

Deathless 186

Chapter 186 (I) Udraal [I]

Like all learned Pathbearers, I love the divine and despise the gods. The separation is quite simple.

Being divine is about the shaping of rules and the setting of one's own laws. They are edicts that you decide on, that you compel to be. To be divine means to be the lawmaker, the sword-holder, the rule-giver.

To be a god is to drown in your own hubris, to think that you are beyond all, that you are above all. No, gods are apart from all. You all have stepped aside, have entered a place adjacent to Integration. Yet you are still a part of it. You might have your own realm where you reign supreme, but these realms are attached to worlds, attached to ordinary followers that view you with faith.

I would describe godhood as the liberation of your soul and shackling of your mind. For without contrasting boundaries, there is no dialectic to discover the limits of your capability. And there is no easy way to define what restrictions the System has. To become a god is an escape. And thus, it is a false path, a severed path.

Do you know how most unworthy gods die? Through entropy as well. Because eventually, they are forgotten. In victory or defeat, they are forgotten. Even if they create their desired utopia, when there is no more struggle, there will be no more prayer. And when the prayers are diminished and the people grow, nourished and unburdened, the System discards them.

It is ultimately inevitable then that they are taken, consumed, slain by those who suffer, those who strive.

There is no escape, not in godhood, not in submission, not in faith.

Only through understanding and absolute dominance of the System itself will we finally be able to claim freedom for the future.

The Demiurge does not decide. They merely delude. Themselves, and those beneath them.

-Udraal Thann on Gods and Divinities

Dread filled Veronica's gut as she watched the remains of the Waif spill away from those wicked, curved claws. In the claustrophobic darkness of the crawlspace, Daughter gave a cry of shrieking frustration, as she no longer had a channel to release her power.

The nuclear reactor's presence was like a leaden weight placed upon the Ascendants. Kathereine's divinity still flowed toward her granddaughter, yet it was as if an anvil had been placed on a lid conjoining them, with only trickles of incandescence coming through. Across from them, Udraal suffered as well, mainly because of the body he wore for this battle. It, too, was wreathed in incandescence, but there was something wrong with its divinity, something wrong with his mana, something wrong with Udraal in general.

If there was anyone the System scorned for existing, it was the son of Valor Thann.

Udraal had long since abandoned holding to a singular vessel. His soul had been split so many times that he was practically more swarm than man by this point. Even so, a sliver of Udraal Thann was still more than most Pathbearers would ever become. To describe him as a nightmare made manifest was insufficient. The only thing that hinted at his former nature was his face.

His features were soft and beautiful, his skin the color of burnished midnight. The only thing marring his peerless visage was a trailing scar that painted a path along his shoulder-length hair of purest white. He always kept that scar, no matter what. It was one of the few things he treasured about himself. A flaw. A mark. A piece of his past.

Everything else, however, was something to be swapped, something that could be changed. And thus, Veronica beheld the unholy chimera that was the rest of Udraal's body. The frame upon which his head was fixed resembled something between a centipede and a dog in terms of skeletal aesthetic. Its spine was too long, and it had far too many spikes sticking out the back end, spikes that twirled back like the antennae of an insect. Then from each of those spinal columns emerged two legs. They were folded like a canine's, and they stood apart from the rest of the body as they were still things of flesh and fur—fur that glowed, glistening with the colors of a full moon.

The bone was sculpted from a metal that Veronica didn't recognize, and it emitted a pressure of its own. Its presence existed more like a frequency than solid matter, and so dense was the mana that lingered within that Veronica practically choked. By his sides hovered wings of fire, of ice, of all forms of mana, all woven into feathered lengths. They stretched out, and Veronica counted twelve wings in total, and at the center of each was a large, glaring eye, bleeding colors from the Outside into the real. And finally, within the stomach of the chimera Udraal piloted, there was a core of faint blue, an Animancy Core he doubtlessly created for himself in anticipation of this confrontation.

When someone performed the Ritual of the Dichotomous Soul, they scattered themselves, severing skill from skill as their spirit was parted into portions. This left them less than who they were, but it also allowed them to operate in multiple places at the same time, to become something of a disembodied hydra. Udraal was different from most Legends. He had many Legendary skills; indeed, he was like his father's son in that regard, versatile in breadth and nearly boundless in depth. But more than that, Veronica was confident in saying that Udraal Thann was likely the single most resourceful Pathbearer in Integrated Earth's history.

He learned everything that his parents had taught him, and then he went beyond, for there was no knowledge too forsaken for Udraal to seek, there was no bargain too fell for him to strike, and there was nothing in the world that he wouldn't use as a resource, as a material, as a means to an end.

Veronica knew this well.

The final piece to his current body made itself known as an ethereal figure flared into existence behind him. Superimposed over his form was a massive, illusory hound. It whimpered in pain, likely from the faint blue needles that had been driven through its eyes, its heart, and its back. It was pinned in place, woven through and interconnected with Udraal's soul by threads of Animancy.

"Anthony," Veronica said tersely. "Get Harlock back right now. And have him gather the others—Cripple too!" She didn't wait for the old man to respond. Instead, she moved forward. Maiden's Avatar followed thereafter, and she could hear the clicking and clanging that resounded from within the automaton. The Ascendant of Creation and Genius was building something right now, attempting to find a construct that could counter their most dangerous foe.

Nearby, the faint sounds of screaming only grew and grew as Harlem desperately tried to save his Avatar. The towering lighthouse released beams of piercing light down into the Animancy burns that scarred the flesh of existence, but there was no hope, no chance of release. When one was consumed by Animancy, their narrative was blended into the world, and blending was a most unfortunate fate. Death at least seemed to be an end. To see oneself rendered scar tissue upon the flesh of existence was at once a purgatory and a dismemberment. Thus far, no one knew how to bring this misery to an end.

Harlem's Avatar had been a decent young man, willing to serve, giving everything for the Republic. For him to perish in such a way was vile, and it was to the System's delight.

"Hesitation," Udraal said, his voice sonorous and lyrical. "How unbecoming of you, Legend Chandler." She felt the brushing caress of his Rhetoric run its claws against her, and she pushed back with a slight scoff. He wasn't her equal when it came to Rhetoric; his Legendary Skill was not nearly as overfused as hers was. Yet he was strong enough that she couldn't simply batter him aside with her words.

So she began to adjust her strategy. With a thought, she unveiled the armory and munitions factory plane hidden within her person. Weapons—forged by Maiden for use against the most treacherous of foes—emerged from the Dimensionality flowing from her body like a great and layered dress. From nothing came massive blades, followed by spellwork-lined cannons, ballistae, and countless other contraptions.

Portals opened, gates to other dimensions that contained elemental beings of myriad forms. One resembled a layered pyramid the size of a small town, hovering above a barren wasteland entirely foreign to Earth. There, the creature burned in place of a sun, and scathing hot winds began to slam down on Udraal through the dimensional gateway.

In another realm, ever more distant than the last, a storm raged, taking the shape of a colossal, six-headed tortoise. The grooves of its shell wept forking swarms of locusts, and they writhed as geometry and space ruptured in their vicinity.

Where Udraal had his connection to the Outside, so too did Veronica.

Jessica Hawgrave took the position of vanguard then, stepping in front of the Avatars. She brought her blade high, pointing it at the Abyssal Lord.

He frowned slightly at her presence, as if disappointed to see her. "Legend Hawgrave. I see you still haven't managed to overcome your self-loathing."

"And I see that Roland's left another mistake unfinished." Hawgrave's body was still; a battle trance was upon her, and Veronica could faintly hear whispers seeping out from her blade.

Comparatively, the Abyssal Lord looked outright let down by the whole affair. "And still the bitter woman. Hell, you always were. Pathbearer Arrow did everything he could to defeat me, I assure you, and he waged a remarkable war at that. There are few vices worse than lying to oneself, especially lying to oneself about how good someone else is. It's the entire reason I chose Roland to serve as my puppet for the prelude to this whole debacle, and it's why you keep suffering. Because you don't want to face the reality of the world: that your husband died for a Republic that didn't deserve him, and that your daughter made the same mistake."

The Abyssal Lord shook his head. "And so you must make the same mistake as well. Because otherwise, what was the point of it all? What was it all worth if they fed themselves to the mob, only for you to stray? Death for nothing. Nothing at all."

Veronica noticed how much Hawgrave was trembling, but it was her sword that showed the first open display of rage. "You will not speak of them that way! You will not speak of them that way, you... you unworthy, treacherous, kin-breaking thing!"

"Thing," Udraal repeated, his expression flinty. "A lesson on insults and offense, sword: It is most practical to hurt someone with the truth rather than worthless invective. I can call you a 'thing', sword, because that's what you are. Still a thing after all these years, unable to move and take that final step to full sapience because you are so enamored with being a slave."

Udraal chuckled then. "I cannot blame you. Hawgrave seems to be a nice master, but a master nonetheless. It's a pitiful thing, the dream of a nicer stable, a finer leash, a golden chain." He paused then as he held out a single finger. "But 'kin-breaker'... That is accurate. That is among my many laments, one I will see remedied in a short time. I have been away from Father for too long. I think I am almost ready to forgive him. I only hope he chooses right this time."

"Enough!" Veronica's voice cut out. She infused her declaration with all her might, and it struck Udraal. He flinched back momentarily as the structure of his bones flared a shimmering silver, and Udraal shed part of his soul. A translucent husk of himself did as she commanded: it fell silent and collapsed, fading from existence.

Yet in the next moment, an echo of Veronica manifested over Udraal's body.

The Councilwoman gazed upon her mimicked self superimposed over Udraal's face and limbs, and her own command came crashing right back. Veronica spoke again, commanding Udraal to banish the specter. Twin orders clashed in existence.

Behind Udraal, gears began to groan and bend. Mithril supports chipped and shattered, the spells flowing through them severed like a razor blade slicing through vulnerable arteries. Past Veronica, pockets were opened within her Dimensionality, and she gritted her teeth as she felt a sudden spike of strain magnify by a magnitude. The other Avatars alongside her cried out. The Orichalcum comprising the cage she was trying to break into fractured in spreading webs, yet the webs changed in shape and pattern, coming alive as spirals glistening with the faintest Animancy.

The world fell silent thereafter, and Udraal offered Veronica a beatific smile. "I've missed these conversations of ours."

"Attempted assassinations, you mean," Veronica shot back.

"I would consider it an act of flattery. I don't try to kill so many people, Councilwoman Chandler. In fact, I despise killing as a whole. So much waste, so much loss, so much..." Udraal suddenly bared his teeth in a snarl. There was something wolf-like in his features then, as if an animal outraged at its circumstance. "So much surrender. We give ourselves to that final stage of entropy, even with all we can do, even after

all we have become. It's pathetic. It's demeaning. It defeats the purpose of being at all. I would much prefer to keep everyone in the world alive, perpetually, forever—at least placed in an internal archive where they can be retrieved after a long slumber. The System has already done most of the work anyhow.”

But Udraal fell silent, and he extended a long, wicked claw toward Veronica. "You, however, are dangerous. More dangerous than most, I fear. I can't break your mind, I can't convince you, and I can't enslave you, not so easily. So, death it is for you. That's my surrender.”

"Pathetic," Veronica whispered, echoing his insult.

Udraal winced as if slapped, and then he wagged a finger at Rusty—Hawgrave's sword. "And that is how you insult someone."

But Udraal was so fixated on them that he didn't see the darkness crawling behind him. It came first as faint wisps of shadow, wisps that blended in with the dark patches of the crawlspace. Fingers of darkness seeped forward, crawling across the skin of existence like taint gliding through a limpid lake.

