial Overdrive > [Error]

Pillar of Orichalcum > [Error]

Non-Sequitur 101 > 103

When Shiv emerged as a mess of Vitae, he found Adam barely keeping out of Urri's reach, his azure dawn slowing the huge Vulteg as it sapped Urri's very strength.

"I'll rip you apart. Uri will deliver your skull as a gift for Lord Scorn. There is no escape from..." And then Urri's booming roar changed into the cold, droning tone of the Ascendant. "THE ASCENDANTS!"

A mess of shadowy tentacles exploded out from the Vulteg's massive eyeball and washed over Shiv.

Spearing bursts of despair filled the Deathless again, but he went Non-Sequitur, accepting the sudden loss of his vitality as he seized his only chance to fight on. As Shiv launched himself at the oncoming darkness, Adam twisted through the air, barely avoiding a huge fist. His vector wings were flaring brightly as he fired shot after shot into Urri's chest.

Adam had also transformed. His body went fluid once more, becoming as if a crashing set of tides shaped in the vagueness of a human form. Urri swung another blow at Adam, and though he came short once more, a lashing tendril of darkness swept through the Gate Lord's Hydrokinetic body, and that inflicted a wound.

Adam was cleaved out from the Hydromancy that shrouded him. The waters he once used to form a new titanic body were dissipated into a puff of steam.

Shiv called out to Adam, but no sound came. He was little more than Vite himself in that moment. Adam tumbled to the ground as more darkness slammed into him. As soon as it did, however, the Gate Lord's body flared and shot into the air with a loud cry. It was the shrill cry of some kind of bird. Shiv didn't think it was a hawk, though. It was too high-pitched for that.

And then he recognized the burning avian. He had seen it before, as he was tumbling toward the Rubix Well. That was a phoenix, albeit a small one, and it bounced off the darkness several times before it finally crashed against the ground once more. Adam rolled, trying to recover. The darkness chased him, and Uri reached out to squeeze his head.

Shiv intercepted the attackers, wrapping his Vitae around the darkness, around the Vulteg's outstretched hands. And then he drained. Vitality detonated within his shuddering soul. At the same time, a shape came into existence near where his physical form was discarded.

A humanoid shape that bore a faint blue dagger. Anthony stabbed Shiv's Vitaemancy anchor, but to his delight, the man's dagger did little to nothing. Stabbing Shiv's body was one thing, but trying to carve Vitae itself did nothing more than leave slight gaps in a large, amorphous blob.

Before Anthony could realize what was happening, Shiv resurrected, and he used a brief moment of stability and surprise to counterattack his foes.

Urri was a powerful Pathbearer. His body was immune to both magic and physical attacks. Shiv didn't have time to figure out how to kill him. However, when Urri was unprepared, he could still be overpowered. So Shiv did just that.

A rush of tides exploded out from Shiv's body, enhanced further by Adam's azure dawn. As the tides passed into Urri, Shiv flung the huge Vulteg at Anthony in a blur of motion. Adam fired arrow after arrow into the sailing Vulteg, and Anthony dove backward, vanishing into the darkness before the large Pathbearer could hit him.

However, Urri flexed out his arms and grasped the darkness. Instead of being launched through a wall, he held himself in place and began fighting in tandem with the Ascendant. But before he could turn and launch himself back at Shiv, a ten-meter-wide beam of fire crashed into him and blasted through the wall regardless. "BUUUURRNNN!" Candles roared, shaking with laughter as he drove the Legendary Vulteg back with his Pyromancy. "CALAMARI! BURRNNN!"

Chapter 183 (III) Dark [II]

A spear of darkness punched through Shiv's shoulder. A growl of pain escaped him. He went Non-Sequitur once more. As more tendrils ripped into his material form, Shiv began a guerrilla war as he rushed to assist the other prisoners.

First, he found Gone pinned against the ground by a layer of shadowy fingers. He reached down and pulled up. His tides went taut, sailing in toward the ceiling. The dark bands holding Gone in place were ripped asunder, and Shiv continued on as the goblin vanished before his eyes in an explosion of speed.

He went for Kura next. The elven Chronomancer had been their bulwark against the darkness, and if he bought her some room, maybe she could be once more. He tracked her via his ability to sense life force, and he saw her kicking and writhing as curled claws of darkness dragged her deeper into the black, trying to take her out of the fight.

Shiv went after her immediately—then felt something shatter his Vitae anchor as his vitality dropped. He no longer had the full effects of his skill, so he surfaced from being out of context before he lost too much of himself, blasting across the three or so meters left between him and Kura.

He tore at the shadows that were cocooned around her and shredded them with tides and vitality. Red and white mana burst out from his being as he sapped the Ascendant once more. Harlock let out a pained gasp as a rush of lifeforce pulsed through Shiv and into the veil wrapped around Integration. The branches of darkness burst apart, and Kurs was released. Shiv caught her by the midriff and tried to fling them both back, but again his Legendary-Tier Skill failed him.

"Godsdammit," Shiv cried out. He went Non-Sequitur once more, just before a needle-thin dagger was driven through his left eye, but Shiv was no longer in his body. He was dragging Kura along, fleeing toward Adam, toward several columns of fire that twisted and turned, pushing the darkness back.

But there came more cries around them. A heavy blast of gravity swept through the tunnel, and Shiv saw Adam get flung up against the ceiling. The Gate Lord slammed neck-first against a metallic surface, and his body bent in a way that made Shiv's insides plummet.

No! Shiv cried internally. But once more, Adam came ablaze and tore across the air as a phoenix. He pounded along the walls, leaving imprints of varying depth as he seemed to displace all the force that was inflicted upon him. When he emerged once more, he briefly clutched at his neck rather than collapsing in a partially paralyzed heap.

Shiv wasn't sure what kind of Toughness Skill Evolution Adam had, but he was glad he had it. Even so, that wasn't going to stop the onslaught coming for them.

From the darkness emerged prisoners. They had been contaminated like Urri was. They wept trails of blackness from their eyes, and they fought in tandem with the shadows that comprised the Ascendant. They unleashed powerful magics upon Shiv and the surviving prisoners, and suddenly, an already dire situation became near hopeless. A tidal wave of frost suddenly tore free from the dark and crashed against the whirlwind of flame channeled by Candles.

An elemental struggle took place, but the Pyromancer was driven back as billowing blasts of Dinamancy supported the existing ice magic. Just then, a pulse of Biomancy slipped free from the darkness as well. Moving almost akin to his own, it lashed out and impacted Shiv's mana hydra, and the Deathless cried out as he found himself the inferior Biomancer.

Even so, he retained one major advantage: he was unseen. He pushed his mana hydra into the other field and began trying to pin it down. It pushed hard against him, yet the way his unseen foe used their skill was ineffective. They couldn't notice where he was, and so it probably just felt like they were wrestling thin air from their perspective.

That didn't last as Shiv slammed into the shape and used his Shapeless Tides to tear it down the middle. A spray of shredded mana filled the air as Shiv gouged the mana field wide open with a shout of fury and channeled anger. He activated both his Song of the Vigilant and his Icon of the Paindrinker as he watched more shapes come into form in the dark.

A howling shriek came from the blackened depths, but Shiv ignored the Biomancer for now. With how much damage he'd just inflicted, they were likely out of commission.

He focused on the ice mage that was emerging. To his surprise, it was the automaton with the binaric crown among his group, and the numbers that comprised its headpiece were quivering with pale frost. Its chassis was cracked, and from the many rents lining its body came dollops of blackness.

Shiv muttered a faint note of apology as he slammed into the automaton prisoner as well. As he struck it, however, it vanished in a burst of noise. A loud siren filled the room, and the mechanical Pathbearer reappeared next to Shiv, barely harmed. However, its magic was halted, and so Candles struck back. A stream of all-consuming flames slammed into the automaton, and for the first time, it let out a cry.

It changed into waves of sound again and again, but sound couldn't fully escape the overwhelming and unnatural temperatures emitted by the Pyromancer. The binaric-crowned automaton emerged, its body gleaming white-hot, melting into slag. Coiling branches of shadow surrounded it, protecting it from further harm, but Shiv saw that the damage was already done.

He emerged once more as a phalanx of golden shadows pushed the darkness back, yet they only managed to create a five-meter-wide perimeter this time. The allied prisoners still on Shiv and Adam's side were far fewer than before as well. Some had been taken, some lay unmoving on the ground. The floor was slick with blood, and Shiv had no idea where Rebis had gone. That was going to be a problem for later.

"Adam," Shiv cried out, "I'm going for it."

"One second," Adam slurred as he tried to nock an arrow. He failed the first time and only managed to create an arrow the second after. Shiv caught sight of Adam's face and winced. The Gate Lord's head was half swollen. Whatever his Toughness skill did, it didn't seem to displace all the harm he suffered.

"Go!" Adam called out.

Shiv launched himself forward, ripping free from his body. He was in the blackness immediately and gripped a sprawling rush of shadows to hold himself in place. Shiv emerged from Non-Sequitur just as the tip of an arrow struck his left shoulder. At the same time, the cold touch of the Ascendant collapsed around him. Overwhelming hopelessness descended upon Shiv once more, but that was parted by a feeling of incomprehensible pain.

It had been a while since Shiv set his own soul on fire with a dose of Necromancy. And every single time Shiv suffered a corrosive wound, he remembered why he hated it so much. His body came ablaze. A reaction between his Vitae and Necromancy triggered. A blast expanded out from him, and suddenly the darkness that comprised the Ascendant became light itself. The Ascendant caught fire. The black was no more. And in that moment, with Adam's arrow and Shiv's Vitae, Harlock learned that even midnight could burn.

An uncharacteristic howl of misery escaped from Harlock, but unlike Daughter, he didn't retreat. Instead, he battered Shiv, slamming him against the wall and striking him over and over again with sharpened tendrils. But with the darkness of fire, Shiv felt Harlock weaken, felt his blows bounce off without doing anything more than scratch or bruise. Shiv caught a hooking claw that came for his throat and held it at bay. "Seems like you don't do so well out in the light, huh?"

Shiv tried to catch sight of Adam and the others, but as the coiling darkness moved around him, as it burned and shuddered before his very gaze, Shiv found himself drowned in a new environment, one that lashed at his very spirit. He could feel himself coming apart from the inside, and it hurt like hell.

Even so, Shiv held on to the darkness around him.

He didn't care that he burned, so long as the Ascendant burned with him. And just then, a flash returned to Shiv, a moment from his past, of just before it all started, the 100th lesser vampire he struggled against. And here he was, fighting something he had no business contending with, burning just to gain an advantage.

Shiv had changed more than a little, but the world didn't change that much.

Something flickered in the corner of Shiv's vision. By the time he turned, he found a knife coming for his eye once more. But then, it was knocked aside as a Veilpiercer burst into existence before Shiv. A clash sounded, as Anthony's sudden ambush was diverted by Adam's timely counterattack. Anthony vanished once more, but Shiv frowned as he realized the Avatar was utterly unburnt. And that made him wonder if the Ascendant took all the damage on Shiv's behalf.

Maybe Adam's theory is right.