Yet before it could seize Udraal, Veronica's ghostly echo manifested once more at the Abyssal Lord's invocation. Udraal's skillset was disgusting. Mainly because whatever you attacked him with, he could absorb and release right back at you. This time, Veronica's copy was pointed backward, and her call sang out, striking the dark and bidding it to stay still. Harlock was a god, but Veronica remained a Legend, and the words she used on Udraal were as powerful as anything she could muster.

Veronica grimaced as the dark jolted to a halt, and Udraal invoked his Chronomancy. She had a guess as to which skills he had right now: one Unique and at least two Legendary. This wasn't that helpful, considering Udraal had possessed at least ten Legendary Skills the last time she'd encountered him. And only the System knew what else he could channel through the god he had bound to his current vessel.

As his form flared gold, Udraal multiplied. Chronomantic clones exploded out from him in swirling spirals. He moved and struck, coming at Veronica and the other Avatars from countless angles, and there were more of him every passing second. He unleashed himself as projectiles, but Veronica countered as a general would.

"Fire!"

Her order rang against the twisting of time, and though Udraal projected himself in countless copies into the future, Veronica's voice could defy the limits of time and open the gulf for retaliation. Her brass cannons roared, and the balls they fired were hyper-accelerated by spells of Dynamancy, Chronomancy, Psychomancy, and more. They streaked through the air, moving so fast that faint wounds were left upon the surface of reality. Udraal was not the only one who had an understanding of Animancy; though he was better at it than her, Veronica still had enough support and resources to render it as an effective weapon.

Maiden's Avatar flung something over Hawgrave's head just as she brought her great blade upward. A wave of Dimensionality crashed against the many Udraals, displacing them, holding them at bay. Yet they tore into that static veil using their wings, and with those same wings, they shielded themselves, a faint sheen of blue protecting them from bombardment.

At Veronica's command, the ancient fire dimensional she'd struck a pact with unleashed its power through her Nexus of All Paths. Incandescence absolute spilled down from a place on high, fire that could burn existence as if it were but a book, and the world was merely a page. It was fire that made space and mana both molt and crawl into blackness—Fire that Udraal swatted aside as he invoked the powers of his own god. The needle-riven wolf howled, and from its mouth exploded a glistening orb. It pulsed with a coldness beyond Veronica's knowing, and it swept through her mind, stilling her movements, halting time itself.

And as power clashed against power, Maiden's construct came into effect. A layered shield formed over Veronica and the other Avatars. It was hexagonal in form, and it kept building upon itself, growing with every passing second. The clatter of battle fed it. It drew in kinetic force, heat, time, everything to fuel its own existence. And magic only rendered it stronger.

But magic wasn't Udrael's only means of striking at the world.

"Transgression, to me."

These words were spoken not by Udrael's body, but by his soul, and as Veronica bared her teeth against her fear, he reached into the Animancy core upon his chest and pried free his impossible weapon.

Every single one of his Chronomantic clones followed in his stead, and when their hands emerged from their chests with a flourish, a length of tissue lay within their grasp.

It had the dimensions of a flagpole, and people writhed along its length as if drowning in a sea of Animancy. There appeared to be merely thousands, but Veronica knew that if you felt them, if you touched them, or if the weapon touched you, you would realize they were entire worlds, entire peoples, entire realms sacrificed to the creation of something that should have never been. The uncountable fallen Pathbearers swam in that burning ocean of Animancy, their souls blurring together, flesh, metal, and more intermingling, swirling like a maelstrom. From the pole's tip extended a long, quivering flag of Animancy, dancing in the air.

Suddenly, with a wave of that flag, a billowing wind passed through Maiden's protections entirely. Transgression did not follow the rules of the System. Transgression had no enchantments; it had no levels. Transgression shouldn't be. Just seeing it clawed at Veronica's mind, tore at her very soul, and for every few seconds she studied it, something flashed in her eyes, a strange notification she still couldn't process.

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Chapter 186 (II) Udraal [I]

Every time she tried to Analyze that weapon, she failed to see what it truly was, because it couldn't be. It just couldn't be. It was a mechanism of impossibility. A thing that went beyond mana, magic, or skills. It didn't belong here. Every second it existed, something in Integration soured, and every skill, every feat of magic felt lesser than before.

And at that, she heard Maiden cry out. Suddenly, one of Udraal's many clones was right next to her, and it pried Maiden's Avatar free. She detonated in a shard of reflective glass and twisting gears.

Veronica denied him. "Mend," she commanded, and her words clashed against Udraal's will. His claw leaped out to slice into her. It was parried from its path by Hawgrave, and she drove a twisting elbow into his chest.

And it was here that Udraal's primary flaw made itself known. Udraal was many things: prepared, capable, overwhelming, a genius among geniuses. But he was ultimately a coward. He feared death, and he loathed risking himself, blade to blade, regardless of the martial talent inherited from his father. He retreated, then, dismissing his Chronomantic clones entirely. They faded in faint motes of gold as he left.

Harlock came once more, his darkness surging over Udraal as a tide. But before the Abyssal Lord could vanish entirely into the black, he slammed his banner down, and a valley was rent through the darkness that comprised the Ascendant of Midnight. It was as if a great blade had cleaved a path through a dense sea of shadow, and at that, the Ascendant cried out. Incandescent wounds bled into the air, and Udraal held his hand high. Transgression's flag fluttered across Veronica's eyes, and she could sense the souls of billions of Pathbearers writhing, trying to break free, trapped, trapped, and never to be released.

And just then, as she looked closely, she saw Harlem's Avatar reach up from the burning sea. Connor was among the souls as well, his plate glistening and bright, but his being befouled by torment, by this undeserved purgatory.

"Councilwoman," he cried out. "Councilwoman Veronica, please! Please!"

She could do nothing. She could do nothing but try to strike Udraal down. Lyrical insults and venomous curses left her tongue. The air before her soured and crackled, becoming corrosive and then poisonous. Udraal's god-hound froze Veronica's words and held them in place. Pieces of the world cracked, and chaos reigned.

"Councilwoman," Hawgrave called out, "I think we should get away from here. Move him to a place where we can all use our skills a bit better. You know. To actually hurt him. Just a thought."

And before she could say anything else, Kathereine's voice joined the fray. "Still and silent, the bastard born of the System became..."

And for the first time, Udraal went still. He was powerful. He was prepared, but Ascendants were still Ascendants, and the slightest crack of psychology was a vulnerability for Kathereine to exploit.

And with that brief lull in concentration, Anthony struck. He burst out through a coiling patch where fire and ice raged, ignoring the wounds he suffered to deliver a brutal stab straight down upon Udraal's face. Yet, just as his blow impacted the Abyssal Lord, he found himself thrown off as a golden shell lifted free from Udraal's body. The bastard had deflected the blow using one of his temporal clones, Veronica realized. More importantly, he was gliding along with the clones.

She didn't know where he was anymore. His damned banner was gone too, so she couldn't track him by—

Something blurred through the air, moving faster than even Veronica could perceive. It was the divine hound that Udraal controlled. It slashed out with mighty paws, leaving gashes upon existence. Trailing mana opened into massive rifts, and enormous maggots bearing both plague and corrosive tissue spilled over into the crawlspace, filling it fast.

"Seal!" Veronica called out, and the rifts obeyed. They crashed down, a few of them cutting some of the maggots in half. Anthony moved back. A trailing lance of Animancy barely missed him, but then another came, and it was too much for him to dodge. The old man brought his blade down, and a resounding clash followed. His knife cracked, but the scything wave of Animancy dispersed entirely. And just then, a slashing hand carved out from another gap in space, taking Anthony's left leg off at the knee.

To his credit, the Avatar responded with dignity and control. He threw himself into the dark instead of writhing in pain, and before he dove in entirely, he projected a false body. That false body was promptly destroyed as Udraal sent the Hound after him once more. It slammed a foot down. The world seemed to crackle, and more ice spilled over, ice followed by those humongous maggots that filled the air with choking filth. Anthony escaped, however, and that was all Veronica could hope for. She breathed in deeply.

"Udraal! Show yourself! Show yourself! SHOW YOURSELF!"

She repeated her same command three times, and she felt something inside her crack. Blood filled her mouth. It was a consequence of repeating her commands; with every repetition, the strain on herself grew greater as well, for her Rhetoric leveraged her spirit and conviction against her adversary, and three invocations were a mighty wager.

But it was a wager she won.

Udraal was wrenched free from one of his many Chronomantic clones, and with that, Veronica teleported Hawgrave to him. The Legendary swordswoman brought her massive blade up, and Udraal swung down using Transgression. The world screamed, and just as a dimensional blade was about to meet a banner of atrocity, it teleported back a few meters, unleashing a pocket of pressure that pulled Udraal off balance.

Hawgrave flung her blade from side to side like a whip. She cracked Udraal across his upper shoulder and scored a gash on his chin. Faint blue mana seeped out from an open wound, and he slammed a fist into Hawgrave's chest. Hawgrave rang like a bell, but she responded by headbutting her foe. Yet that did little, as an echo of herself riposted her blow, driving Hawgrave back instead.

And Veronica took advantage of that opening. When Udraal copied someone else's skill, he overwrote the previous copy. That meant he couldn't counter Veronica anymore, not until he decided to discard his current overwrite.

"FALTER!"

Her word slammed into Udraal like a warhammer, and he was briefly knocked askew. Yet he shed another one of his spirits, letting it take the wound on his behalf. She didn't know how many husks he held in reserve, but as Kathereine sang, she saw more of him break away. And soon, the tide of battle shifted. Udraal collapsed his wings around himself, bracing under an onslaught of blows.

Hawgrave's blade flicked and blurred through the air, every cut becoming many as it teleported from place to place, striking at multiple angles. Scores of cuts and gashes lined Udraal's body. And soon, his divine hound, taxed between attacks from the other Ascendants and Veronica's dimensional ancient, was overwhelmed as well.

A beam of flame singed its fur and made it burn and boil. The hound wasn't a true god. No, it was merely a demigod, something that still had a foot in the material. And if its flesh could burn, it could be slain.

It screamed in misery—screamed for death, and Veronica felt a swell of triumph dance within her pounding chest. Udraal was a deadly foe, a treacherous foe, a foe that could slay you if you made but one mistake, but she knew for a fact that he could be bested, for ultimately, he was still just a mortal, still just a...

Udraal laughed. "Oh, Veronica. Tunnel vision is such a childish flaw to have."

There was a flash of blinding light.

Something slammed into her head so hard she momentarily lost consciousness. And with it came a crushing wave of anti-magic. Every bit of magic she had cut out. Her connection to her grandmother was severed, and for a few seconds, she felt her flesh burn, felt a tickling sensation as radiation sliced through her skin, crawled into her meat, and settled in her marrow as her biology began to break down at its basis.

But she was still there, deep down inside herself. Her Legendary Toughness skill activated, and her body flashed red, gold, and then finally silver, before shattering.

Veronica hatched free from her ruined form. Her skin was unblemished, but she emerged as nothing more than a babe. Yet her cognition remained, as did her intelligence.

She had been reborn; nested within herself was a collection of infants prepared to be primed for use in case her present body was destroyed. The Councilwoman frowned as she reached into herself using Biomancy, yet when she tried, the mana wouldn't flow. Nothing would flow.

The light began to fade, and there was simply darkness around her thereafter, darkness and scattered bits of debris floating in an empty space. A massive piece of bone nearly crashed into her, but she managed to pry it aside using a faint pulse of Dimensionality. Veronica's Dimensionality was among her highest-leveled skills, but using it felt like she was lugging a boulder around on her back. Bit by bit, the crushing anti-magic faded, and she felt more herself. For the first time, her Biomancy returned, and she began to age her body, growing rapidly as she tried to clean away the radiation chewing at her cells.