The shadows began to pull away from Shiv, seeping through the walls and gliding along the tunnels. Only a patch was burning, but still, the damage was absolute. One couldn't suffer a wound to the soul and simply walk away.

"Shiv!" Adam cried out.

The Deathless looked to his left and saw the Gate Lord hovering in the air. His azure sun was flickering in the air, flickering over his head, and Adam looked as spent as Shiv was. The Deathless tried to fling himself at Adam, but his vectors burst apart as an error took hold of the skill again. He made it halfway through before he struck the ground, and a wild cry of misery escaped from Shiv.

His body was a mishmash of burns and horrid scars. His Voidmanted armor was barely clinging to his body once more. It was dead again and probably needed to regenerate, but even so, they had repelled an Ascendant and earned themselves a reprieve.

Shiv felt someone seize him by the wrist and drag him along the ground. It wasn't gentle, but it was fast. Even so, Shiv howled all the way as his many burns were pulled against the uneven metal floor. He was rolled over onto his chest as Adam briefly blasted him with the surge of Righteous Dawn.

Until the azure sun winked out over Adam, and he collapsed to his knees as well. The Gate Lord was shaking. Blood was pouring out from his eyes, ears, and nose. The swelling that characterized the left side of his head was even more severe by this point. Adam looked like he was half-balloon. Shiv couldn't help but laugh. "Nice... forehead."

"Shut up, you bastard." Adam chuckled. "I know I look ridiculous."

"And I know I look—" Shiv began.

"Like you should be dead," Adam finished. The Gate Lord wouldn't even look at him, and Shiv knew it was pretty bad.

"Alright, help me up," Shiv said.

Bonk stepped into view and reached down to pull Shiv back to his feet. He barely managed to stifle a scream as he looked at the remaining survivors. Kura stared at Shiv with wide eyes and a look of absolute disbelief. Gone flinched away from Shiv as he took his first step. "Okay, Ascendant's gone for

now, but I think he'll be back, and I think there's going to be others coming as well. We're gonna be pushing for the outside. Adam, you got another Necromancy arrow in you?"

The Gate Lord nodded. He held out a hand, and Shiv pulled him back to his feet as well. "You sure you can take another hit?" Adam asked.

"Going to have to," Shiv said. "It's all we got against the bastards. You were right, though. Detonating me inside the shadows contained the blast. If the darkness is still surrounding the cage, I think we can burn our way out. Come on."

And as Shiv took another step, he nearly fell over from exhaustion and disorientation. Many of his Skills were having problems again, and Shiv cycled between feeling like he could tear the world in half in a bout of anger to being as frail as a Pathless geriatric.

A clawed hand caught him, and his burn wounds flared with agony. Shiv gagged as nausea overwhelmed him, and he emptied the contents of his stomach all over the ground. However, they were moving. Shiv found himself being pulled along by Five and Adam at the same time. He briefly lost track of time as they passed through the tunnel, making their desperate escape. Shiv looked behind them and didn't notice any encroaching darkness whatsoever.

Maybe the Ascendant had retreated. Maybe, just maybe, they had a true moment of peace. But something inside Shiv refused to hope. It was never that easy.

And true to his thoughts, as soon as they slipped beyond the outer wall of this cube, they ground to a halt. His group collectively entered defensive postures. Shiv barely managed to lift his head. As he did, he found himself sighing.

"You managed to set Harlock on fire," a brown-haired woman standing a dozen meters before said with a breath of amusement. "That's a first. I told him that he should have let us help sooner. But you know how it is with gods. They forget they were ever vulnerable mortals in the first place, and have to relearn old lessons over and over again. Still. Burning darkness itself. That really is a first."

"Yeah," Shiv grunted. He pushed away from Five, from everyone trying to hold him up. "And that's probably going to be a regular occurrence if you don't get the fuck out of my way right now." He looked at the woman and the figures beside her, barely registering in his vision, trying to impart every bit of intimidation he could muster through a glare.

She stared back at him, and her lip curled. But it wasn't a fear; rather, it was a hint of wry amusement. Strangely, Shiv thought she looked familiar, somehow. He'd seen her earlier during his battle against the Tarrasque, but there was something about her face. "Quite a bit of your mother in you, too, isn't there, Tanner? Regardless. I'm Legend-Councilwoman Veronica Chandler, and—"

"And go fuck yourself. I don't give a godsdamn shit who you are," Shiv growled. "You teleported me into this place, and I'm getting out. Me and everyone else. One way or another. Adam. Arrow." The Gate Lord pulled back on his bow, and a corrosive glint lit the tip of his Veilpiercer. "You better leave now, Avatar. Leave, or we'll find out just how flammable you are compared to that Ascendant I just lit up."

Veronica studied Shiv for a moment, and then she gave him an unexpectedly feral grin of defiance. She opened her mouth, and from her lips came forth an inexorable command. "Well, show me how you burn, then, Deathless. Make it worth my words."

Chapter 184 (I) Rhetorical [I]

To my esteemed adversaries at Aviary:

I have recently come across a few of your agents. Please don't blame them for being discovered. These things happen sometimes, especially when you train your little birds a little too well. Hence, I think I would like to offer some constructive criticism.

Firstly, people have flaws. People don't have these neat and unproblematic personalities. The receptionist you sent to serve me in replacement of my last one was a little too cheerful, a little too bright, and the way she spoke belongs on the page of a novel rather than the messiness of daily life. Same thing goes for several other people you've decided to seed into said daily life. My gardener, housekeeper, and all people I've had to replace due to previous members of my staff leaving or passing from age? They're also too neat, too perfect. You made them to appeal to my personality, and that's what ultimately tipped me off. So, don't do that.

Secondly, why did you assume that I was the weak link between me and my grandmother? You really should just send younger men and women to feed her lust. Of course, you won't be getting them back after she sates her desires, and their fates will be unenviable to say the least. However, her lips will loosen, and you will learn things. If they're to your benefit, I can say my grandmother is a double-edged sword in many ways, for me and for you. Involve yourself with her at your peril.

Now, some suggestions. You should target some of the other Avatars instead of me. Maybe go find Anthony. The old man needs some fun in his life. Thank you for keeping me on my feet and refining my alertness, but please understand your position. I am not someone you can deceive. I am not someone you can blackmail. I am not someone who can be bent to the will of another.

Everything I do has been on the basis of manipulation and influence. We might not be of the same cloth. I'm no spy, I'll tell you that much. But politics is war by other means. And politics is war once you get past a certain level of power. Words have power. Power enough to kill the first person that reads this letter.

And, as a final warning, if you continue to annoy me, I will dictate a strongly worded letter, and when it hits your shores, New Albion will experience a mass casualty event that goes on for a decade.

Anyhow, thank you for your time, thank you for reading my letter, and please, if you're going to disobey me, at least send better agents. And by better, I mean flawed.

Legend Councilwoman Veronica Chandler

-A Letter from Legend-Avatar Veronica Chandler to Aviary

Veronica's command struck Shiv like an explosion. A literal explosion. It assailed him physically, mentally, and spiritually. From the very first syllable she spat, he felt something crash against his Shapeless Tides. It was like the sky was falling on him, like a massive hand was squeezing him tight. He tried to resist using his own Legendary Skill, but Veronica was powerful, and he felt himself gasp before her impossible might.

Then his Shapeless Tide malfunctioned once more as the poisonous Animancy curdled inside his being. His vectors vanished. Suddenly, Shiv had no means at all to resist the Legend-Avatar's power. He cried out in pain as a foreign force forced its way into his very bones. His ligaments tore, his muscles ripped; he launched himself forward, even though he didn't want to.

Another order was unleashed by Veronica, but Shiv felt it rip by him and strike someone else instead. "You! Fire at him!"

Adam cried out in alarm, but Shiv couldn't hear anything anymore. Instead, the only thing that echoed through his mind was the command Veronica spat. Over and over, her words became like a mantra until it was all he knew, and it wasn't simply resonating in his mind, but in his very soul as well.

Show me how you burn, then, Deathless. Make it worth my words.

Notifications flashed before him as he accelerated toward the Legendary Councilwoman. The other Avatars remained in place, simply regarding Shiv as a problem already resolved.

And then there was Veronica herself. She stared him down with a look of anticipation as he drew closer. A searing flare of pain consumed every part of him once more as a Necromancy arrow split his back open.

Another blast of soul fire burst free from Shiv's already mangled body, and darkness spread across his eyes. With his Icon of the Paindrinker still active, the misery he endured reached new heights. The Deathless was burned to the foundations of his soul, and he found himself yearning for unconsciousness. Yet unconsciousness never came. Veronica wouldn't allow it. Her voice thundered inside his soul, commanding him still, refusing to let him go.

At the same time, as the flames expanded out from him, as they came close to washing over the ascendants, Veronica spat another command, and Shiv's bloodshot eyes widened before her display of awesome power.

"Curve," Veronica simply said.

He caught the faint hint of shivering blue that emanated forth from her voice. It was the color of Animancy, followed by a distortion of Dynamancy. Shiv's mind was spiraling. The explosion of soulfire never came close to touching Veronica. Instead, it did as she bade, folding around her and the other Avatars, leaving them entirely untouched. The same could not be said for Adam and the other prisoners.

Nightmarish screams came from behind. Shiv smelled cooking flesh and caught sight of several badly burned bodies toppling over.

As Veronica's voice faded within the Deathless, he turned. He tried to go back for Adam, but Veronica whispered to him once more. "Break."

Her voice hit him like a falling hammer. Something struck his knee, but just then Shiv's Shapeless Tides came back, and instead of feeling his legs shatter, he found himself driven through the air by a blow of magical and material force. As Shiv tumbled, trying to get his bearings, he caught sight of Veronica's face once more, of how deeply she frowned.

"Well, how are you doing that?" she asked, a thin eyebrow raised. "Anthony said he stabbed you already. How are you still using your skills?"

Shiv's reply was a near-feral growl as more of Adam's screams reached his ears. This fucking bitch was keeping him from his friend. Shiv cast a quick look in the direction of his companions and found everyone beyond disfigured by his soulfire. Five was writhing; patches of fur had been replaced with long stretches of smoldering red flesh and shining alloy. Adam barely looked human at all. He was practically bald by this point, and his skin melted off his body. Gone was missing, as was Kura. Shiv hoped they had fled rather than being disintegrated, but he wasn't sure. Rebis had already been missing for a while; Shiv had no idea where he was at all. Bonk resembled a charred husk of meat rather than an orc. Even so, he gave pained wheezes that faintly sounded like laughs.

Shiv's mind whirled. A second ago, he thought there had been hope. He thought that he might just be able to escape. Now, everything had gone straight to hell, and even his most desperate strategy had failed before the Legendary Councilwoman. But without Harlock twisting his mind and spirit, Shiv reacted how he truly would when faced with a hopeless battle.

He went berserk.

Berserk 21 > 23333333[Error]

An animalistic roar escaped the Deathless as he felt his strength explode. He flung himself at Veronica, his vectors doubling in size and flaring with kinetic energy. Shiv lost all sense of coherence. He was no longer able to maintain Overflow Tides because he couldn't cycle them. But what he did have was amplified, and he intended to tear the Legendary Councilwoman limb from limb, even if it was the last thing he ever did.

"Miss," Veronica cried out. The statement struck Shiv in the chest like a bomb. He felt himself get driven back slightly, but it didn't stop him. He didn't obey. His hand swung in a wide haymaker, and the air around him crackled with booming force. A sonic burst expanded around Shiv, and Veronica's dark hair flapped around her face. However, her face remained unbruised.

"A bit sloppy," Veronica muttered. "Lots of wild anger too. Yeah. Definitely your mother's boy."

He wasn't nearly as fast as he needed to be without his Inertial Overdrive consistently active, and Veronica was never in his reach in the first place. With a splash of Dimensionality, she vanished and appeared right behind him.

"Stop."

Another order hit him, this time crashing into the center of his back. He felt a part of his lower spine fracture before the heavy blow, but he ignored it. He spiked his Shapeless Tides backward. His legs were wrenched out of their sockets. His skin was partially flayed free from his flesh. Without cultivating more Toughness, Shiv couldn't sustain these forces. Agony consumed him, but that only fed his anger, fueled his berserker rage.

He slammed a fist straight against Veronica's chest for the first time, and her Dimensionality pulsated as if the surface of a lake struck by a falling stone. The Councilwoman smirked and gave Shiv a look of appreciation. "Well, I guess Cripple wasn't lying earlier. Pain's not enough to put you down. Just feeds the beast inside you, does it?"

An incoherent howl left Shiv as he wrapped his hands around her head, staring straight into her dark-brown eyes. He squeezed, but her arms remained low by her sides. Her skin flashed red-gold, then incandescent. Veronica smirked, even as Shiv exerted more of his strength. His fingers were pressing against her skin, grinding against bone, but he inflicted no harm. Tide after tide slammed into her head, but they simply broke apart without inflicting any true damage.

It was then that Shiv heard a faint melody rising in the background, and over Veronica's shoulders appeared an ethereal form, both elegant and ghostly. A long, pale-white dress glided around the Songbringer's body as she shrouded her Avatar in an aegis of sound. Her entrance brought Shiv's rage to new heights, and as his Shapeless Tides slammed into Veronica once more, her head inched back slightly. The Councilwoman's expression flickered then. A faint look of concern passed through her features as Kathereine choked in surprise.

Before she could do anything else, however, his Berserk cut out, and his Shapeless Tides followed thereafter. Suddenly, he plunged from the air, clinging onto the hem of the Councilwoman's dark coat as he tried not to fall. Clumps of mutilated meat swayed from his body, and he tried not to focus on the absolute suffering he had to endure.

A slight breath escaped from Veronica. "I can see why Cripple had trouble with you now. But I'm going to need to train a lot of bad habits out of you. No need to worry about your fearlessness, though. You got plenty of that in you."

Shiv snarled. He kicked wildly, trying to climb back up to her face. She was around as tall as he was at baseline, but due to his monstrosity, Shiv was practically twice her size. Even so, his weight barely seemed to affect her, and with a casual flick of her foot, she managed to throw him through the air as if he were some kind of insect.

Shiv let out a surprised cry as he sailed through the opening in the cube that he and the other prisoners were trying to escape through earlier. As he crashed against the ground, a miserable scream escaped from his throat as every single burn on his body came ablaze in unison. Shiv didn't know how long he writhed on the ground or how he maintained his consciousness.

What brought him back to coherence was Adam. The Gate Lord was whimpering. Shiv followed the pitiful noises to the man himself and let out a gasp of horror as he caught sight of Adam. He was curled in on himself like a ball. Shiv could see countless burns and exposed sinews through patches of missing flesh lining the Gate Lord's body.

Shiv grunted. He tried crawling toward his friend, but his body wouldn't obey. Shiv was about as broken as Adam was, perhaps even more so. It wasn't a matter of pain tolerance anymore. His muscles simply wouldn't function. His bones were a map of drifting shrapnel inside a bag of leaking meat. So Shiv didn't use his body to move. Instead, he projected his Vitae. He extended strands of white and red and pressed them against Adam.

At his touch, Adam stilled and managed to lift his head ever so slightly. The Gate Lord's blue eyes were filled with such pain that Shiv looked away.

"We're ne-never doing this again," Adam whimpered, shuddering with every syllable he forced out. "Bloody hells, you didn't tell me it was going to be this bad. How did you even take this the first time?"

Despite everything, Shiv couldn't help but laugh. "It's not that bad," Shiv said. "You can get used to it... 'cause you'll end up blacking out eventually."

Adam clenched his teeth and tried to stop himself from shaking. Nearby, Shiv could hear Five begging for death as the Deathless sank his Vitae deeper into Adam's soul. He realized that the Gate Lord was charred here as well. He tried cycling Adam's injuries into himself, but then there came a declaration that forced him to stop.

"None of that."

Hearing Veronica's words was like experiencing a new natural law being erected in existence. One moment Shiv could do something, the next it was absolutely impossible, for every part of him fought himself. Something inside Shiv turned sour at the unfairness of it all. Despite every challenge he'd overcome, despite how hard he'd struggled, despite becoming Legendary, he was powerless. Powerless in the face of the Auroral Council, powerless to protect the ones he cared for. To be honest, his life felt like a shitty joke with no punchline right about now.

Adam blinked at Shiv and tried to communicate something through his many gasps of pain. As the Deathless attempted to project his Psychomancy toward him, Veronica called out again. "None of that, either."

Another natural law was driven down upon Shiv's soul like a spike: one that forbade him from using any magic at all. Physically crippled, spiritually compromised, and mentally shackled, Shiv's mind whirled for anything, anything he could do at all. And just then, he managed to activate Non-Sequitur once more, but it was a futile action.

As he snapped free from his body, he found his Vitae as wounded as his flesh, and he only managed to writhe across the ground, flinching in pain with every centimeter he moved. Even parted from his body, he could still feel Veronica's words nested in a place deeper than his bones. He couldn't reach out to Adam using his Psychomancy. He couldn't try to fix him using his Vitae, and he couldn't escape, not in his current state. Shiv had no options at all. All he had now was a temporary distraction he couldn't exploit.

Veronica slipped past the threshold of the cube. Plates of metal were bent along the edges, and they vanished behind a veil of static darkness as the Councilwoman came to claim her prize. She walked toward Shiv, and her shroud of protective Dimensionality billowed as if it was a grand dress. "It was a good try at an escape," she said, "but this outcome was inevitable once I returned." She wrinkled her nose and glared at the other Avatars behind her.

Shiv's eyes were blurry from the pain, but he could see Stormhalt hovering in the crawlspace, black lightning spilling free from him. There was also another one of Daughter's avatars, a few he couldn't recognize, and finally, a large rectangular automaton that might've been Cripple's.

Shiv's mind ground to a halt. Cripple! Fucking help me, godsdammit! Do something! Anything! It took a lot to make Shiv desperate enough to beg for aid, but he was well past that point. There was nothing he had left. Nothing he could do to stop Veronica from taking him and everyone else as prisoners once more.

The woman in question cocked her head and looked down at Shiv. Unbeknownst to her, his true self wasn't nested in his body anymore. Instead, he was a few centimeters away, pressed up against Adam.

"You have a Master-Tier Psychology skill, don't you?" When Shiv didn't say anything, she kept going. "I can tell. That was the thing I had to struggle against the most, aside from your Magical Resistance. But even without Kathereine, I fear this wasn't an even engagement. My main Legendary Skill is

multifaceted, even more so than yours. Leviathan of the Shapeless Tides is a three-skill fusion, according to my knowledge. Mine is made up of six. And it's not nearly the only Legendary Skill I have."

Part of Shiv was tempted to tell the Legend to go fuck herself one final time, but through a maelstrom of pain, a thought occurred to him. There was one skill that could still help him, but there was no guarantee it wouldn't be compromised soon due to the Animancy affecting his soul. Preparing for his vitality to drop dangerously low, Shiv reached inward and began constructing a golem. But it wasn't just any golem.

Animated Skill Infusion: Shadows of Futures Coming

Chapter 184 (II) Rhetorical [I]

He'd taken an Animated Skill Infusion from Kura earlier, and he recalled how her skill worked. Her temporal clones could be directed in battle, and she could seemingly spawn a near countless number of them. More importantly, she could swap her positions with one of them, and where Shiv was compromised, his golem might not be. Even so, it took a substantial amount of vitality to create, and with him already down a fourth due to his use of Non-Sequitur, he needed to be very strategic.

There's no fighting the Ascendants and Avatars, Shiv thought to himself. He decided against giving the golem any skills beyond Shapeless Tides and the Animated Skill Infusion. After that, he whispered a command to the golem, one he could barely recall himself afterward due to an overwhelming surge of pain that passed through his body.

That done, the golem flared with Chronomancy mana, and it parted into two, then three, then four, and then many, many more. The sudden appearance of the golem caught Veronica off guard. Behind her, the other Avatars were watching as if an audience to a play. They also responded to the manifestation of the golems, but most of them acted too late to stop their first action.

Shiv flinched as one of the golems smashed through his material body. He couldn't remember if he told it to do that, and he grimaced as a puff of red-white mist filled the air.

Veronica was about to say something, but a lull of confusion came over her as Shiv's Vitae Anchor was destroyed. Shiv's state reverted to that of being outside context. Veronica forgot who she was fighting. And that was the opening Shiv was looking for.

At once, he pulled his cape off and threw it over one of the golem's necks. He flung himself inside the cape right after, and as he landed on the ground of the alloy forest contained within, Shiv arced his back and let out an agonized howl. He returned to context in the same instant, unable to sustain the vitality bleed any longer. His howl reached a new octave as Adam was launched inward, slamming against his body and sending them both tumbling into an iron tree. With that collision, Shiv remembered the commands he gave his golems. They were to gather all his present companions and throw them inside his cape. Once that was done, they were to flee as far and fast as they could, dividing over and over again to stay ahead of Veronica.

Hammering bursts of Chronomancy washed over Shiv. Every impact made him cry out while Adam moaned nearby, both of them all but incapacitated. Soon, Five and Bonk joined in, but the orc ended up making a gagging noise as if he was choking on his own tongue, and the wolf-man was basically catatonic.

"Hurts... Hurts... Bad..." another voice rasped. Candles was somewhere beyond Shiv's sight, and the Pyromancer let out gasping hisses of misery.

And then a loud voice bellowed in Shiv's mind. It was too much for the Deathless to bear at first, but as he managed to fight through his debilitating suffering, he realized he'd clutched the core that Cripple gave him earlier.

"Shiv? Shiv, are you still there?" the Ascendant called out.

Shiv coughed, sending blood splattering over the cold, metal dirt. "Barely," he managed. He regretted speaking immediately thereafter, as an intense sensation of burning torment flowed through his very veins.

Before anything else could be exchanged between Shiv and the Ascendant, something burst through the dimensional portal leading into the forest of alloy. Gone appeared, and she dragged a legless Kura behind her. Rebis remained absent. Seeping shadows flickered in their protective dimension, and Shiv felt his heart plunge as he realized Harlock was back once more.