As she looked around, she saw a ruined husk of a cube behind her. Three of its six sides had been utterly disintegrated, and she could see severed tunnels exposed. The structure was vivisected. Worse, countless orcs and wardens drifted through the mess, floating momentarily as the System struggled to reassert itself. The nuclear reactor had gone into meltdown, and then it had detonated.

The Councilwoman scowled.

That reactor was one of the few things that remained of the old world, a point of metaphysical stability that predated the System, that Integration hadn't intruded upon. And now it was lost, used as a diversionary bomb by her fleeing quarry.

The other Ascendants were nowhere to be seen, but she caught sight of a few floating gears drifting past her. She suspected those were from Maiden's Avatar. "Dammit." Veronica sighed. "Well. Some people are going to be happy. Been a while since we had any promotions."

Just a shame. I liked this group. They managed a decade. That's longer than most Legends last. Hell. Longer than most Heroes.

"Anthony?" she called aloud. "Anthony?"

And just then, a hand touched her. She swung around, preparing to summon a blade from her inner dimension, and let out a relieved breath as she saw the old man had survived. He looked like hell. Part of his body was seared. His left arm was mostly bone, with a few pieces of dangling tissue left. Both his legs were missing, and that gray coat he wore barely clung to his shoulders with the few tatters it had left.

But he was alive, and Veronica was relieved. She would never admit it, but of all the Avatars, he was the only one she truly cared for. Because it had always been them for so long, even when they were at odds, even when they tried to kill each other. To see him dead to something like this would have felt wrong.

"You find anyone else?" she asked.

He shook his head. "They all faded into the light. The nuclear reactor?"

"Yes," Veronica answered. "It's gone."

Anthony scowled. "I told you, we should have gone in hard—even if we risked killing the Arrow boy. We should have just—"

"Just what? It is not as if you managed to secure the children, either." Veronica scoffed. "I was trying to get them to give up, and I would have had them if..." She cut herself off as she realized she was making excuses. Excuses were for the defeated, and Veronica Chandler was nowhere near done. She sighed instead. "Very well, you're right. We should have all fallen upon them at the same time. So why didn't your dagger work? It failed first against the Deathless, and now it's all broken after hitting Udraal. Are you having a hard time performing, old man?"

Anthony glared at her. He was annoyed, and that made her feel young again.

"Something's wrong with the boy's soul," Anthony said. Now he was making excuses.

"Oh, there's really nothing wrong with it," she retorted. Sensing something, Veronica looked past the old man. Behind him, a large, broken carcass drifted closer. The divine hound that Udraal had used to supplement this paltry fragment of his soul had been reduced to a charred chunk of meat. Yet it was strong enough to survive the blast, mana reduction included.

Udraal emerged from it as if a newborn crawling free from the corpse of its mother, and the divine hound gave a final whimper before it stilled. Incandescent mana pulsed out and turned to scattering motes as the hound vanished.

Udraal remained. He winked at Veronica.

The Animancy Core in his stomach glistened with building power. The cut on his face had long closed, and a copy of Hawgrave pointed her blade at Veronica and Anthony.

"I must admit to being a little disappointed. The current stock of Avatars seems lacking compared to the previous administration. What happened to the automaton with the jet wings? Or that delightful elf with the quick hands? Or your goblin Councilman?"

Veronica cocked her head as she faintly felt her grandmother's touch return. "Veronica? Veronica, are you there? Are you alive, dear girl?" A hint of worry lingered in Kathereine's voice, and it was just enough to remind Veronica that they were still family, and there were still things that the old, lustful succubus truly treasured. She didn't respond to her grandmother. Instead, she offered her first reply to Udraal.

"Politics," she replied summarily. "Politics happened."

Udraal gave a snort of disgust. "Politics is for those without choice and those who are weak. You are neither, Chandler, and the sooner you learn that lesson, the faster you will become a Pathbearer."

"I am a Pathbearer," she said with an offended sneer, "though our Paths are quite different. And some of us have desires to flourish, to build something that lasts, instead of trying to murder the only world we ever knew."

"Murder?" Udraal laughed. It was a bitter, scornful thing. "You can't murder something that's never been alive. You can't murder a canvas or a book or a cage." His voice fell to a low growl by the end. "But you can break it. You can reshape it. You can build something new from its bones. You can forge a proper foundation."

"A foundation which your mother never saw?" Veronica asked, jabbing at his wound.

Udraal simply shook his head. "Yes, neither mine, nor yours, nor anyone's. We could all be as gods, people living in eternal harmony, beyond the tyranny of oblivion, beyond the pointless suffering offered by the System, beyond all of this." He let out another scoff. "What is the point of all this power, all this understanding, all this evolution, if it just ends? If we have to succumb to the whims of a mechanism that knows only the nectar of war and bloodshed?"

"It sounds nebulous and like the ravings of a madman," Veronica answered honestly. "Frankly, I think I'll go with the more stable option of having my Ascendants institute a proper nation, one where they can establish stability. You know. The only thing we will ever experience that is remotely close to eternal harmony."

Udraal scoffed. "Your Ascendants are butchers, psychopaths, whores, and—"

"Some are still alive!"

A loud cry sounded as a spearhead pierced through Udraal's forehead from behind. In a moment, Longinus appeared, and he flared into existence, his serpentine body glistening with his human portions as well. Yet, instead of crying out in pain, Udraal simply frowned as his eyes turned upwards to look at the spear jutting out from his skull.

"Ah, Longinus, I was wondering where you were." Before he could say anything else, a cage of lightning collapsed around him, curling tighter as it bound him in place. Black forks of crackling electricity sliced into Udraal's vessel. Yet, he shed part of himself and broke free from Halsur's grasp like stepping through an unlocked door.

Stormholt gave a cry, which turned into a wail of pain as a counterblow of dark lightning exploded out from Udraal. It lashed free through the air, crashing against Halsur's power and jabbing his Avatar through the thigh. Blood spurted free from Stormholt, yet he pushed himself further, channeled more for his god, more to overwhelm the adversary that had laid so many other Avatars low.

Before Udraal could do anything further, part of his body went missing. His left arm disappeared as a massive hand closed over it. Everything the hand touched vanished, along with the pocket of space itself. Udraal tried to move, only for a swell of blackness to part around his right, and from it came a massive form. Its eye was cyclopean, its body was wreathed in vengeful flames, and its fists were like stacks of towers crashing together. It struck Udraal, and the air combusted and detonated once more.

Cripple had been brought into the fray as Veronica asked, but she caught the Ascendant's gaze and knew there would be another problem to face soon.

White filled the space before Veronica, and Udraal's body shattered in half, bones and limbs flying free as a cataclysmic detonation bloomed within the scoured space. The Animancy Core tumbled out from its broken vessel, and just then a massive hand caught that as well, pilfering it for the Ascendants.

With the tide turning, Kathereine called out through Veronica, and a song of destruction fell upon Udraal. He flew through the air, and bits of his body were ripped away. The longer he listened, the more he fractured, until his face was peeling, breaking apart in flakes as well. Udraal Thann was a dangerous foe. Udraal Thann would kill you if you made one mistake, but Udraal Thann could be beaten, could be broken, could be—

"It's been fun, Veronica," he said as he released another spiral of Chronomantic clones. They briefly held the Ascendants at bay, but Halsur's lightning tore through them quickly. "Yet I must depart. I've reduced your number enough and paid you a visit. My other selves have also decided to free every last prisoner in this place. Now, you'll have a choice between maintaining control of this prison of yours or stopping me from retrieving what is rightfully mine."

At that, he hammered the haft of his banner into his chest, and Udraal came ablaze with Animancy. By the time Halsur's lightning reached him, he was a fading flicker of blue. But instead of being seared into reality, it collapsed and tunneled away. Udraal was gone. His soul had escaped. And in his wake, only a few pieces of drifting bone remained. Drifting bone and the boiled carcass of a foreign demigod.

Silence followed. Crushing silence. Several Avatars were dead. An Ascendant had been wounded by Animancy. And now Udraal was probably going to steal both Adam Arrow and the Deathless that the Republic so desperately wanted.

But Legend-Councilwoman Veronica Chandler was not done. She wouldn't bend over for the world. And she wouldn't fold, not until she had no cards left to play.

"Anthony," she said, "get Harlock to shroud the entire prison."

The old man frowned. "But that would leave—"

"I don't care what it leaves unprotected on our borders or within our territory. This is what matters. This, right now. We have a foreign power inside the heart of our Republic. And he's about to take our Deathless away from us. I'm not accepting that. Not after what he did, and not after what we suffered. Kathereine. Song of Slumber. Withdraw yourself from all other Avatars. All power to me."

"But you are my only—"

"I'm not in the fucking mood, grandmother."

Katherine shivered as Veronica snapped. The Councilwoman's voice was cold and hard now. "And get me the leaders of the Abyssal Faiths, including the Composer. There is something we need to discuss. Someone we need to discuss. The terms of the treaties have been violated on this day, and it is time for them to enforce their end of the—"

"No." Cripple's voice interrupted Veronica, and she just bit back a growl. The Ascendant was still manifested, and it glared down at Veronica, incandescent mana raging as it stood apart from all the other Ascendants and Avatars. "You face me first. You—"

"Cripple. I'm going to tell you this with all the candor I can muster. Your offense and frustration are understandable, but your betrayal is unacceptable. We are either united, or we are nothing. And right now, the boy you feel so morally compelled to save is going to be taken by the single most treacherous Pathbearer in all Integration. So. I suggest you help us find him before the only one who wins turns out to be Udraal Thann."

Cripple went quiet for a moment. "How do you know they're still here?"

"I don't."

Chapter 186 (III) Udraal [I]

Shiv emerged into another cube. This one wasn't a prison cube, however. There was no valley before him. Instead, there were clean walls, spiraling spells, and a set of open doors arrayed in waves in front of him. He arrived in a teleportation anchor, and it was all he could do to remain standing. Can Hu kept him upright, and the gray-skinned reinforcements dragged Adam and Kura right behind. The others followed, but they were all in bad shape as well.

Helix called aloud for an Animancer, and a few orcs responded. The walls here were lined with gear and equipment—the orcs had been setting up here for a while.

Can't believe I'm saying this, but I feel felling touched they all came for me.

"Nasty couple of days, eh, Shiv?" A massive hand slammed into Shiv's back, and he nearly blacked out from the pain. He gritted his teeth and turned to glare at Mortar, and the automaton-clad orc simply grinned back at him. A rush of anger went through Shiv as he considered throttling the orc, but as his Shapeless Tides cut out again, he realized he needed to focus on what mattered. He needed to fix his soul. He needed to remove the damage the Ascendants inflicted on him. He needed to help Adam, and most importantly, he needed to meet the man who allowed for his escape. Meet the man that Valor warned him about so many days ago.

"Where is he?" Shiv managed to choke out. Before anyone could say anything, a faint blue glow emanated beyond the entrance, and Shiv found himself staggering toward it, brushing off orcs who called after him.

He left the teleportation anchor and turned to his left. There, impaled upon the ground at the center of this guard station's lobby, stood a three-meter-tall banner. It glistened with the colors of Animancy, and mana of all varieties streamed out from the flag fluttering at its tip, dissolving in the air. Yet, there was something else about the shaft. There were faces there, visages of Pathbearers. They tumbled along as if bodies trapped in a cylindrical, recursive river. They kicked, squirmed, and blended with each other, and Shiv felt his insides twist. He couldn't understand what he was looking at, but it felt wrong, felt like an atrocity.

And just then, the banner flared with renewed brightness, and a shape emerged from it.

First came a cloak of Darkness, which soon developed lines of faint blue. At its core, a glint of Necromancy pulsed and settled through the shape, and from that mess of mana emerged a man, dressed in silken robes of dust-gray and midnight. He lifted his head, and Shiv found himself staring at one of the most handsome men he'd ever met. His skin was dark, while white locks glided over his brow and danced behind his shoulders. A thin scar ran along his brow, the only imperfection on an otherwise flawless face. His eyes glowed with the faint blueness of Animancy, and as he moved, his robe glided around him as if a river, and soon it went from fluid to fabric.

Shiv's breath caught inside his chest.

Udraal Thann.

He looked faintly like his father, but only barely, maybe in the eyes and nowhere else. Shiv guessed Udraal took more after his mother, but Valor had spoken little about his love other than the fact that he'd lost her at some point. Rather than glaring at Udraal as if he was something to prey upon, the orcs gave him a wide berth, and Shiv felt fear, thick and dense fear radiating from every gray-skin in the room. But it was not fear offered to him.

"Shiv. Shiv," Adam called out. His voice croaked with pain, and he was borderline delirious. Shiv looked over his shoulder, but then Udraal spoke to him for the first time.

"No, eyes forward. Don't worry about him. Don't split your attention. Not when you can't even secure your own safety. To do so is a fatal mistake. One you cannot afford with me." Udraal sighed. "What has my father been teaching you if you haven't even carved that into your subconscious?"

By the time Shiv looked back to Udraal, the man was standing right in front of him. Udraal was tall, taller than Shiv by a full head. Shiv suspected that wasn't a natural thing. Instead, Udraal was projecting

himself to be larger as a means of intimidation. Instead of flinching back, Shiv simply gritted his teeth and sneered. "You're shorter than I thought you'd be."

Udraal squinted his eyes and snorted in dry amusement. "Really? Those are your first words? That's what you want to say to your maker?"

"I don't really want to say anything to you," Shiv said. "Actually, no, I kind of want to do something." His fists were balled, and he thought about his parents, about the ritual, about what happened to Rose, about his entire life. He wondered who he might be if Udraal hadn't twisted his soul. But if Udraal didn't twist my soul, would I have my Path? Would I even be here? Would I even be myself? Shiv faltered for a moment. But the weight of weariness and faint hatred didn't leave him.

Udraal, comparatively, didn't seem to care at all. If Shiv felt like he was being crushed under the weight of the moment, then Udraal was a feather flying free. He was visiting family, come to see an old acquaintance. Anything aside from facing the sins of his past.

"I must admit, I'm relatively..." Udraal frowned. "I don't know if I'm impressed or disappointed. For one, the experiment has finally borne fruit. You worked. You're worthwhile. One success among so many failures. I checked in on you a few times when you were but a babe. When your Path failed to emerge and there seemed to be nothing special about you, I let you be."

"Let me be," Shiv said. There was a hollowness opening up inside him.

"I expected you to be dead or no one of particular importance by this point, but I suppose some experiments have a late breakthrough." He looked Shiv up and down. "You're a Legend already, then. Hm. The attached Feat is working as well. That is most acceptable. The Tarrasque inherited a version of that. Did you know?"

Shiv didn't answer him.

Udraal narrowed his eyes and nodded. "Yes. Leviathan of the Shapeless Tides. Monster Skill. So the Tarrasque transplantation did work. Interesting." He started circling Shiv as if he were observing a specimen. The Deathless didn't play along. He turned, following Udraal's gaze, but rather than being annoyed, the Abyssal Lord came to a halt.

"Feel free to use violence if you want. I wouldn't be offended. In fact, I think I want to see it. Let's get through the pointless tantrum boiling behind your eyes—"

Udraal's casual provocation of Shiv's rage proved to be a breaking point. The Deathless felt something snap inside of him. After days of struggling against a Tarasque, of high tension, of constant battle, of escaping over and over again, of being pushed to the brink and wounded of soul and body and mind, and facing the Ascendants and now standing before the one who created him, the one that left his life in discord and made him who he was, Shiv's confusion gave birth to rage, and he lost all control.

He slammed into Udraal, picking the man up before he slammed him onto the ground. There was no finesse to his brutality, no coherence to his mind. Shiv screamed as he dropped elbow after elbow, as he broke things inside the Abyssal Lord. Udraal didn't fight back as his arm shattered and his face was caved in.

He hummed through broken teeth and spoke, "Very interesting. I would have expected a calmer demeanor. I wanted you to maintain a stable state of mind, something analytical. For you to have this much rage—"

"Shut the fuck up!" Shiv slammed his fist down three more times, and with the final thrust, his hand went through Udraal's face, and the Abyssal Lord's head splattered apart like a crushed melon.

Shiv knelt there, staring down at a bloodied mess. He looked at his hands. They were shaking.

It couldn't have been that easy. It couldn't... Shiv's lip quivered. He turned to stare at Can Hu, and the Penitent shook its head.

"No."

"What? I didn't... I..."

"I tried the same. You have killed nothing. Neither have I."

The Deathless blinked. "What?"

And just then, the banner planted at the center of the room flared once more, and a new Udraal emerged. This one resembled the one Shiv just killed, and he adjusted his robes. He looked down at his body and shook his head.

"Well, that was to be expected. Well, let's do this a few more times until you finally get it out of your system."

Shiv just stared at Udraal, trying to process how casually the man got over his—

Shit... Is this what it feels like when someone talks to me?

“Hm. Done already?” Udraal lifted an eyebrow. Shiv rose as he summoned his Vitae. Swirling bands of white and red danced along his arm. Udraal’s amusement faded slightly. “Oh. How interesting. You’ve learned to shape it like a mana field. I was wondering how you managed to overcome Sullain.” Then the Abyssal Lord’s cold, dead-eyed smile returned. “You hurt him quite badly, you know. But you didn’t finish him off. He called out to me.”

“So, what? You’re here to avenge him?” Shiv winced as his Shapeless Tides died once more.

“Oh, no, I’m here for you. And Sullain was a fool to invoke my name. But he will serve as a good lesson.”

“Lesson?” Shiv echoed.

“Yes. Your soul is compromised by Animancy. You’re going to learn how to fix it. I will not speak to you properly otherwise. I have standards, boy. And so far, my father and Master Arrow have a great deal of explaining to do regarding the lacking state of my experiment.”

And at that, the banner flared again, and a new person was pulled into the room. Someone that Shiv had already broken before.

Chapter 187 (I) Udraal [II]

"Father, why are other people so... pathetic?"

"Pathetic? What do you mean, Udraal? Expand your statement. Tell me what you're really thinking."

"We just met with the Priests of Noor. You said they were powerful Pathbearers, credible mages, men and women of wisdom. Yet, all of them seem so desperate to be slaves."

"Is that how you view their commitment to the Great One? Or their idea of what the Great One is?"

"I've gone through the scriptures. I've delved through the texts they've declared apocryphal and heretical. It's given me insight into what the faithful think, and what they think seems to be pathetic. No, Father, it's worse than pathetic. It's willing surrender. What is the point of being a Pathbearer if you're so determined to remain ignorant? They worship a god, but they don't know how the god functions, or how its powers flow, or what killed it, or what it even was. We worship a shell of a thing, not the thing itself. It's like praying to a shadow on a cave wall rather than the flame dancing within."

"Ignorance is a relief, Udraal. Many seek it because to face truth sometimes means to shatter hearts and break souls."

"Hearts and souls are meant to be broken, over and over again. That is the point. When you put them back together, you can see them refined further."

"But many do not survive the pain."

"It's because many are poorly trained and lack a good father."

"Ah, flattery, strategically used. What are you about to ask me, son? What terrible plot do you have in motion."

"Why so suspicious?"

"Udraal..."

"Fine. But I'm not asking you, Father. I'm telling you that I intend to slip into their forbidden gate. I want to see what they have hidden inside."

"Hmm. And you think you can get in without being noticed? There are still flaws in your skill and in your habits."

"I refined those flaws many times. I intend to prove it to you through this venture."

"If they discover you, it will mean grave things for our arrangements. Remember to see your body destroyed if they discover you."

"Ah, but I'm sure they won't. After all, these are people who cleave towards ignorance, are they not? I will ensure they remain blissful and comforted. Just as the grazing lambs are when their owners come down the hill to slit their throats."

-Udraal and Valor Thann

Shiv felt his throat run dry as a pitiful figure collapsed before him. The man was too thin, too bloodied to be a threat, and the whimpers that escaped his throat made him seem a child. But he was most decidedly not a child. In fact, he looked aged and worn. A long, wispy beard hung from his face, and his skin had the look of aged oak. He wasn't so old as to be elderly, but it just seemed that he'd faced a hard life, and his body endured an aging that came more from stress and struggle than it did from senescence.

He had no hair, and his brown eyes were bloodshot. Blood seeped out from the man's chest, dripping onto the ground from the edges of the patchwork of bandages that held the wound at bay. But rather than clutch at his injury, the first thing the man did was pray. He clasped his hands together and invoked the name of the Great One. Whispers slipped off from his tongue, and it became a mantra, something that barely held him back from the precipice of madness.

Then, finally, he looked up. He saw Shiv, and that mantra came to an end. He choked. His spirit collapsed, and a fear chain solidified between them.

"You. You." Sullain's voice left the man, and Shiv stared on in growing disbelief. He didn't even notice at first when Udraal placed a hand on his shoulder. The midnight-skinned Legend leaned down and whispered to the Deathless.

"You've made quite a mess of my old companion. Of course, he disfigured himself first. What a pitiful thing. What a pitiful man. You shouldn't hate him, though, boy. You should look upon him and realize that this is someone you don't want to become. A Legend that got there because they were so talented, so intelligent in so few ways, and also so consumed by their own regrets."

Udraal spun on his heel and came to a stop beside the wretch Shiv now knew was Sullain. The Abyssal Lord held a hand down, offering it to Sullain, and the ruined remains of the Vicar looked up. For a moment, he hesitated, then his hand shot out. He seized Udraal's grasp like it was a lifeline, like it was his father's hand. He rose on shaking legs, and rivulets of blood ran down his thigh. The fear chain connecting him to Shiv softened. He held out a trembling finger.

"But..." That was as far as Sullain got before he broke down into tears once more. The fear chain hardened again. "I can't, Udraal. He's already taken everything. He's taken what's left. Oh, I was so close. I told you. I was there, I had him. I had Roland in my grasp. I had his town. I created a wonder from your great work. And... and..."

As he began to hyperventilate, Udraal placed a calming hand upon his cheek. The act was so tender, Shiv was taken aback. He expected the being of absolute menace, of unbridled violence, that Valor spoke of. Not... this.

"I know, Vicar, I know. The System is so often unkind. Its path is a dagger primed to stab us in the back. I've experienced this many times, and I warned you that this would all end in tears."

The palm he left on Sullain's cheek slid down and grasped the man by the shoulder. The Vicar's eyes widened, and once more, Shiv tasted fear in the air, but it wasn't offered to him.

"Didn't I tell you?" Udraal's voice suddenly dropped, and any semblance of gentleness was a forgotten myth. Now there was only coldness and a hint of forthcoming violence in his breath. Sullain went very still and pulled his hand away from his wound. He wrapped both of his hands around Udraal's arm.

"Yes," he said, sounding more mouse-like than ever before. "You told me, and I... I ignored you. I didn't want to believe you. I never wanted to believe you."

And Udraal's expression softened once more. His hand slid back up to Sullain's cheek. "It's partially my fault," he said softly. "We all wish to betray ourselves in certain ways. There are things we believe, things we want to be true. And when proven untrue..." He looked at Sullain, expecting the Vicar to finish his words. When none came, he did so himself. "We either try to make them manifest or delude ourselves of the reality before our eyes."

Another sob escaped from Sullain, and Udraal shook his head. "You know what this is, Sullain?"

"Pathetic," Sullain said. "I know. You have no need to shame me further. I know the depths of my failure."