His heart promptly fell through the floorboards when he also remembered the fact that he didn't give his golems any Vitality Drain. They wouldn't be able to sustain themselves for long.

There came another burst of golden mana, and suddenly the darkness dissipated. His golem had temporally shifted once more, swapping places with one of its golden shadows. To where? Shiv didn't know. He was on the inside, but he knew this was unsustainable.

But Kura was back...

He projected a few strands of Vitae toward the wounded elf and seeped into her body once more. He needed another Skill Infusion. And he needed her to carry on when his golems were used up. He stole her wounds with his Aegis, and her legs suddenly returned into existence. Gone, who was trying to apply a tourniquet to Kura's right leg, blinked in surprise as she looked toward Shiv.

Aegis of Assimilation > [Error]

"Shiv, listen to me," Cripple continued. "I know you are badly wounded right now, but you must keep moving. The other Ascendants will be upon you soon. You're not supposed to be in this place. In fact, no one in this prison is supposed to know of the fusion reactor's existence, but that can be used to our advantage. Do you know where the cube's nuclear reactor core is?"

"What?" Shiv cried out. "No, not even a little. The hell is a nuclear reactor core?"

"I think I do," Adam croaked out beside Shiv. The Deathless blinked. He looked at Adam and did a double-take as he found the Gate Lord kneeling. He was on his hands and knees, and a faintness of flickering blue popped and flickered just above his burn-scarred head.

"Adam, no, just stay down, you're—"

"Oh, shut up," Adam wheezed. "If I'm going to die, I'm going to die standing."

And with that declaration, his Righteous Dawn flared to life once more. It wasn't nearly as bright as it was before, but it still packed that righteous glow, that soul-mending balm. Adam's radiance infused Shiv with just enough strength that his shaking stilled. And it wasn't just Shiv who received Adam's aid. Shiv saw Bonk getting up in the corner of his vision, rising from a web of silvery veins that grew along the ground, akin to vines. Five was still crying out with pleas for someone to end his misery, but it sounded like he had more breath in his lungs now as well.

"I know where the reactor core is," Adam growled. "I met the Owl there. But why? Why are we heading in that direction? Harlock and Daughter attacked me there. He assumed Shiv's guise and tore through the Ravens to get at me."

"Because if you increase the core's activity to its maximum level, it will suppress all magic in the area, ambient or not, and that might just give you a chance to escape," Cripple summarized.

Another wave of Chronomancy slammed into Shiv. The Deathless nearly doubled over just as he began forcing himself back on his feet. Adam helped him stay upright, but both of them cried out in pain as their burn wounds collided.

"Yeah," Shiv said, "if I'm going to fall over, just let me fall."

"Sorry," Adam coughed out hoarsely.

"And so? And so?" Bonk called out. Shiv looked at the orc and winced as he realized that Bonk's eyes were melted shut. "Might not be able to see very good right now, but did I happen to hear a plan in motion? Is there something I could hit?"

"I think we're going to find out in a couple of seconds," Adam said before calling out to the only healthy members of their group—relatively healthy, anyway. "Chronomancer!"

"Give me a felling moment," Kura groaned in reply.

"No, there's no moment!" Adam said. "We're going to need to rely on you. You too, Gone. Most of us are in no condition to fight."

"Do I look like I'm in any condition to move?" the elf called back sarcastically. She wiggled her toes. "I just got these back."

"More than us," Adam snarled. "Shiv is going to run out of vitality soon..." His words slurred, and he began blinking rapidly. Shiv snapped his fingers in front of Adam's face, and the Gate Lord managed to stop himself from passing out. "Ah, wait! His golems are going to run out of vitality soon. The Chronomancy is going to run out. It's not going to be able to last. We're going to move this cape onto one of your shadows. We need to... You need to start making clones right now. We need to make the transition fast."

"Got it," the goblin said. "I'll make sure you all get across." Her words left her lips like crossbow bolts, and in a burst of speed, she vanished.

"Alright," Adam called aloud. He waved a hand as he slumped toward the exit. "Everyone out! Prepare to transition! Shiv, get the wolf up! He can whimper later!"

The Deathless grumbled as he followed Adam's orders. He reached down and plucked Five off the ground. The burned wolf-man let out a shriek, and Shiv empathized with his pain. "Alright," he slurred, "you're gonna be fine, I think. I hope."

"I don't feel very fine," Five moaned, barely managing to retain his dignity. Sparking wires and pieces of complex machinery stuck out from the cyborg's open wounds, and Shiv doubted he could heal the wolf-man, even if his wounds weren't soul-deep.

Something drifted past Shiv. He caught sight of a golden shadow passing through the dimensional portal, then another, then another, and soon a small army of golden shadows slipped out ahead of Adam. Just then, he felt something flutter by. Before he could react, something slammed into him, dragged him out into the open, out into the humid tunnels once more. The world blurred around Shiv as he let out a pained growl. In the next moment, he found himself tumbling, and he landed on the ground, only to discover he was back within the forest of alloy.

Gone leaned over him. There was a deep gash running along the left side of her chin. A droplet of blood splashed against Shiv's nose. She held something up for him to see, and Shiv blinked as he realized he was looking at a severed arm. Shiv looked down at where his right forearm should be and found it missing. Blood spurted out from his stump, and his bone flickered between a red-gold hue and the plain white of a Pathless's skeleton.

"Sorry," Gone said, apologizing tersely. "Managed to rip this off while pulling you through. Your Toughness suddenly got really bad."

"Yeah, that happens... That happens," Shiv repeated. "I got stabbed with an Animancy dagger. It's not your fault." He pushed himself up. Again, to his surprise, he couldn't really even feel the dismemberment. No, the main source of pain concerning him was still the burns. Blood gushed out from his many wounds where they weren't sealed shut, but as he swiped his Aegis through himself, he managed to replace his missing arm at least. "Alright, what now?"

He looked to his left and found Kura strapped to Adam's back. Ripples of Chronomancy radiated free from her body, and a look of concentration left deep furrows on her brow. Her legs were missing again; a series of tightly tied cords choked the blood to her stumps.

"The hells keeps tearing your legs off?" Shiv asked.

"Daughter," Kura snarled. "And when this is done, my debt to you is paid proper. You have no idea how many times I preserved your life at the cost of my flesh."

"If we get out of this, I'll even godsdamn cook for you as thanks," Shiv muttered.

The elf stared at him. "Is that a jest?"

"No. I'm a good cook. I would be a great one if the System would stop trying to fucking kill me and gave me a second to rest!"

Adam's eyes were glowing, and Shiv realized he was using his Seer of Horizons to navigate. Time and time again, Chronomantic wavelengths crashed into Shiv. Every transition made him bite back a scream of pain, but they were moving. They were fleeing somewhere.

"Keep going, follow the tunnel, just keep following the tunnel!" Adam let out a miserable groan as he readied a Veilpiercer. Shiv wondered if he had the strength to release the arrow, and his answer came as Adam nearly folded over the moment he tried to draw his bow back.

Shaking his head, Shiv staggered over to his friend and gripped the string as well. "We'll do this together," Shiv breathed. "Come on, Gate Lord. Bend that little stick arm of yours."

"Eat shit, you oversized ape." Adam gritted his teeth. Still, he gave Shiv a thankful look, and they both pulled. Thanks to Shiv's Shapeless Tides suddenly working again, they managed to draw the bow back, and Adam released it. As soon as he did, a piece of his finger went missing. Even so, a gap was sheared open before them.

A dimensional pathway was revealed, and through that pathway, they saw the exact tunnel they'd been in earlier once more. A small army of golden shadows was racing down the curving path. There was no more steam in the air, and as they sped ahead, a wave of crawling darkness chased after them.

"Candles!" Adam cried out. "Candles, get in front of the pathway! Now!"

Shiv blinked. He'd barely noticed the Pyromancer earlier. As he swung his head around, he found Candles being propped up by Bonk like he was some kind of weapon, and that was ultimately necessary, considering Candles no longer had any limbs. For the first time, Shiv heard the Pyromancer complain about something.

"Too much fire, too much..." Candle shook his head, his flames dimmer than ever. For the first time, Shiv thought he could see something akin to human flesh surrounding his bones, but it was translucent and appeared to be shaped of fire, so he wasn't sure if it was merely a trick of the light. "I don't wanna burn anymore. It hurts too bad..."

"You have to!" Adam shrieked. "If you don't, we're all gonna get taken by the Ascendants! They're gonna put us back in those cells forever! Do you want to spend years in the cells again, Candles?"

Candles let out a sob, and with that, brilliant flames erupted from his searing halo, spilling free from his being and pouring forth through the dimensional pathway as a jetstream of indescribable heat. Before the Ascendant of Midnight could reach in and compromise Shiv's final sanctuary, his grasping hand was scoured from the world by a torrent of Legendary Pyromancy. Candles channeled his over-strained mana field with an agonized cry, and Bonk joined him in his screams soon after, as his hands started melting.

"Yeah!" Adam screamed. "Keep going!" Suddenly, he looked over his shoulder, and the elf fastened to his back flinched in surprise. "Go right! Go right here! Go through the door!"

There came a loud sound outside. It was the noise of a blade carving through dense meters of alloy. Another Chronomantic burst hit Shiv, and this time, he collapsed. An inky darkness crawled over his vision, and the pain he felt faded to prickles of static. He didn't know if he was unconscious for one second or ten years, but by the time he returned, he found himself barely on his feet, getting violently dragged every step of the way.

"Come ON!" Adam cried in naked panic. Behind, the sound of clashing metal and buckling walls made Shiv push forward. A small army of golden shadows was left in place to hold the doorway, preventing the darkness from pushing through. He realized he was moving along a circular walkway right now, and at the center of the oppressive room was a massive, rapidly spinning pillar. It roared with energy, and an uncomfortable prickling sensation danced across Shiv's many burns.

"Where the hells are we?" Shiv asked, his gaze fixed on the spinning rod.

"Reactor core," Adam replied quickly. The Gate Lord held Cripple's core high and called out, "Cripple! We're here! What do we do now? Cripple? CRIPPLE!" But the Ascendant didn't reply. "Godsdamn it! Alright, we need... We need..." He paused, and his eyes snapped to Shiv. "You said Five is a member of Aviary?"

Shiv nodded.

"Bonk, pass me the wolf-man!" Adam called.

"Here you go, Gate Lord!" Bonk cried aloud. Shiv turned just in time to see Bonk literally chuck Five into the air. Of course, he also chucked him in the wrong direction. Bonk's blindness and the near-deafening noise produced by the spinning pillar had caused him to throw the wolf-man against a nearby wall instead. Five gave a pained squeak as he tumbled down, and in the next moment, he was plucked out of the air and slammed down next to Adam by a suddenly appearing Gone. The goblin's face was a mess of cuts and bruises by this point, while her prisoner attire was shredded. She was also missing a few fingers, and half the quills on her back had been shorn off at an angle by a singular cut.

"Hurry, hurry, hurry, hurry, hurry," she repeated over and over again, her head snapping back between Shiv, Adam, and the entrance the small army of golden shadows was trying to hold.