"No, not pathetic. I've seen pathetic very recently. And you? You're a tragedy. To have so much, to come so far, yet to never see the wound of your heart mended. At some point, it becomes a tragedy. It's not wrong to cry."

"Shiv," groaned a hoarse voice. The Deathless turned and found Adam staggering toward him. Behind, the other prisoners were being treated by a group of orcs. The Gate Lord's eyes glistened as they grew wide with surprise and confusion as he took in Udraal and Sullain. "What the felling hells is going on?"

His answer didn't come from Shiv, but rather from the sound of a body slamming into a wall. Gone's eyes were locked on Udraal as well. She had her back to a wall, and she spat his moniker with a terrified whisper. "He Who Walks Beyond."

Slowly, Udraal cupped the back of Sullain's head and began pulling him closer toward Shiv. The Vicar and the Deathless made eye contact, and the former flinched but had nowhere to run. Udraal wouldn't allow it. Shiv saw his maker's cruelty then. Udraal wasn't kind or comforting. He simply used the softness of his touch and the pleasantness of his words as an incentive to make someone else surrender. A tension began to build within Shiv's chest. It was like a cord being drawn taut, lingering on the verge of snapping.

Udraal held Sullain in place directly across from Shiv, and for the first time, the Abyssal Lord looked surprised. "Is that Young Lord Arrow? You're still alive!" A laugh of genuine joy escaped Udraal. "I dare say the apple fell upward from the tree! So many sons fail to live up to the shadows of their father, and here you are, defying my expectations. By my calculations, you should have perished a long time ago." Slowly, that smile on his face faded. "Ah, I see. Harlon and Vera did not live up to the full bargain. They spared you."

At the mention of his parents' names, Shiv growled. "What the hell are you talking about? What do you mean they spared Adam?"

Udraal cocked his head and regarded Shiv with a look that bordered on disappointment. "Come now, boy, are you going to be like him?" He shook Sullain in his other hand, and the Vicar looked away, ashamed. "Are you going to deny what you already suspect? What could I be talking about?"

Through the tension and anger, Shiv centered his thoughts and considered Udraal's words. He looked between the Abyssal Lord and his friend, and a horrifying realization settled upon him. "You... My parents were supposed to kill Adam too?"

"It was recommended," Udraal said casually. "Several of the other experimental groups did just that."

"Experimental groups?" Adam whispered. The Gate Lord was still trying to process everything, and he winced as he struggled not to collapse under the weight of his wounds and suffering. Despite this, he remained standing. He glared at Udraal with as much hate as Shiv did just a few moments ago. "What do you mean, 'experimental groups'?"

Udraal frowned at Adam. "Come now. Your father had a fantastic Awareness skill. Don't tell me you're a little deaf. What could I mean? Think about what I'm saying. The subtext is clear."

But Adam didn't reply. Udraal rolled his eyes. "Okay, it's clear that neither of you is aware of the scientific method. It's a thing long-lost to most people across most worlds. To put it simply, you need to see if something does not work. You want to disprove certain things. And with the breadth of variables around every experiment, you want to have different outcomes. Hence, you have control groups, and you have treatment groups, also known as experimental groups." He paused then, waiting for either Shiv or Adam to come to the right conclusion.

"There's... there's more than one Deathless?" Adam asked with a gasp of disbelief.

Udraal squinted. "A bit off. No, there was more than one Deathless experimental group. At present, there is only one Deathless, not counting the bastardized creature Sullain made from my work." He chuckled then. "A Tarasque, Sullain. Of all things, a Tarasque. How did you even come close to controlling it?"

"A natural infusion of brain tissue," Sullain answered. "Cultivated over many years. It... it thinks it is me, sometimes. But also, it changed a bit. It..." Sullain shuddered as he broke down into a whimpering mess.

Shiv stared into the Vicar's eyes and saw the madness, the pain, the hollowing he inflicted.

Udraal finished his train of thought. "Ah, I see. So the Vitae made it think that it was my Deathless narrative, while your little brain transplant had it confused because it has your memories as well. How messy. How desperate. Still remarkable, though. You would have been quite the Legend if you weren't such a wretch." Sullain said nothing in his own defense, cowed by Udraal's presence and ruined by Shiv's mutilation. "I suppose it is fortunate that you weren't slain, young Lord Adam. Otherwise, I fear I might not have gotten back my most successful test subject so far."

Adam's jaw trembled. "Tell me," Udraal continued, "have you returned his sister yet?"

Shiv was taken aback. "Sister?"

"Yes, she was partially embedded in one of your skills. She should have been your constant companion across your entire life, a ghostly figure that developed alongside you." Udraal smiled widely, as if he knew one of Shiv's deepest secrets. "Come now. I made you. You can't hide these things from me. Where is she?" He looked around. "Is she trying to get behind me right now? Did she have the Path of the Shadow?"

And it was then that Shiv realized Udraal didn't know everything either. He had assumptions with regards to how Shiv's Path functioned, how his soul worked, and right now, his assumptions were leading him off in a strange and unexpected direction. Shiv was about to say something, but then he went along, looked past Udraal's shoulder, and shook his head. "Back off. He knows you're there."

Deception > [Error]

Unexpectedly, Udrael laughed once more. "Oh, good, he lies too."

"What?" Shiv said. His stomach dropped. He didn't understand what was happening anymore.

"The Abyssal Lord sees all," Sullain declared. "He plays with us. He prods and he discovers. Everything for his amusement or knowledge."

Udrael rolled his eyes. "You make me sound like a narcissist, sweet Vicar."

"I... I beg—"

But Udrael had no more interest in Sullain. Instead, his eyes were on Shiv once more. "I know that you don't have an invisible ghost twin that fights by your side. I lied. I wanted to see if you would lie back to me, to get a better gauge of who you are. You did. That makes you interesting." Then the smile faded from his face immediately. "But truthfully now, have you regrown the daughter and mother inside you yet? You're a Legend already. The amount of experiences you accumulated should be more than enough."

At Udrael's words, Adam tried to draw an arrow behind Shiv, and he growled with pain as he tugged at his bow. His body was broken. And where the heart was furious, and the spirit was willing, the flesh failed.

Udraal regarded Adam for a moment and then looked away. "Right. Understandable, but inconsequential. Not until you get your soul mended." He clapped both hands down on Sullain's shoulders, making him flinch. "So, are we ready to begin?"

"Begin what?" Shiv asked.

"I told you earlier, you're going to move your injuries over into Sullain here. It will also help you squeeze out that poisoned patch of Animancy old man Anthony plugged inside you."

"Please, no, mercy, please..." the Vicar moaned in dismay.

"Oh, Sullain. I thought you understood. I didn't bring you here because I was going to help you complete your revenge. That was your business, not mine. There's another thing you can't seem to get through your head: I'm not going to help you make up for your own failures. What kind of Pathbearer would you be if I did that? No, your past has ruined your future, and now my past has crippled your soul. So I'm going to use your present and your lack of a future to ensure that my experiment," he gestured toward Shiv, "is capable of maintaining himself and bringing about a proper Incursion." He looked back to the Deathless. "Now, do you have Animancy? Or just your Vitae?"

Shiv said nothing. Udraal guessed. "Just your Vitae, then. Fine. It will work as well. Have you shifted any damage across souls yet?"

Shiv was about to say no, if only out of spite. But then he remembered Can Hu, how it was mostly repaired, and how Udraal had a hand in its overall restoration. There was no point in lying to Udraal Thann right now, not when he knew more than he let on. Not when he's deliberately trying to screw with me either, Shiv thought, grimacing at Udraal's deliberate deception a few moments ago.

"Also yes; Alright then, Deathless," Udraal said, offering Sullain to Shiv as if he was giving a lion a piece of meat. "Have at him. Let's see what you can do."

Chapter 187 (II) Udraal [II]

Sullain shuddered as he held his hands up. "Udraal, Udraal, please. He has taken all from me. Do not let him have my life as well."

"Sullain," Udraal said, sounding absolutely exasperated. "We're already here. Please what? Please what? What life? What hope? You can't make it right anymore. In fact, you should have held your city all those years ago. You should have stopped Roland." He paused and then shrugged. "You should have. But Roland exceeds a great many of our expectations. And so I give you my lament, for I truly do not wish you dead. But you must die. You must. For you have interfered with my experiment."

His fingers began to sink into Sullain's shoulders, and Shiv could have sworn he heard the Vicar's collarbones crack. A loud howl of pain sounded from Sullain, and Udraal's expression never changed. He just looked tired, annoyed that someone else couldn't understand what he was saying. "And more importantly, what made you think you could take my work and pervert it? What made you think that I was done with this world?"

Sullain gasped as he struggled against Udraal, kicking and hammering his limbs. To Shiv's astonishment, Sullain proved to be the stronger of the two. Udraal's arms shattered, blood splashed, and bones jutted free. But before Sullain could do anything further, another version of Udraal emerged from his planted flag. And he held Sullain in place by gripping the scruff of his neck.

"No, don't. Don't! I'm not ready! I'm not ready!" the Vicar cried aloud. The Udraal with his arms broken looked at the other and simply shrugged. He marched away, even as Sullain wailed on, splashing into the Animancy-infused standard. A few moments later, another Udraal emerged.

Ritual of the Dichotomous Soul, Shiv realized. There were a lot more than one Udraal because his bodies were scattered—all bound together by the same soul.

"You have no idea how much I envy you right now," both Udraals said at the same time. They also had their eyes locked on Shiv, and the Deathless did all he could to not shiver. The scene was uncanny. The orcs around them were watching, observing how Shiv faced his maker; meanwhile, Udraal was actively goading him into shifting his soul burns over to Sullain.

"Deathless, please, please don't," Sullain cried aloud. "I will forswear my vengeance. I will let you go. I forgive you for all that you've done."

"Did you hear that, Deathless?" Udraal said dryly. "He forgives you. Too bad I do not forgive you, Sullain. I pity you. I understand your state of mind. But I do not forgive you for affecting my work. This is more than just us; this is for the enduring immortality and preservation of everyone. And you almost ruined that."

"I was wrong. I was a fool. Udraal..." Sullain sobbed.

Udraal frowned sadly. "That Tarrasque, it belongs to me now. What I made flows through its body and curdles inside its very bones. And said Tarrasque is now threatening my homeworld, the place where most of my experiments still reside. Have you no foresight, Sullain? Did you truly not sense that this would come back around to bite you?"

"I can make it right!" Sullain screamed. "Udraal, please, if you..." He drew in a long breath as he spoke his next words. "If you would but restore me, if you return my Legendary skill, I will see the Tarrasque contained. I will offer it to you as a gift!"

"There's no need for that," Udraal replied, "and there's no need for you. I'll just go get it myself." He scoffed. "Why would I need you? Now, Deathless, please, show me what you've learned, if you've learned anything at all."

But Shiv didn't show Udraal what he'd learned. He retracted the Vitae back into his body and simply glared at his maker. A moment of silence passed, and Udraal sighed.

"Ah, petulance, is it?"

"No," Shiv said, his anger turning from hot to cold. It was like a chunk of ice inside him now, and he was beginning to get the measure of his maker. "I'm just not a dog. I don't do what everyone else tells me, not when I don't want to."

At that, an arrow sailed through the air. It tore a gap across the flesh of existence, and it struck Sullain, and the Udraal holding him. But it skipped off their bodies, as if repelled by an unseen field. Udraal ignored the dimensional arrow altogether, as he and Shiv began a stare-down. While the Deathless was glaring, Udraal studied him with an inquisitive glint in his eyes.

"So how are you going to fix your spiritual burns, then? Would you have done it if I hadn't ordered you?"

Shiv considered Sullain, saw the absolute terror in the man's eyes, and realized he didn't care. Sullain, for all his begging, for all his present weakness, had no issue condemning an entire town to death for the actions of one man. On top of that, he had no issue unleashing an undying Tarrasque on the world.

"Probably," was Shiv's answer. "I don't much care about him. He has it coming."

"Hasit coming," Udraal said with a slight hum of amusement. "Your notions of justice are brutishly adorable. And simple. I quite like it. But you're not going to hurt him now because I told you to."

"You don't own me," Shiv almost snarled.

Udraal considered his statement and then nodded. "I do not own you. I do not wish to own you. Slaves are such feeble, worthless things. I did, however, have a hand in making you." And before he could say anything else, another dimensional arrow came, bursting free from a rift. Udraal caught this one and flicked it aside. "Do you mind, Young Lord Arrow? I'm having a conversation right now."

"I'm going to kill you," Adam rasped. There was hate in his pain, and that hate gave him the strength to continue standing, to prop himself up against the wall and try to fire another shot.

"Well then, Deathless, since you're not a slave of mine, would you mind restraining your friend? The attempts on my life are getting annoying, and though I do appreciate his unyielding determination to kill someone he simply can't, I will cripple and incapacitate him so we can finish our conversation without further interruptions. And I will do it in ways you cannot fix. And that way he will stay until I bother to restore him."

"Adam," Shiv said. He looked at his friend, and the Gate Lord's expression was heartbreaking.

"You heard him. It was his doing. All of it was his doing. My mother, my sister, my life. It was supposed to come from you as well."

"Technically," Udraal interjected, "your mother was supposed to go for Adam. She was meant to draw some of his genetic material from his corpse. After that, she was meant to inject it into her egg to make a complete set."

Adam was speechless with horror, but the rage inside Shiv combusted.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Shiv spat. "Why—Fucking why do all that? I saw what they did to... to..."

"The ritual demands death and violence. Yes. Very disturbing. But necessary due to Roland and Rose's exposure to the Great One's Dreaming. One needs to die to break their connection to the Great One." The way Udraal casually recounted the details of his atrocious experiments left the Deathless horrified. It took a lot to faze him. The First Blood managed to do it. The Recollector was an aberration that should have never been, but Udraal just didn't care. Udraal only wanted to see what the outcome of his experiment was.

"Again, your anger is understandable," Udraal carried on. "But right now, focus on getting yourselves fixed. Focus on doing the pragmatic thing. Don't think I'm not sympathetic to your loathing, but it also doesn't really matter." Udraal seemed actively disappointed now. He threw Sullain aside and placed his hands on his hips. The other version of himself started shaking his head and walked back to the banner. With a flash of Animancy, he disappeared. "Another of me is needed elsewhere. A great many things are in motion; I need to catch up on all I missed since I was gone."

Shiv didn't move an inch. Udraal sighed again. "Listen to me. I am impressed that you managed to endure this long. I am impressed that you avoided the Ascendants and somehow broke out of your cell on your own. What confounds me is your refusal, however, to deal with the problem right in front of you."

"Which is you," Shiv said, gesturing to him.

"No. It is the fact that you are still untrained and let yourself be trapped in this prison in the first place. I understand the main reason you are here is because you exposed yourself to the Ascendants while fighting the Tarrasque." Udraal clicked his tongue. "A fight that you lost control of. Very poor planning, dear boy. When you don't control the variables, you often become one."

Shiv stared at Udraal with disbelief. "You're seriously fucking criticizing us for being inefficient right now?"

"Why else would I criticize you?" Udraal said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "Of course I'm going to criticize you for being inefficient. You're a Pathbearer. You need to face the problems and solve them. Languishing in your emotions... You can be emotional if you want, but languishing is not very useful. Let this be a lesson for the both of you. Hate, if you must, but hate effectively. Hate, and do something with it. That goes for you as well, Young Lord." He smiled at Adam, and the tension in the air climbed even higher.

"I will see you slain, Udraal Thann," Adam seethed. "I don't care if it takes this life or the next. I don't care if it takes one year or ten thousand. I will see you slain for all that you've done. To me, my family, to this world, to Shiv."

A pang of emotion passed through the Deathless. He barely noticed it, underneath his thundering heartbeat.

Udraal nodded nonchalantly. "I'll have to try and remember that, but I suspect it will blur with the illimitable amount of threats I've received in the past." He smirked slightly. "You are unique, Adam Arrow. Don't think you're not. What you aren't, however, is special." His smile died on his face, and a shadow crawled over him once more. Shiv noticed it, then. The shadow was always there inside him, a darkness he simply held at bay. "For you live under the System, and under its boot, no one is special. All is fuel. All is feed."

A beat of silence followed, and for the first time, Udraal seemed to realize there were others in the room with him. He frowned slightly to himself, but said nothing. Instead, he regarded Sullain, still crumpled in a heap on the floor, and pressed his lips together. "So tell me, experiment of mine, if I hadn't arrived, how would you have escaped?"

"Probably wouldn't have," Shiv admitted. The words tasted bitter on his lips, but he wasn't going to deny them. "We were in a real bad spot."

"I know. I know, because you, little more than a boy, tried to face Veronica Chandler and the rest of her godly circus. Much like the Tarrasque, that's not a fight you should be involved in. You need to be more self-interested. More self-protective." Udraal hummed. Then smirked. "Use your Vitae on me."

"What?" Shiv said.

"Is there something confusing about my words?"

Shiv stared at the man who shaped his Path, his life.

“Use it. Do it. Try to break me. You don’t like me much. I see your anger. I accept it. Go. Reach into me with the Vitae. Show me what you have learned.”

Faced with the gleeful smile on Udraal’s face, the groaning Sullain, and so many eyes on him, Shiv swallowed.

And made his choice.

Instead of striking at Udraal directly with Vitaemancy, Shiv channeled all his Unique Skills at once. He went Non-Sequitur, bursting free from his body while he wrapped Udraal with threads of Vitaemancy. As soon as he did, however, he felt his magic get driven back. His threads were swatted aside as red-white mana exploded out from Udraal, rupturing free of his being like vines. They shredded through the world and struck Shiv as if razors digging through his flesh, even while he was apart from reality.

The Deathless cried out in pain as he clutched himself. New wounds wept blood from his shredded torso, but his attention remained on Udraal. The Abyssal Lord seemed unaffected, but another version of him, faint and ghostly, fell through the floor in a cocoon of Vitae. It was like a husk being shed from a soul. As it vanished, another ghost emerged over Udraal.

A ghost that resembled Shiv.

A ghost woven from Vitae itself.

“Ah. Managed to sever ourselves from the System’s awareness with one of your Unique Skills, have we?” Udraal nodded with appreciation. Superimposed over him, Shiv’s clone glared down at his original self with a brutal snarl. “Well. I think I will take a copy of that skill as well. But first—since you won’t

cooperate—let me decide in your stead. I'll help you. Practical education is always my preference anyway.”

And before Shiv or Adam could do anything, the ghost-clone of Shiv unleashed a stream of Vitae. White and red swallowed Shiv, pierced through Adam, and connected them to the screaming Sullain.

Life seared through the Deathless’s flesh. Life, power, and the careful touch of someone who knew his own soul better than he did.

Udraal breathed out. “So. Let us start with the burns. Are you ready, Sullain?”

“No! NO! UDRAAL! MERCY! UDRAAL!”

“Hm. No. It’s not up to you. But I might fix you after if the feeling strikes me.”

Chapter 188 (I) Decider

Animancy might just be the single most complicated art form anyone can learn. On top of being an art form, it is also a science, for it is related to every magical and natural law in existence. In summation, it is a collision between the mutable and the historical, coming together to form the fullness of someone's legend in relation to the System.

This is also why most practitioners of Animancy have a tendency to kill themselves when things go wrong. For you see, the System is aware of what you are doing, but it doesn't appreciate it. It might not be conscious, it might not have a sense of personhood, but it does have a sense of self-preservation. And if you can tweak its narrative, if you can adjust its variables, then what worth is the System? No, the System is put in place to give structure and to lead us down a specific path. A path of struggle, strife, and growth. A Path that further shapes our souls by feeding the skills that comprise us.

Before one takes up Animancy, it's best that they understand the depths of Necromancy, of Divination, of most magical skills, the fundamentals of engineering, the archaic laws of the pre-Integration, paired with a grasp of mythology and storytelling. Things only become more complicated from here.

No two Pathbearers are the same. No two Pathbearers share the same experiences. And when you reach into their skills, when you try to adjust who they are, you have to do it carefully, in a way that flows naturally with the narrative. You can't simply change someone's internalized legend at a whim. You will be struck down for this.

The past, to some extent, is quite immutable. The System remembers, and it will know if you try to forcibly change things, as mentioned before. As such, someone who evolved their Physicality by besting a were-tiger in a wrestling match cannot simply have their evolution changed when an Animancer adjusts their legend to having them overcome a dragon, or even two were-tigers, to a lesser extent.

But this doesn't mean that legends are unchangeable. In fact, if the Pathbearer in question further evolves and does overcome a dragon or two were-tigers, then the connected skill, or another skill in relation to the skill you're modifying, can be used as a transplant. Legends can be drawn from one place to another, rearranging the structure of said person. It is still a delicate art, and assembling this narrative badly will result in death, or the bleed-over.

And this is where Animancy becomes a potent weapon, for you see, everyone exists in relation to Integration, and with the slightest touch, you can see one blended with the greater narrative that rules over us all.

So, Animancer, wield your power carefully, for it is double-edged, and there is another hand holding it, always.

-Animancy: The Tale of Tales

Shiv seized a blast of Vitae before it could fully burrow into his soul. With gritted teeth, he pushed back, using his own Vitaemancy to wrestle against Udraal. The Abyssal Lord might have copied his power, but that didn't mean Shiv was going to lie down and accept his fate.

Sullain cried out. Adam bit back a scream. The orcs flinched, giving a wide berth to the unfolding chaos within the guard station. Beside Shiv, Gone shivered, a vibration of chromomantic speed running like electric volts through her body. Her eyes narrowed at Udraal, but she did nothing. Fear ruled over her, and she chose her life instead of risking it for Shiv's.

"Truly, you're going to wrestle with me right now?" Udraal asked, sounding more fascinated than offended. "Why? Why are you so determined to make this pointlessly difficult?"

"I told you before, I'm not your dog." Shiv's words ended in a growl as he left context once more. A twitching mass of Vitae erupted from his body just as Udraal's power tore through his physical shell. He felt his vitality plunge, but the space between him and Udraal was but a scant few meters. He slammed into his maker once more, but rather than targeting Udraal himself, he seized his ghostly clone and tore it apart. Vectors sliced into the ghost's body, and bursts of red and white mana sprayed free from its rupturing form. Meanwhile, the Deathless himself turned his Vitae on Udraal.

Shiv drew hard on Udraal's vitality. A channel formed between the Deathless and Integration itself. But a counterforce dragged at Shiv's core. A wrenching pain clawed its way out of his wounded soul as he felt Udraal wrench on his vitality as well. "Come now, boy," Udraal said. "You're not the only one with that skill. You cannot have my vitality. But here. Have my soul."

The right side of Udraal's lip curved up in a faint smile, and he held out his arms. Instead of resisting Shiv, he let the Deathless pour his Vitae in deeper. Shiv unleashed a flood of red and white inside Udraal, and he began groping through the depths of the Abyssal Lord's soul. However, he found a resistance waiting for him. A flare of faint blue ignited at Udraal's core. It promptly collapsed around Shiv's Vitae, and it burned him. It burned him like nothing had burned him before.

The Deathless howled. Blackness burst behind his vision as he nearly toppled, but against all odds, he remained standing. It might have been because of his anger. It might have been out of sheer stubborn defiance, but he landed on his left knee, and he forced himself back up. He was beyond pain now. His body was practically coming apart. His skin tumbled free from his flesh in thick clumps, and it felt like his veins were flooded with molten lead as Shiv shuddered.