"Yes, hurry!" Kura groaned with building strain. Shiv could feel the sheer amount of Chronomancy pouring out from her body. There was so much mana that it put the Recollector to shame ten times over, but even that wasn't going to be enough to stall the Avatars and their Ascendants for long.

"Five! Five, get up! Look, look at me!" Adam reached and shook the wolf-man, but Five tried to push the Gate Lord away, moaning in pain. His ability to endure pain seemed near non-existent compared to Shiv's and even Adam's.

"Ah! Stop! It hurts! It hurts too much!"

"It's going to be worse if you don't help me! You're going back in the cage! Do you want to?"

At the mention of the cage, Five managed to crack open one of his eyes, and Shiv saw the wolf-man's pupil dilate. "Agh. Okay, okay. It doesn't hurt that much."

"Good! You're an Aviary agent, right?"

Five hesitated. "I told him that," Shiv called out.

"Technically, I'm burned—" Five began.

"I don't care what your officially listed status is! Do you know how to do anything with that?" Adam pointed toward the large rod spinning at the center of the room, and Five's eyes widened.

"Is that... Is that some kind of nuclear reactor?"

"You tell me," Adam snapped. "I have no idea about ancient technology. The Owl introduced this thing to me, and he said that it gave me radiation."

"Radiation?" Shiv muttered, unfamiliar with the term. "What do you mean, radiation?"

"This place, it's filled with radiation! We are all getting irradiated as we speak!"

"Then why the fuck did you bring us here?!" Kura nearly screeched.

"Because the Ascendant told me to come here!"

"What Ascendant?!" Kura's eyes went wide. "Why are we listening to some Ascendant?!"

"I am trying to help you!" Cripple's voice suddenly echoed through the room like a crashing wave of thunder, originating from the automaton core in Adam's hand. "Shiv! Adam! You're in place. Good. You need to find the mainframe within the reactor core and set everything to maximum capacity. That will create a mana-suppressing effect and give you an opening to escape."

"And where might this mainframe be?" Adam asked, his patience wearing thin.

"I think... I think I know." Five suddenly stood up. His head snapped toward the ceiling, and Shiv looked upward for the first time as well. He saw additional rings, additional ringed walkways extending above, and a few shredded Ravens hung over the edges. Their tattered remains dripped with viscera, and Shiv shuddered at the state of their bodies. Harlock and Daughter had absolutely ripped them apart.

The poor bastards didn't have a chance at all, Shiv thought to himself.

"I need to go up," Five said. "Can someone—" and then he vanished in a golden blur. At the same moment, Shiv saw Five appear a level above him. The wolf-man cried out in surprise and pain, but then Shiv heard Five follow up with, "No! It's still higher! As high as you can go!"

"Shiv!" Cripple continued. "I am moving a specialized cube nearby. I cannot get it in place to be directly adjacent with the reactor; however, it shouldn't be far away. If you can manage to open a gap through one of the nearby walls and enter the space between, I should be able to guide you to the cube. With

the reactor active, it should make it difficult for the Ascendants to track you as well, but only if you move fast."

Shiv didn't even bother replying. Instead, he sprinted along the walkway, ignoring the bursts of pain passing through his body. As he came to a halt in front of the aluminum wall, he pressed his hands against it and willed his Shapeless Tides to come back. It took around three seconds for his skill to fully reactivate, and by then, Kura was on the verge of breaking.

"I can't hold them back! I can't hold them back much longer! Hurry! Hurry!"

Shiv drove his first tides into the wall, and he began to pry in two directions. The metal peeled—but then Shiv's skill cut out once more. "FUCK!"

Still, it was enough to make an opening in the wall, and—

"You know, Cripple really isn't very good at the whole being subtle and slick thing." Through the gap Shiv had made, Veronica stared flatly at him. "You got a pretty interesting Unique Skill, though. You and the Young Lord both. How about you both surrender and submit yourselves to me and put this misery to an end?"

Chapter 185 (I) Rhetorical [II]

It is a mistake to think that social skills belong to an entirely separate category from their martial counterparts. Everything is interconnected. All skills build on each other. All skills influence how you use other skills, for they are as if silos within our souls. The experiences you have and the triumphs you will reap are enabled just as much by the breadth of your capabilities as by their depth. And more importantly, as you use skills in tandem, they merge. So, eventually, the barriers between the social and the martial will collapse altogether.

But even before that, words are capable of violence. People like to deny this because they do not wish to face the weakness in their own hearts.

How many times have you flinched at an insult someone has offered you? And how many times has that insult echoed a certain voice in your mind?

Words are more than weapons. Words are poison. Poison that afflicts your thoughts. Poison that can reshape the world.

Words are viruses. We deny this, but our kingdom is shaped by words, by text, by understanding. The wrong understanding, a toxic understanding, is a venom that becomes a cancer, and a cancer that will bring down a culture.

And this is why Rhetoric and Psychology are non-negotiable skills. You have to understand them. You have to be able to wield them because you are not apart from your culture. We ascend alone, but we live among others, and among others is where we will experience transformations. Not all skills are equal, and not all outcomes are pure. Recognize a skill for what it is: a means of influence, as is violence, as is force, as is magic, to change something, no matter what the method.

Words are violence, words are violence, words are violence.

Say it to yourself until it becomes as true as stone.

-Words as Weapons: Where the Social Intersects with the Martial

Veronica's command slammed into Shiv's chest and broke a few ribs before his Shapeless Tides flickered back to life and pushed back. Adam wasn't so fortunate. With a short cry, he was driven to his knees, and he gave a keening wail as his spirit broke before the Legend-Avatar's command.

"I surrender, I surrender!" Adam howled through unwilling teeth. "Ah, you godsdamn—release me!"

Shiv didn't have a chance to help his friend, however. Instead, he found himself overwhelmed by Veronica. She spat order after order at him, her words exploding against his body like a chain of mana bombs. The physical aspect of her words was converted into Overflow Tides, but the spiritual wound Anthony inflicted on him earlier came into effect once more. His Shapeless Tides collapsed, and Veronica's words invaded his being. Gone and Kura struck. A blurring shape tore at Veronica's face, while dozens of golden shadows stabbed at the Legend from all angles.

Veronica scoffed quietly. "Miss."

And the attacks did—every single one.

"Cut yourselves."

Gone managed to stop herself from tearing through her throat, but the Magical Resistance lining her body came afire with strain. Kura's mana defenses shattered as a blast of Animancy cracked through to her soul. She let out a shrill scream as a time clone burst into being beside her and lopped off her left hand as well.

Shiv tried to get up, but a beam of light tunneled a searing wound through his abdomen. At once, every moment of shame and failure he experienced rushed through him, and by the time the brightness scythed away from his body to torment Candles and the others, he found himself gasping and shivering on his knees.

Once more, that feeling of absolute hopelessness overtook the Deathless. He tried clenching his fist, but a greater power than his own overcame him.

“Lay down, boy.”

His hands went slack, his muscles went limp, and he nearly crashed down on the ground.

Then something impacted Veronica at blistering speeds again. Gone bounced off the Councilwoman's chest like a cannonball sliding off a ship's hull, and her golden quills were pulsating with such power that Shiv felt his Chronomancy field come apart from the sheer temporal friction she emitted. Veronica flinched back, her Reflexes outmatched for once. But her flesh flashed red, gold, and silver—then she properly teleported right behind Shiv.

Shiv's Shapeless Tides returned. A circulation of new tides drove out the mana roiling inside his soul. He exploded back to his feet, drove his elbow backward, and discharged his inertial sheath. Veronica teleported through the blast and tried to whisper something to Shiv. Her words never made it out. Bonk swung something against her Dimensional veil. Rather than trying to strike her directly, he phased into her, and the Legend-Avatar snarled in annoyance as she teleported once more.

Gone blinked beside Shiv, and she immediately snatched him back. The next thing he knew, their group had retreated from the opening he was making, falling back along the curving walkway that surrounded the chamber. They were halfway across when Veronica offered them a brief nod. “Alright. I'll let you have this moment. Go down swinging if you want. We can talk afterward.”

Shiv looked around and reached out to touch Adam. He sent his vectors slicing across the Gate Lord's body and grunted with strain as he tried to pry Veronica's influence free. Just as her Rhetorical Commands were shattered with Adam, she waved her hand once more. A portion of the wall behind her vanished into spreading patches of static blackness. If the situation didn't seem hopeless enough, they had just crossed a point of absolute despair. A small army of wardens emerged, each of them heavily armed and well-prepared to assist the Avatars.

Shiv counted twenty at first, then fifty, and then three times that. They flooded out from the static in ordered squads. Vanguard at the front, and behind them were wedges of Poly-Magi, shaping an interwoven mix of spells. They pressed Shiv and the others further back along the walkway, but the Deathless and Adam battered them with mana-hydras and arrows, respectively.

Shields were lifted. Then the wardens took on defensive postures as Kura's golden shadows burst into being around them as well.

"I can't do this much more," Kura groaned. Her head sagged forward. Blood gushed from her eyes, ears, and mouth. It took a lot to strain a Legend. Holding an Ascendant of Midnight and also a small army of Heroic wardens back at the same time was more than a lot.

The other Avatars entered the fray just then as well. The old man that had stabbed Shiv earlier—Anthony, Avatar to Harlock the Midnight—manifested just beside Veronica. He tipped his hat at Shiv as if saluting him after a proud bout of sparring. Then came a young man, no older than Shiv, clad in brilliant plate that was nearly blinding to behold. He had been the one to fire that beam of light into Shiv that forced him to relive all his worst moments. A new Waif peeked out from behind him, the girl's features a snarl of fear and disgust. She had the same wicked dagger as always, but Daughter herself was nowhere to be seen. Yet, there was still a fear chain connecting her to Shiv, a fear chain that promptly winked out as Shiv's Shape of Monstrosity Skill collapsed.

Emerging behind Veronica was a large automaton with a reflective body. Within the reflection was the faintness of a woman, and even though she was wreathed in shadow and steam, Shiv knew she was glaring at him. "Daughter. Is that the one that scarred you?"

A whimper sounded through the world just then. Such was all the confirmation the woman needed, for in the same instant, something pierced Shiv's very soul, branding the core of his being.

Curse Gained: Hands of the Bloodied - Anything you craft and create will be stained with blood and degrade at an accelerated pace.

Shiv grunted and clutched at his chest as an insidious, clenching weight settled inside him.

Warning: You have earned the everlasting enmity of Maiden the Genius.

Great, he seethed. Like it didn't have enough bullshit to worry about.

Next to Maiden's Avatar was a man who wore nothing but dirty rags. He waved a hand, and some of the wounds inflicted upon the wardens dissolved into dust. Finally, another automaton Pathbearer entered through the patch of Dimensionality as well, its head glistening with shivering lights resembling a complex lantern of some kind.

And if that wasn't bad enough, another familiar figure made herself known. Jessica Hawgrave, Titansbane, hovered into view just over Veronica's shoulder, and she looked down at Shiv with a hint of pity.

The wardens made their move and pushed forward again. The Vanguard at their front parried and struck at a few golden shadows, dispelling them. Kura reorganized her own clones and made a new defensive line in response. It wouldn't last for long, however. Shiv could see how faint her Chronomancy was; Kura was on the verge of collapse.

Most of the curving walls separating the reactor core chamber from the opening Shiv made to the crawlspace beyond the cube had outright vanished. More Dimensionality crept along the edges, and soon, Shiv and the others would be utterly surrounded. With every passing second, more wardens were pouring into the fray. Blades, hammers, magic, and more crashed down against Kura's expanding line of golden shadows, and Veronica just looked on with a casual anticipation in her gaze.

Shiv wouldn't let her have that satisfaction. He got up and pulled Adam back to his feet. The Gate Lord tried to throw himself down once more, but Shiv just kept him standing. He growled, trying to keep his thoughts together, fighting through the dense burst of pain and confusion clouding his mind. "Adam. What... what do you think might happen if I slam into that rod real hard?"

The Gate Lord stared at the spinning nuclear reactor, breathing heavily. "I have... no idea. Cripple? Cripple?"

Silence.

"It's not going to be able to reply right now," Veronica answered on Cripple's behalf. "A few of my fellow Avatars and their Ascendants are currently having a conversation with the Strongest. It gets confused sometimes. But this time, I can't really blame it. Stormhalt really made a mess of things. My grandmother too. Politics and interests get messy, kids. That's rule one of becoming a Legend."

"Grandmother?" Shiv muttered.

“Kathereine the Songbringer,” Veronica said. She rolled her eyes and shook her head as if she was dealing with the antics of a teenage child rather than some kind of god. “It’s absurd. I know. All this madness for a silly feud. It’s part of the reason we need you. I’m going to bring the Starhawk back to the fold. He’s still important to the Republic, and he needs to understand that his personal discomfort is not more important than the safety of our nation.”

“I know about the ritual,” Adam snarled. His voice was near-feral, and his bruised and burned features made him resemble a beast more than a man. “I know what you intend.”

“You have no idea,” Veronica sighed. “No idea. It’s much worse than you could possibly imagine. And much better as well. You can’t imagine the cost nor the prosperity this will bring.” Adam’s answer came in the form of a large arrow that burst into existence an inch away from her eye. It shattered against her eyeball without inflicting a mark. “But I will show you. And you will come to understand that in this world, we can choose between bad choices and nightmarish choices.”

“Yeah, I’ll show you a nightmarish choice.” Shiv tried to fling himself at the reactor, but found his Shapeless Tides inactive again. He let out a frustrated shout and swung a mana-hydra at Anthony. His mana was parried as Veronica commanded it to miss. “I’m gonna rip your asshole out of your ass, you old piece of shit.”

Anthony looked at Veronica and narrowed his eyes. “Reminds me of another angry child I once knew.”

The Councilwoman ignored him. What she didn’t ignore was Adam firing an arrow at the nuclear reactor. A Veilpiercer impacted the spinning rod—and did nothing but leave a thin gash in the material.

A loud ringing noise filled the room as Veronica sighed. “Do you have any idea how valuable that thing is? Magic doesn’t work well with it. And it doesn’t go off that way.”

"How about Pyromancy?" Shiv said, trying to whisper to Adam.

"I have no idea, Shiv," Adam hissed, trying not to collapse from his many wounds. "I'm not even sure how the damned thing works. Where's that bloody wolf-man?"

Shiv looked at Gone, but the goblin was missing again. "System knows. The reactor-thing... It irradiates people, right? Well, maybe if we could destabilize it, more radiation would come out. Maybe if we hit it with enough fire, it'll go up in a big blast or something."

"That's practically suicide," Adam retorted, "and it wouldn't do anything. Hitting you with Necromancy didn't do anything, Shiv. It's just suicide."

"It'll be our suicide," Shiv corrected. He tried to keep his tone light, but his insides were filled with bitterness.

The Gate Lord stopped struggling for a moment, and his gaze dropped. He nodded his head to his friend. "I suppose you're right about that. Our suicide. Gods, how did we get here?"

"You said it, Adam: gods," Shiv answered.

The Gate Lord laughed. "I hate you. And I hate that I'm going to miss you if I die."

“Yeah? Me too, ‘cause you’re not going alone. I’m not letting these felling shits have me. Not to experiment on. Not to keep as a pet. Not to gain ten Legendary Skills from.”

They shared a look, and nothing more needed to be said.

Dying was an ugly thing, but doing it next to a friend made it easier than doing it alone.

Just then, however, a heavy weight settled on him. It crashed down like a building avalanche, and the Deathless was forced down to his knees. For a beat, he thought that Veronica had unleashed another attack on him, but then he realized she was barely standing as well, as were the wardens and the other Avatars. Everyone had been affected.

An anomalous pressure clung to the atmosphere, and with every passing second, the weight crushing Shiv only grew. He followed the sensation back and realized it had originated from the nuclear reactor. It was spinning faster than ever now, turning at such a velocity he couldn't count its revolutions.

Then, from above, he heard a loud, cackling laugh. "I got it! I got it!" Five called out to everyone below. "I..." And the wolf-man suddenly realized how dire the circumstances were. He made eye contact with Shiv, and after a beat, slinked back over the edge and began to flee along the upper walkway. Usually, Shiv would be quite annoyed with people abandoning him in dire circumstances. Right now, he couldn't blame Five at all.

It looked like everyone except Five was bound. One after another, Kura's golden shadows vanished, extinguished by the magic-suppressing presence of the fully-activated nuclear core. Yet, the Ascendants didn't rush forward, didn't sweep through all the prisoners trying to hold on for a last stand.

The wardens didn't sprint into battle, either. Instead, everyone struggled. Everyone tried to recover. It felt like the very mana within them had been unbalanced—sapped.

Shiv guessed it was because of a readjustment in the ambient available mana in the world. It felt like there was less of everything: less of himself, less of reality, less of the System itself. A notification flickered before his eyes, but it blinked out before he could read what it had to say.

Katherine's faint form revealed itself once more, but she snarled as she struggled to maintain herself as the mana-suppressing effect of the reactor fully triggered. The other Ascendants reacted poorly to the sudden suppression as well. Daughter, turning visible just behind the automaton containing Maiden, burst apart with an echoing cry. A towering lighthouse of an Ascendant faded into glowing smoke and embers. The darkness trying to push through from the outside and the doorway leading into the nuclear reactor chamber all but vanished as well.

Cripple hadn't been lying, but it had understated the effects. It said that this would become a veil against the Ascendants, that it would be a functional barrier to them being able to easily track where Shiv and the others fled. What it actually felt like was a bottleneck, something that choked the flow of magic to a halt entirely, and something that thickened inside Shiv's veins like plaque.

Even so, Shiv could deal with discomfort, and he still had a bit of mana inside him. With a snarl of frustration and effort, he forced himself back to his feet. Faint vectors glided across his body, and even though he couldn't use his Legendary skill to the fullest, it was still enough to grant him might and leverage.

He used it to launch himself through the stunned wardens, at the woman who caused him so much pain. Shiv's fist collided with Veronica's jaw in a loud pop. In that moment, they were both less than who they were. He crashed down the moment he struck her. Her head snapped back, and she let out a pitched cry as she nearly collapsed.

Anthony caught her. He thrust down with his dagger—and stabbed nothing as an arrow impacted the edge of his blade. Adam burst through and dragged Shiv back across in an instant.

But their escape was a short one. As soon as Adam emerged with Shiv from his collapsing tunnel, a cry sounded through the air. "Stop and fall!"

Shiv resisted Veronica's command for the merest of moments, and then his skill failed again. He slammed down on the ground as both of his legs broke beneath him. Adam folded over right beside him, and Kura screamed with him as they both went down. A ragged cry of exhaustion came from Shiv, but by now, he was beyond the point of caring. He began crawling toward the Councilwoman, but he didn't manage to get close to her at all before he was pinned in place by the Vanguard. Though weary and deprived of mana themselves, they didn't hesitate to throw their bodies on top of his to lock him down. Something pulled at one of his broken legs, and Shiv clenched his teeth, trying not to scream.

Veronica looked down and was about to say something when she suddenly twisted right. An arrow tore past her and slammed into Hawgrave's chest with a resounding squeal of inertia. Adam was still fighting as well, still firing even as he was compelled to lie upon the ground. As Hawgrave staggered forward with every step, struggling against the mana-suppressing field emitted by the reactor, another two arrows hit her in the chest.

Something tugged hard on Shiv once more. In an instant, he slid out from underneath all the Vanguard, and they were too sapped to respond in time.

"Come on, Insul, come on," Bonk gasped, groping blindly across Shiv's stomach. The Deathless let out a hiss as the orc picked him up. A Vanguard tried to stab Bonk, but a fast-moving ball of golden-green death tore into his throat, giving the orc time to retreat with Shiv. "We're not done here yet. Don't—"

Veronica pointed at Bonk. "Split."

Her voice hit him, yet its magic was ultimately reduced.

That didn't make a difference.

A diminished Legend was still far more than a Hero.

Bonk was shredded down the middle in an eruption of blood and shattering mana. The orc didn't get a chance to do anything as the left and right sides of his body fell in opposite directions. Shiv toppled between them, splashing upon a carpet of gore. As wetness soaked his face and chest, Shiv felt something inside him explode. "BONK!"

"BREAK!" Veronica cried again.

Gone screamed this time, something inside her shattering in tandem with her Magical Resistance.

"Paralyze!"

Shiv turned, roaring with incoherent rage—only for his spine to shatter into fragments. Darkness burst behind his eyes, and he crashed face-first back down upon Bonk's ropery insides. "F-fuck..."

Before Veronica could say anything else, Adam's Righteous Dawn blazed to life once more. It grew ever brighter, and its flames of burning radiance were used offensively against the approaching wardens and Avatars. Already drained by the nuclear reactor, Adam's azure dawn sapped their souls further, and the first row of wardens promptly toppled over, absolutely spent of energy. Hundreds crashed down upon the ground, and a small hill was made. The Avatars held up better, and Hawgrave merely doubled over before continuing on. Yet they were affected as well.

Adam's sun grew brighter with every passing second.

Shiv had no idea how the Gate Lord was pushing through the effects of the nuclear reactor, but he was glad that Adam could.

Yet, as Adam's Righteous Dawn flared, it began to fissure and crack. Shiv's eyes widened as he wondered if Adam was pushing himself too far, but then a rush of strength hit him, and suddenly Shiv didn't feel so weak anymore either. He consumed his physical wounds using his Biomancy field, and in the next moment, he was back on his feet as his Shapeless Tides returned.

“VERONICA! I’M GOING TO FUCK YOUR CORPSE WITH MY KNIFE!”

He wasn't the only one. More golden shadows reappeared, forming a stampeding herd. They stomped down with bladed legs, shredding through the gaps between the downed wardens' armor. Blood spurted as they lifted their feet, and they cut down any in their path, any who failed to resist, who were far too weak to survive. Then the golden shadows crashed against the Avatars proper. The battle resumed.

Veronica teleported away, and in her place, something flashed. It was a dense construct, infused with Dynamancy, and it blasted outward in a massive wave, preparing to swallow everyone within the

chamber. Shiv slammed shoulder-first against it. He didn't know how long his Legendary Skill would stay functional, so he used every bit of strength he had to throw the blast off at an angle.