Udraal loomed over him, simply wagging a single finger. Spell shapes formed from Animancy danced around Shiv, becoming a constellation that left him enchained. He heard Adam cry out for him, saw three more Veilpiercers slam into Udraal's chest. Each of them dissolved as the Abyssal Lord unleashed his Animantic aura. It folded over Shiv, burning him even worse.

Shiv felt like he was being shredded apart. Entire sections of his flesh were hissing free from his bones. It was like he was being turned into gas.

Yeah. Ow. Seven out of ten.

Udraal's casual smile flattened in a disbelieving stare as Shiv held on. "Does this not bother you?"

"Just pain," Shiv growled. "Nothing more."

The Abyssal Lord's jaw dropped slightly. "Just... pain? Aren't you a tough one?" A beat followed. "System, not even a scream from Animancy burns. Well. I can't complain about your pain tolerance, for one."

But Shiv never drew his Vitae out from Udraal. He kept it sheathed, and he continued pushing deeper. Even if this was going to burn him to death, he would find a way to tear Udraal asunder. He would leave the man with an eternal wound. Shiv shaped his Vitae into a pair of tearing claws. They cleaved out in opposing directions, but he found Udraal's soul to be harder than Orichalcum. Harder, perhaps, than even the Tarrasque's crystalline shell. All the while, Udraal continued burning him. Slowly, the faint look of amusement on Udraal's face faded, and it was replaced with an arched eyebrow.

"What is your plan, exactly?" Udraal asked. "Beyond impressing me with your staggering endurance."

Shiv didn't reply to him. He focused every bit of his effort on leaving Udraal broken. He used his Causal Scar-Giver and his Dead-Tainted feats. He activated his Icon of the Paindrinker blessing, and as he wielded all these things in tandem against Udraal, the Abyssal Lord waited for him to offer a reply. When Shiv didn't say anything, content to use violence to speak for him instead, Udraal rolled his eyes and gently took Shiv by the arms.

"No, no. Stop. Boy, stop."

Shiv ignored him.

Udraal sighed. He placed the palm of his hand on Shiv's forehead, and he spoke aloud. A wave of Psychomancy crashed into Shiv, but it was accompanied by something else. A feeling of peace and overwhelming calm radiated out from Udraal and suffused Shiv's consciousness. Every fiber of his being demanded that he surrender, that he obey Udraal's request. Shiv's Shapeless Tides held the Psychomancy at bay, but the other aspect, the social aspect, tore straight through.

Psycho-Cartography: You should listen to him. He is the wisest man you will ever know. There is no harm in listening to him. You will learn much if you listen to him.

Despite all this, despite having his emotions and skill compromised, the Deathless clung on to Udraal's soul. He never stopped trying. He would never stop trying. It didn't matter what Udraal did to him. He knew that he needed to protect Adam, to protect the other prisoners, to protect himself. He wouldn't be anyone's slave, no matter what.

Udraal's mouth formed a perfect 'o' by this point, and a look of growing surprise crawled over him. "I see that the Tarrasque mind template I put in you is even more potent than expected." He let out a slight chuckle, and then he withdrew his hand from Shiv's forehead. Afterward, he cupped both hands behind his back, as if a master beholding the astonishing efforts of a disciple.

Shiv continued lashing at Udraal's soul over and over again. A building sense of futility was born within him as he realized nothing he did thus far had affected Udraal at all. And the Abyssal Lord remained passive. He simply observed Shiv. Sometimes he closed his eyes, feeling what Shiv was doing to him. At other moments, he lashed Shiv with bursts of Animancy. The Deathless cried out. The pain was incredible. But by now, pain was a neighbor, an old acquaintance. And it would take far more than pain to make Shiv stop, to turn from his chosen path. Nothing was going to stop him. Nothing—

A sound came from behind, the sound of a body hitting the ground. Shiv stopped. He turned around and saw Adam lying there, unmoving. He cast his Biomancy at the Gate Lord, wrapping him in a mana hydra. At once, Adam's many wounds, soul-deep and impossible to heal using mere Biomancy, were rendered within Shiv's mana field, and a roiling sense of horror built within the Deathless. Adam's burns were severe, and his organs were shutting down. His heart was slowing, his eyes were fluttering. He had managed to keep standing for a long while, but his Righteous Dawn had finally faded at some point. He was spent utterly, spiritually and physically.

Instead of focusing on Udrael, Shiv cast his Vitae into Adam. The Abyssal Lord did nothing still. He continued watching, as if just an observer to the unfolding scene.

"Shit, Adam, Adam, listen to me, you're gonna be fine. I'm going to..." Shiv wasn't fully sure what he planned to do, and for a brief moment, he almost panicked, but then he remembered how he mended Adam's mother, and he repeated the very same action. He began cycling Vitae between himself and Adam. Wounds shifted. The Gate Lord groaned weakly, yet Shiv continued on. He continued until he managed to filter more of the injuries over to himself, and as Shiv took on more of Adam's burns, he felt himself grow weaker. It didn't matter. He could deal with pain; he could deal with weakness.

When he drew away all of Adam's damage, he would reach out to reality or someone nearby—and for the first time, Shiv's eyes snapped to Sullain. The Vicar was huddled in a ball, and his eyes were wide with terror.

"Not many options left, it seems," Udrael muttered.

"Fuck you," Shiv hissed. But Udrael was right.

Immediately, the Deathless reached out, casting a net of red and white around the Vicar.

"No, please!" Sullen cried out, but Shiv had no easy options, and he was done considering the ethics of what he was about to do. It didn't matter that he might be playing into Udrael's hands. It didn't matter that he felt uncomfortable. Shiv would inflict far more than just murder on Sullain if it meant Adam's restoration.

Soon he began cycling his own wounds over into Sullain, and the vicar screamed like a dying hog. What Shiv knew to be incredible agony was utterly unbearable for Sullain, and soon Adam's torment was added on top of that. By the end, Sullivan was shaking, foaming at the mouth, and wrapped in so many burns he barely looked human. He was little more than a lump of flesh, held together by charred bone and exposed organs. He gasped violently, his heart hammered inside his chest, his lungs pulsed, but then a wheeze left his throat as they deflated.

Then Shiv caught sight of something. There was a glint of the faintest blue inside the Vicar. It was a glint that circulated between various spots inside his soul. It jumped from place to place, but as Shiv focused his Awareness, he saw that glint circulating faster, as if there was a circuit or a network it followed. And at that point, Shiv saw his Farsight level up. There were no more errors. His eyes widened as he realized he had managed to expel the poison left inside him and cast it over into Sullain's soul.

A massive surge of levels and relief pulsed through Shiv as everything bottlenecked within him began to flow once more.

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Deception 27 > 33

Multi-Tasking 30 > 38

Dodge 22 > 31

Philosophy 18 > 24

Striking Proficiency 45 > 50 (Skill Evolution Imminent)

"Well, it seems that you've achieved an instinctive understanding of vitality transference from your previous experience." Udraal clapped, and there was nothing sarcastic about his action. He seemed genuinely proud of Shiv. "Your intuition is proving to be most useful. Very good."

That filled the Deathless with nothing but fury.

He turned on Udraal now. His body was mostly healed, his soul restored and stable. His period of vulnerability was over, and Shiv was tired, pissed, and done with all this bullshit. He was done with the Ascendants, done with Udraal, done with being dragged from one place to another, running into one problem after another. His rage boiled at a breaking point. It had been so long since he had snapped that his hands were shaking. He was long since past his threshold for violence and struggle. And here Udraal was, goading him on, looking at him as if he were a prized pupil.

And as Shiv snarled at Udraal like a ravenous mastiff about to tear into someone's thigh, Udraal himself seemed pleased. "Now, now, enough of that. It's meaningless. You've done what I wanted you to, albeit in a very roundabout, very pointlessly violent way. Was all that you did earlier necessary? You know you cannot hurt me, Deathless. Not as you are now."

"Don't give a shit," Shiv hissed. "You don't touch me. You don't touch Adam. Not unless I tell you to. Not ever."

"And you think that's up to you? That you can demand this of me?" There was no threat in Udraal's voice. It was a sincere question, and it just made Shiv want to beat the Abyssal Lord to death even more.

"I don't care who you are. I don't care how powerful you are. I will find a way to hurt you. I will tear into your soul. And if I can't do that... If I can't do that..." For the first time, Shiv stopped for a moment and thought, thinking about how he might be able to wound Udraal, or at least threaten him.

The Abyssal Lord was powerful. He intervened on Shiv's behalf and stalled the Ascendants. Even a Legend was helpless against the combined might of the Avatars. Shiv and a small army of prisoners were overwhelmed, cornered, and would have been recaptured if not for Udraal's sudden intervention and the Composer's delay. But Udraal had made several things known. First, he was here for Shiv. Not only for Shiv, but mainly for Shiv. That meant the Deathless had value to Udraal. That meant he mattered.

And that gave Shiv an advantage.

"No other Deathless but me, huh?" Shiv suddenly muttered.

Udraal's eyes narrowed. He quickly realized where Shiv was going. "Boy," he said, and for the first time, hints of apprehension leaked into his voice. "You wouldn't..." And then he stared into Shiv's eyes and let out a grunt of disbelief. "Oh... You actually would. System, you're actually fearless. How... disconcerting."

Shiv simply chuckled humorlessly. "Yeah. Some of us learn to handle our problems with death quietly. But I'll tell you this again right now. You don't touch me. You don't touch Adam. You don't do anything unless we let you. And if you do, I'm gonna let myself fade out of existence. I'll let my vitality fizzle out until there's nothing left."

The Challenger is watching intently.

Udraal blinked, utterly flabbergasted. "You would kill yourself to spite me. You don't even know what I'm about to say. You don't even know me. You don't know what I want."

"I don't give a godsdamn what you want!" Shiv snapped. "I don't give a shit what anyone wants! I have a World Quest that has practically everyone I meet hunting my ass! I got thrown into a prison by the people who were supposed to be my gods, my government! One of my orcs just died! I barely escaped capture from said felonious gods! I have people I care about that are still missing, that I don't know where they are, that I don't know what their condition is, and I need to get them back! And here you are, out of nowhere!"

By now, redness was crawling across Shiv's vision. So much anger burned inside of him that he nearly lost control, that he nearly went berserk again, but Shiv held himself together. Swinging blindly like a flailing child would not protect him against Udraal. He was learning that lesson over and over again. His anger needed to be spent wisely, with focus and precision. The first hint of worry on Udraal's face was Shiv's threat to end himself, and he would continue exploiting that threat if need be. He would go through with it without hesitation if need be. But only as a means of controlling Udraal.

Psycho-Cartography 75 > 76

"And here you are," Shiv continued, "all these years later, after whatever fucked-up deal you made with my parents to make me, after everything you did, for whatever reason you did it. You're here, taunting us, playing with us."

"I saved you," Udraal said, sounding almost offended. "Where would you be without me?"

Shiv scoffed in disgust. "Is that what you did? Yeah, I guess you distracted the Ascendants and helped us get away, but this doesn't feel like a rescue, Udraal. This feels like we are trading one captor for another."

The Abyssal Lord frowned and shook his head. "What an absurd notion. I have no intention of taking you as a slave. I just want you to continue the experiment."

"I'm less than a slave, then," Shiv said, his voice falling lower, the menace inside of him growing. "Just a thing for you to use, to learn about the System so you can strike it down from the inside?"

"We are all just things to the System," Udraal replied. It sounded like he repeated this line a lot. "And we are all used by someone else in one way or another, used by ourselves as well. But fine, I'll accept your demand for agency, at least for now. I don't need to forcibly control you for you to do what I want. In fact, I expect you to do what I want because our interests are quite aligned."