Leviathan of the Shapeless Tides > [Error]

Inertial Overdrive > [Error]

Strider of the Unbending Path > [Error]

It was difficult, far more difficult than anything he'd done with the skill before, yet he managed. His Frictionless Vector worked, and the Dynamancy blast cleaved out at a 45-degree angle to his left. It tore a chunk of the other walkways away and ripped one of the walls open as if it was a piece of paper.

Before the Avatars could respond, Shiv swung his mana hydra into them again, and the detonation of bright red mana swallowed the edge of the room. Arrows flew from Adam, crashing into the Avatars. One arrow came two, and two became four. The wardens tried to mount an offense, but Gone tore through their frontline, and several Pathbearers disintegrated into puffs of bloody mist outright.

"Shiv!" Cripple's voice filled the room. The automaton ascendant sounded strained and distracted. "If you can hear me, run now. Do whatever you can. Run, now! Flee!"

But there was nowhere to run by this point. The Avatars were beginning to advance through the bombardment, while all around Shiv was a crawling sprawl of black static. Veronica's power was still spreading faster than he could keep up with. Soon, even with the reactor's effects, she would have this entire room under her control.

But before Shiv could fully despair, another divine being spoke within him.

The voice was faint, but it was clear and true.

"Shiv," it whispered, "I need you to reach Adam for me. I need you to make contact with his being. Please. It may be your only chance."

Shiv's eyes widened in disbelief. "C-Composer?"

Chapter 185 (II) Rhetorical [II]

Despite his shock, he questioned the Composer's request no more and made to reach his friend. Before Adam could ask him what he was doing, Shiv laid a hand on his shoulder, and a rush of divinity surged out from Shiv's soul into Adam. Shiv felt his Blessing come afire, felt a new song erupt from his insides. But it wasn't just his Blessing. Something new was happening inside Adam as well, and the musical notes that spilled out from Shiv were outlined with the same color as the Gate Lord's Unique Skill.

Shiv's Song of the Vigilant spread out around him, and the resonating waves it painted across the world in Shiv's vision became suddenly tangible. They flashed into existence within the oppressive interior of the reactor core chamber, coating every surface and constricting every Pathbearer present with their strings—strings that danced, strings that vibrated, strings that one and all flowed to a central point; a lyre that shivered to the flicking fingers of someone divine.

"Ascendants," the Composer cried out, her voice high with scorn and offense. "You've gone too far. Your debt remains unpaid. For all that you've done, for what you have stolen and what you continue trying to keep, you will face judgment."

In that moment, the wounds lining Adam's body molted away, and a massive figure rose, hatching out from Adam's azure sun. Her body loomed high in the vast chamber, and her eight legs were pressed against every corner of the room. Her contours were painted by that radiant blue, and her inner core resonated, oscillating with the colors of sunrise and sunset. She wasn't truly here, but there was an extension of her presence, an extension of her mana, that reached across from Weave, up from the Abyss, and into this prison at the heart of the Republic.

With her intrusion, the battle suddenly came to a total halt. Her song continued on, growing louder and louder, and it was only then that Shiv realized her resonating webs were coiled around the Avatars and their wardens, around the very Dimensionality that Veronica projected. The black static strained, but before the Composer's magic—further bolstered by Adam's Unique Skill—it was like an animal trapped in a net.

"Break! Scatter apart!" Veronica shouted at the webs, but they didn't obey her so easily. A few shuddering strands frayed along the edges, but the others endured, even growing thicker with every passing second the song continued.

"Composer!" Veronica bellowed. "You have no right to be here. Think about what you are doing."

Her words were echoed by her grandmother, and Katherine's form appeared once more. Yet she was barely there, nothing more than a ghost, quivering like a dying candle before the Composer's golden, glowing glory.

"Think carefully, Lady Arachnae," Katherineine began. "Think about what you are doing. This breaks the treaty between the Abyssal Faiths and the surface nations. And for what? You intrude on a private affair, a domestic affair. These are children of the Republic. They belong to us."

"A Republic that attacks its own children," the Composer shot back. The song suddenly stopped as she ceased her strumming in pure outrage. "A Republic that betrays its own towns, its own people." Shiv could not recall ever seeing the Composer so hateful, so aggrieved. "I know what your inquisition has done. And I have more than a guess with regards to what you plan to do with my parent, the Great One. You have always been deceivers, betrayers, vultures. You feed off the glory of something that never belonged to you. You exploit others to bring your Paths to greater heights. And now you continue your mistakes!"

"Our mistakes?" Kathereine echoed, voice between outrage and wry amusement. "You know not what you speak of, oh Queen of the Weak. It is because of us that there is stability at all. It is because of us that the surface, at least the near surface, remains in homeostasis, in perpetual stability, and it is because of us that you still writhe beneath the dirt. Because we hold the true threats at bay. We have established a Republic that maintains your security. And we continue holding to our truths, unlike you."

"You intend to hold the truth so long as you can continue exploiting my progenitor's power." The demigoddess of Weave pulled at the strings on her lyre again, and all around them the webs began to shiver once more. Just then, a counter-chorus came from Kathereine as a battle of rising hymns began, the Composer's countless fingers flicking across her harp, matching the Ascendant beat for beat. "And so long as you can build towards stealing the wholeness of the Great One's legacy once and for all. You speak encrusted truths and deeper falsehoods. Your tongue flicks in two ways, forked like a serpent's. Everything you have done has been for yourself. All of you have been doing this for yourself. No matter what lies you tell, no matter what excuses you bring forth, you must know that this power does not belong to you. That you cannot use it properly. That this so-called homeostasis you fight to preserve is fragile and is destined to collapse."

"What a display of desperation from the half-daughter of a corpse!" Kathereine's voice rose, and the webs surrounding the Avatars and the wardens were drawn taut. "Oh, feeble little spider, as helpless as the one she swears to protect. So many years since her father and mother fell, and even so, what is her prize? A hole in the dark and a bottomless ocean of regrets!"

The webs surrounding them began to scream, the sound of parting iron paired with the straining strings of countless instruments.

"My struggle goes on for those scorned, for those wounded by undeserving hands," the Composer's voice drilled off with its own snarl, "while you feed and feed like the gluttons you are."

"We feed and give," Kathereine sang, her voice rising high as tides of divinity clashed between them. The webs began to buckle and strain. "And where your so-called natural divinity has granted you less than a city-state, we have claimed most of a continent! We have built a power capable of standing against all corners of this world! We have protected and preserved those we call our people, while you fight and barely survive against the parasites and fools you find yourself surrounded by."

For the briefest moment, Shiv saw the Composer flinch, and a pang of sympathy went through him. He'd noticed things about Weave during his time there as well. It was a good city, perhaps the safest and kindest city he'd ever been in. But there were flaws under the surface, and there were slips in the Composer's facade. Her sorrow at sacrificing so many of her people on a raid against the First Blood, her admission of weakness when the Dragon-Knights made flight for Gate Theborn, her inability to offer more than a few Sisters and Weaveresses when the gate was captured, and the rampant inequalities at the base of her home as well.

Weavers suffering; Weaveresses favored more than others, while plagues chewed through the fabric of her precious society...

Shiv barely managed to shake off the building loathing he felt for the Composer. Kathereine's music was insidious as all hell.

"It was folly for you to come here," Kathereine continued. "You might be a goddess by natural birthright, but you are underdeveloped. Furthermore, you are a coward with lacking ambition. You should have been a full goddess by now. You should have taken more power, taken more experience, taken all from your parent. They were right there, and yet you foolishly stayed your hand."

"I let them rest! Because they have passed, because they wish to slumber, because they do not wish to wake," the Composer snarled. "I am no vulture!"

"No, you are a victim-to-be," Kathereine sneered, "and this world has no respect for victims. If you wished to be more, then you should have been strong. At present, the only reason why you can stand before us is your demigodhood. You are no true Divinity, you are merely a thing trapped between, and a thing trapped between you shall remain. Just another bug in the System's web instead of the spider she presents herself as. Because you have neither the mettle nor the will to take what is rightfully yours. And so, what purpose is the nobility of your heart? What meaning lurks behind your actions? Your songs are farces, noise, and nothing more, for there is no weight behind those vibrating strings. The lyrics you spit will fall to silence when your people scatter and die, and you will be consigned to a footnote to Earth's history as our Republic endures eternal."

The Composer's webs were screaming at the breaking point, more than a few snapped, and just as Shiv thought the goddess was about to collapse before the Songbringer's proclamation, she brought her hand down upon all strings of her lyre at once.

Just then, Shiv caught sight of a larger shadow looming behind her—the face of another deity. Where the Composer might not have been able to break Kathereine's power alone, another force intervened.

The Challenger's illusory, war-scarred visage grinned at the Ascendants from behind the spider goddess. "Fakers fall. Vultures are feed for hawks. Rip their throats out, little spider. Keep my Insul standing..."

An explosive reverberation swept out from her core, gliding along every web. They struck the Songbringer like lashing whips, and Kathereine cried out, releasing a note of genuine pain. The melody she was humming broke, and suddenly the Composer was the dominant force once more.

"You are right about my lacking ambition. You are right about my cowardice. You are right that I am but a demigoddess. You are right that the System does not favor me. But you are blind, and you are deceived. You think power will keep you alive? My progenitor was powerful, but where did I come from? Where was I born? My womb was a sleeping corpse, and the one that stood as my parent was struck down despite their overwhelming power. You say my songs are fated to go silent? Perhaps, but no more than yours. For what future lies in wait for a culture whose supposed protectors seek to shackle their own children, that seek to betray their allies, that seek to sacrifice their people in a blood-stained ritual just to feed themselves?"

"A ritual that will guarantee our power, our station against any adversary!" Kathereine shot back. Dulcet tones rose as she struck, but the balance had been tipped. The webs around her and the other Ascendants were tightening.

"There is no guarantee!" the Composer cried out, near-hysterical with offense. A disbelieving chorus of laughter escaped from her, and her stringing notes grew somber. "There is no guarantee. This is what you refuse to accept. This is what you refuse to admit. Power is not enough. It will never be enough, for there is always another threshold. There is always another realm, another world beyond ours, denser in mana, populated by more powerful Pathbearers with greater skills."

"And that will be no matter when we—" Kathereine was cut off by the Composer.

"It will always be a matter, because you refuse to see what the System wants. It doesn't favor you. It favors the struggle you offer. It favors the chaos and change you will bring, and eventually it will tear you down. There is no true immortality if existence is war, and the System demands it to be war, war everlasting. Anything that seeks peace without its consent will be cut down. I think you know this. And I think you all simply flee from the truth."

"ENOUGH!" Kathereine cried aloud, and this time her voice was joined by Veronica's. "Begone, Lady Arachnae. We will not repeat ourselves. If you endure here, we will descend into the Abyss, and we will seek an audience with the other Faiths to discuss your breach of the collective treaty."

And at that, the Composer suddenly stopped playing, as if obeying their orders, and her strings untangled from the Pathbearers within the chamber. She detached from Adam's spirit as well. The Gate Lord staggered, and Shiv caught him before he could fall. He shook his head as if just awakening from a deep sleep. As he looked up, he blinked. "Composer, you... you came."

"You called," she said, her voice suddenly gentle and sorrowful. "I'm sorry I could not offer more."

"No," Adam gasped. He shook his head, and something almost akin to a song escaped him. "No, it's more than I expected. You... you came. You came when no one else did. I prayed. The Starhawk was silent. But you weren't. It was... Your music was beautiful."

"And it will not be enough," Kathereine and Veronica spoke in unison. A glowing incandescence was spreading out from them now, out from the other Avatars as well. They had recovered, and they were pushing back against the mana-stilling field emitted by the nuclear reactor.

Shiv felt his insides plummet once more. Oh, come the fuck on.

"You might have delayed us for a moment," Veronica said, "but there is nowhere to go. Not for them, and not for you, eventually. We will claim what is ours. We will claim the Great One. Ours is ambition. Ours is strength. And ours is the ability to protect these two from the world."

"But you don't have the time," the Composer said coldly. "You think I came here to entrap you? You think I am foolish enough to hope I can match your pantheon by myself? No. I simply needed to delay you."

"Delay us?" Kathereine asked, incredulous. "Delay us for whom?"

"For me," a deep and sonorous voice intoned.

The Songbringer released a choked, disbelieving gasp. "No. Not you."

Shiv and the Ascendants turned with surprise, but before any of them could react, a lance of pale-blue Animancy tore through the chest of the young Avatar clad in radiant armor.

And once more, Shiv heard an Ascendant scream in agony.

Chapter 185 (III) Rhetorical [II]

The illusory lighthouse Shiv had seen earlier returned, but its length was afire with faintest blue, bleeding into the fabric of Integration itself. The colors of Animancy blended and grew until everything before Shiv was consumed in a flash of light. The Composer vanished, Adam collapsed, and the dimensional sprawl Veronica unleashed came ablaze in its entirety.

The wardens too close to the static were consumed by the Animancy. Hundreds of Poly-Magi died half-deaths as they were stitched into the narrative of existence, damned to a place within the twisted embrace of soul-burned Integration.

Shiv lost sight of the Avatars then, and never got to see who was attacking them. But many wardens were still present, and they were recovering as well, partially bathed in incandescent mana.

Yet, before they could do anything, a blast struck them, a blast that sailed over Shiv's head. More whistling sounds came, and arcing projectiles slammed into the gathered guards. Explosions swept out, flinging the wardens aside. But these wardens were hardier than the others, higher in Tier, and better equipped as well.

Even when Gone responded, slicing through them, many still endured. Their wounds closed or were reduced to scratches instead of fatal strokes. They struck back using their magic, mana flowing from their hands like curling tongues.

But with every second they lingered within the chamber, their spellcraft weakened. The nuclear reactor was still churning, and its weight continued to be crushing for Shiv, especially with his destabilized soul. But it also seemed like the Ascendants didn't have the time to concentrate on pushing back the reactor anymore, which evened the playing field at least a little.

Just then, a cry came from behind the rank of wardens. "Vanguards! Up at the front! Shields rise! Shields!"

And then another shrill cry sounded, and something ripped through the air just over Shiv's head. Faint trails punched into the Vanguards' skulls. Blood puffed out from mortal wounds, and their front row collapsed entirely. More of those whistling projectiles slipped past the Vanguards then, and when this series of detonations went off, limbs filled the air alongside shrapnel.

And then massive shapes were rushing past Shiv—gray-skinned shapes. One bore twin daggers in his hands. They glistened like starlight, and as he slashed and swiped, the daggers became as if wands directing the flow of an orchestra. Other shards of starlight ripped free from his dimensional robes, and

the wardens were shredded by the sudden ambushing orc. Then there were bolts of Dynamancy flying. They struck the unprepared wardens like hammers falling upon tin cups. Resounding clangs filled the air, but the wardens were knocked down instead of utterly crushed. Even so, that proved to be a fatal outcome as a heavy blast descended upon them.

Shiv was flung back by the explosion, but before he could crash down, something caught him in an iron grip.

He looked up—and found himself staring at a mechanical half-skull.

Its green eyes were glistening. Its metallic chassis was rusted in certain places and cracked in others, but it felt harder than ever before. It also stood taller, reaching over four meters in height, and its skeletal frame had filled out. Instead of being thin and on the verge of breaking, its ribs were fully enclosed, sealing away its vulnerable insides behind layers of heavy, slatted plating. It had additional arms as well, but few of them sported hands. Instead, there were long rods that stuck out from them, spinning, metallic rods that constantly sparked with resonating staccatos of discharge. From the tips of those long rods flew pieces of metal, moving so fast that Shiv could barely keep track of them. And then he stopped being able to keep track of them altogether as his Inertial Overdrive failed.

"Get up, Pathbearer!

" Can Hu's voice was stronger than ever before. It crackled, not with interference, but with the weight of crashing thunder. And despite the horrific wounds that mangled his body, Shiv was driven to his feet by sheer will alone.

"Can Hu!" he called out, surprised at the restored state of his friend, surprised that it was here, surprised, but much more importantly, pleased to see someone else he could count on.

And it wasn't just Can Hu. Beside the Penitent stood an orc with wings of blood extending from his back. Twisting strands of crimson mana danced between his hands, but he let out a curse as his mana flickered in and out of existence. "Challenger, I hate this place. What is even happening right now?"

Despite Helix's complaints, he managed to discharge a spell, and it struck the Wardens in a pulse of mist-like red. They began screaming a moment thereafter, and Shiv watched as their flesh bubbled and melted out from between the cracks of their armor. More Wardens fell, and more orcs joined the havoc.

"RIDE THEM DOWN!" Mortar's voice roared from somewhere Shiv couldn't see as more grayskins slammed down from the air, smashing through the wardens.

A faint clench of teleportation caught Shiv's notice, and he moved on reflex. His right hand shot out, and he caught the head of a Vanguard attempting to put his halberd through Can Hu's chest. Shiv's Shapeless Tides didn't fail him then. He pointed his vectors inward, and the man's head crumpled, crushed by his collapsing helmet.

Shiv flung the body at a squad of magi. They were trying to create a Pyromancy spell, but they couldn't quite get it to catch due to the suppressive effect emitted by the nuclear reactor. The body of the Vanguard hit them like an artillery shell. Several of the mages broke and folded along the middle, their heavy armor doing little to protect the flesh within. As they died, their Pyromancy spell finally went off, and it went off wrong. A burst of spreading flames spilled out in the shape of a horizontal envelope. It ignited several groups of wardens nearby, and the battle grew ever more chaotic.

A cold metal hand pulled Shiv by the bicep, and he staggered along, letting Can Hu guide him. And just then, Five landed beside him and picked Adam up. The Deathless's eyes widened, and he found himself briefly speechless as the wolf-man threw the Gate Lord over his shoulders.

"Meltdown!" he shouted. "We need to get out of here before the meltdown really gets going!"

Shiv didn't understand what would happen when a nuclear reactor went into meltdown, but it didn't sound good, so he hurried along, and the other survivors hurried along with him. He cast a final look at Bonk's dismembered body, and a clench of rage gripped his heart.

The rage faded a moment later as he realized Bonk was probably just going to reincarnate, but it wouldn't be the same. He didn't know if orcs' souls were truly recycled as much as their memories were, but he pushed it out of his thoughts for now. Fuck... Sorry, Bonk.

As they made their escape, Shiv watched as a small army of orcs pushed in through a gap in the upper section of the reactor chamber. Shiv had no idea when the gap was made or who had made it, but it was a clean cut, delivered with scalpel-like precision and finished with no noise at all. Not even the Ascendants had noticed. Past the cut, Shiv saw the faint glow of seeping mana, and he saw the static of Dimensionality as well. It wasn't just a cut. It was a portal to somewhere else.

And just then, a crackle was followed by a sudden surge of acceleration as the Deathless found himself drawn upward. He looked down and saw two thrusters blasting free from Can Hu's legs. The penitent's lower body had changed as well. It resembled multi-jointed slats that wouldn't look out of place on an insect. And from beneath its heels came steady streams of fire that emitted a comforting hue of soft blue.

"Can Hu, how the hells are you fixed?" Shiv breathed. "Is this because I mended your skills?"

"Partially," the Penitent said tersely, and from the rift they were fast approaching came another horde of orcs. They cried out joyously as they descended into the fray, and at the same time, the entrance leading into the nuclear reactor exploded as a tide of darkness swept through. Harlock was coming once more, but then Harlock was held in place as a gathering horde of orc Dynamancers formed a protective dome. Then came Pyromancy. Spells shaped from heat and light exploded in the air, and they were channeled as if rays of starlight down upon the darkness sealed behind the kinetic shields.

Harlock was held back briefly, and that was the last Shiv saw of the Ascendant then, as he found himself dragged into the dimensional gap. Gone, Adam, Kura, Five, Candles passed through right beside him— then Whisper and a few other orcs followed as well.

For a moment, the Deathless tried to process everything he'd just experienced. This felt impossible. Saved by the Composer, and then by his comrades. But something felt wrong. He was missing critical details. He had no idea how his allies had arrived here, and if they were back, maybe Uva and the others were as well. Could it be the Starhawk intervening with his divine power?

Shiv thought that was the most likely case, but then the Penitent spoke once more, letting out something akin to a reluctant sigh. "Your mending of my skills helped, but you were not the one who completed the reconstruction of my soul."

Shiv stared at Can Hu. "Then, who did? Did the Starhawk manage to make it back? Do you know what happened to Blackedge? Did it come back from the Outside? What about Uva and the others?"

The Penitent didn't respond immediately. When it did, its voice was tenser than Shiv remembered it ever being. "I did not have a choice, Pathbearer. I wish you to know this. But he was our only option to get here, and he was the only option to see myself repaired."

Before he could open his mouth to respond, a notification appeared in Shiv's eye.

The Challenger looks forward to your reunion with—

“No... Nononono,” Kathereine breathed. “You... you can’t be here!”

Veronica stood frozen, staring ahead in mute horror.

"Help! Help me!" the Waif screamed. She had been taken by their ambusher at the same moment he put a hole through Harlem’s vessel. The poor boy had been consumed by Animancy in an instant. He didn’t even get a chance to fight back. Connor’s screams still echoed from scabs of pale blue beside Veronica. She focused her mind and ignored the wails. There was nothing anyone could do for him now.

The Waif kicked and struggled as her head was cradled by a set of wicked, curved claws that glistened with strange mana, a lore Veronica Chandler had never seen before. Daughter tried to intervene, but a flash of Animancy made her flinch back.

“Veronica—” the Waif shrieked, sounding truly like a terrified child. The Councilwoman’s name proved to be her final word.

The sounds of pulping brain-matter and shattering bone filled the air, and they were accompanied by a disappointed sigh.

“Hello, Veronica. Kathereine. I understand you have something of mine. I have come to reclaim it.”

Veronica shuddered as she prepared to draw on every bit of her grandmother's power to survive what was to come. "He is not yours."

"Hm. I would say he is. Not because I made him. But because you cannot stop me from taking him back."