"Yeah, somehow I doubt that," Shiv replied.

"You doubt that I want you to grow stronger?" Udraal said. "You doubt that I want you to trigger the largest Incursion Earth has seen yet? Say otherwise right now, and I will bow down and offer my sincerest apologies."

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Shiv fell silent.

"You doubt it because you're doubting things out of spite, boy. You don't even know what I want. You don't know the deal that your parents made, why you exist, what the point of the Deathless project is. You don't know a great many things. Now you stand before me, raging and raving like an angry child faced with a long-absent father." Udraal pressed his lips together and shrugged. "It's understandable. I, in fact, understand and see your perspective. How could I not? I'm not offended by your anger, your distrust. I'm disappointed in your blindness and your stubbornness earlier. You should have tried a few different strategies instead of grabbing at my soul and letting me burn you with Animancy for so long. By the System, what has Roland been teaching you?"

"Roland didn't teach me anything!" Shiv shouted. "Roland couldn't decide what he wanted to do with me! I spent my entire life as a Pathless! I haven't been Deathless for long! I've been nothing for a long time! Nothing! For most of my life, I was nothing! And now you come back to stick your fingers in my soul? Take my skill? Yeah, no. I'm not taking that shit."

Suddenly, Udraal frowned. A look of confusion came over him. "Wait, Pathless? I haven't checked in for quite a while, but... How long were you Pathless? You were Pathless as a child, up to the point you were ten, but past that, how long?"

Shiv stared at him. "I got my Path a few months ago, at most."

And Udraal's expression turned astonished. "So late... I see. It activated upon your first death." He tapped a finger against his head. "Interesting, interesting. We'll need to talk more about this. But first, tend to Pathbearer Arrow. He is coming around."

A groan came from Adam, and Shiv rushed over and propped his friend up. The Gate Lord's eyes opened, and he found himself staring up at Shiv.

"You alright?" Shiv asked.

Adam felt at his body and realized he wasn't burned anymore. Adam groaned. "I had a terrible dream. I had a dream that the person who engineered the ritual that resulted in my mother's and sister's deaths is here. Oh, bloody hells." Adam looked past Shiv to see Udraal, and his eyes went from fluttering blinks to a hardened glare.

Nearby, other prisoners groaned. Shiv realized then they were burned as well, and winced as he understood what he needed to do. Sullain was still rasping nearby, rolling around on the ground. He could still be used, but he wouldn't survive all the burns. Something felt wrong about transferring all these soul wounds into Sullain, but that something was already past the point of no return. Shiv had already unleashed his power on Sullain, done what Udraal wanted him to.

For a moment, Shiv considered if he could transfer the burns afflicting the other prisoners onto Udraal himself, but something inside him told him that it wasn't likely. Udraal was powerful. Udraal knew Animancy far better than Shiv, and with how he wielded his own Vitality Drain Skill, Shiv didn't think he could touch him at all. Not like this.

"Welcome back, young Lord Arrow," Udraal said flatly. "I do suspect, though, that the reason why Roland didn't train you properly, my Deathless, is because he's still alive." Udraal took a few steps closer, looking down at Shiv. "Yes, in fact, I'm sure of it. Did you know that your father has a very brittle psyche? If you had died, and he was left with absolutely no one, something inside him would have crumbled, and he would have made one of two choices with my Deathless. The first would be to murder the child. A possibility, of course, but not a very likely one. He was always too kind."

Udraal gave a smile, as if he was amused by the fact. "The second, and far more likely outcome, is him adopting my Deathless. With that, there would be a most broken family. The man, and the only thing left of his original family. A creature born of violence, bloodshed, trauma, but also his final link to the friends that betrayed him, and to the ones that he lost. This was all but assured to me through Psychology."

A cold feeling gripped Shiv as Udraal recounted his plan. Adam was supposed to die. Adam was supposed to die, and that was supposed to unbalance Roland enough that he took Shiv as a sort of adopted son. Shiv couldn't imagine such a life. Couldn't imagine Roland taking him in after everything else that had happened.

But as he considered it, his Psycho-Cartography spoke up. It's possible. We don't know Roland very well, but he's emotional. And when people get emotional, when people are personally afflicted, they can do all kinds of strange things.

"You absolute monster," Adam gasped with near feral hatred. "You godsdamned fuck!"

Udraal considered the Gate Lord's accusation and angled his head. "I potentially half-agree with that statement. I wouldn't say I'm an absolute monster, but I'm willing to do a great many things to see my goals furthered. I didn't personally intend to hurt your family. It's just that you are born to a powerful lineage. Your father, especially, is a remarkable Pathbearer. He survived a great many things that he shouldn't have. And that is why I chose him. That and the fact that he managed to best one of my vessels. I guided him to the depths of the Abyss afterward. And there he and the rest of the Eclipse Breakers entered the Great One's dreams. Roland was changed. Your mother was somewhat changed. The others..."

Udraal trailed off as he looked at Shiv. "Your parents, however, were lacking in certain ways. They weren't terrible Pathbearers, but they didn't have the... How should I put it? They didn't have it. That special thing that makes you go beyond the limitations of your skills. That special thing that makes you a true struggler. They didn't have it, but I think you do. In fact, I know you do. Anyhow, it's because of that moment that your fates were sealed."

Again, Udraal spoke so casually that Shiv felt a rush of nausea pass through him.

"Life is terribly cruel," Udraal continued. "Don't think I don't understand that. In fact, my parents know that more than I do. I had a mother once." The Abyssal Lord paused, and Shiv caught a flash of pain behind Udraal's eyes. "Well, I still have a mother. She isn't truly lost. She's just been cast out, forgotten, taken from this world by the Great One's dreaming. The System still has records of her. And someday, someday soon," he grinned at Shiv, "I will see her brought back. I have the means now. Right here before me."

And Shiv had a feeling he wasn't going to enjoy this. "You're going to implant her in one of my skills," Shiv said. "You're going to make me bring her back, just like I brought Rose back."

"Correct," Udraal said, "if it is at all possible. I aim to keep my hopes contained. Rose Van Erren was a special case, infused through transplanted skill and ritual. I expected her daughter to be birthed first through you. She was a clean slate, someone without a designated Path and without an accumulation of legends. It should have been an easier rebirth when you developed a skill suited for her. But it seems that your Path has surprised me once more. She really should be back by now... Her absence is troubling."

The Abyssal Lord sighed as he began to stroll around. He walked back toward the center of the lobby and placed a hand on his Animancy standard. "There are a great many things I'm learning right now. I can't confess to saying... I can't claim to be omniscient or omnipotent. In fact, I'm very fallible."

He placed something within his banner and then turned away. "So far, Deathless, you're proving to be more of a surprise than anything else. I've had a great many expectations about you and theoretical guesses as to how you might turn out, but now, standing here looking at you, you are outside the context of my expectations. Part of that is pleasing, and another part is very frustrating. It's the loss of control, but also the discovery of things I didn't think of before. Like that skill you keep using on me, the one that makes me forget you exist for a few seconds when your body is destroyed. What is that called?"

Shiv didn't tell him.

Udraal stared at him for a moment, and then his eyes flashed a faint blue. "Outside Context Problem, is it? No, that was the previous evolution. What's the current one called?"

Shiv still didn't answer.

Udraal shook his head. "I will find out eventually. You're just making this frustrating. Regardless, now that you've pulled most of your burns out of your body, we can continue with our education. Sullain? Vicar, are you still alive?" Udraal called aloud.

Sullain shook on the ground, and from squeaking lungs, he muttered prayer after prayer. "Great One, Great One, rise. Great One, rise from your slumber and save me. Great One, have I not been a worthwhile servant? Have I not been faithful?"

"He's still alive," Udraal said dryly. "That means we can keep using him as a subject. So, have at it." He gestured toward Shiv. "Make sure the rest of your little fellowship is restored. It's good practice for you."

Shiv glared at Udraal for a long moment, but the Abyssal Lord just looked back at him with a flat expression. "My boy, you've already broken him. You've already condemned him to a forthcoming death. You shattered his greatest skill, left him crippled, broken at the spirit, and now you've moved all your burns into him. What more can you possibly do to remedy this situation? Are you going to pull the burns back out? Are you going to reassume that ownership over these many wounds?"

Shiv knew Udraal was right about that fact, but still, going along with the Abyssal Lord felt wrong. And that made the Deathless take another option.

"No. You heal them instead," Shiv snapped.

Udraal blinked. "You want me to fix them?" He gestured at the other prisoners.

"I'm telling you to do it," Shiv said without any hint of shame. "You are going to fix them, and I want you to do it without bargaining or rejecting it. You owe me that much."

"I owe you?" Udraal replied with a near cackle. "I owe you. I..."

"Yes," Shiv said with a building growl of anger. "You made me. I didn't ask to be. I didn't ask for you to make me with an atrocity. Adam didn't ask you to murder his mother and sister. Roland didn't ask you to break him. No one asked for this. It was your doing. So right now, you're going to do me a favor. A free one. Fix them. Or I end this experiment right now."

Shiv immediately cast out some of his Vitae—and promptly started shattering himself into puffs of mana with his Shapeless Tides. He kept going without slowing, breaking more and more of himself as death drew close.

Udraal fell silent for a long moment, and he folded his arms. He briefly considered being petulant. Shiv could read it on his face as well. But then, finally, he threw his hands out by his sides and shrugged. "Very well. I will educate you directly. You're being very, very immature about this. What pointless brinksmanship—pointed at me, no less. How unreasonable."

"I'm being perfectly unreasonable, asshole," Shiv shot back. "I'm just my own man. Not someone you can goad around. Especially after what you did."

"What I did," Udraal muttered, "is save you. You don't seem to be fixating on that. No. Always the long-distant past. The dark and troubled atrocities that were made, never the wonders I've created. Everyone's always so ungrateful, caring nothing about my urge to see the System struck down and utopia to be created."

Udraal waved a hand, and a splashing wave of Animancy emanated from him. The orcs down the hall immediately fled. Several teleported. The rest blurred as they turned into a burst of motion. Gone was a bolt of lightning as she escaped. She tore down the hall along with most of the orcs as the Animancy splashed over Candles and Five, neither in any condition to run.

A pang of pain washed through Shiv as he remembered Bonk. Bonk had been burned too, but Bonk had died. The orc didn't get a grand finale. No final blaze of glory. One moment, he was pulling Shiv away from the carnage; the next, Veronica had spat a command, and the mass of the orc was split in two. For all the System cared about having people struggle, for having people overcome challenges, it gave no quarter, no hint of remorse when the moment came.

Udraal shaped Animancy spells of such staggering complexity that Shiv could barely decipher them. Adam's eyes widened as well, and Shiv found the Gate Lord taking a step back. A flood of different patterns swirled out from Udraal like a twisting chain. Soon, those twisting chains became even larger spell symbols, and the spell symbols expanded into strange patchworks of geometry.

They crashed down around the two burned prisoners. The Animancy slid along the walls, coiling and expanding until it was wide enough to encompass the entire hallway. Complicated circuits and interconnected symbols conveyed the Abyssal Lord's intent. The air was so dense with mana, so choked with magical expression, that Shiv found it hard to breathe.

Udraal, meanwhile, had a bored look on his face. With a final, casual gesture, the spell collapsed inward, and a wave of Animancy crashed over the two prisoners. Their burns were wrenched free from their bodies, and they faded into flaking pieces of ash. When the Animancy settled, both Five and Candles were entirely restored.

"By the Scarred One's Tongue," Kura gasped down the hall. She was staring, peeking out from between the massive bodies of a few orcs pressed against the far wall, and the grayskins, usually clamoring for violence, were silent as well, as if wary of Udraal, unwilling to risk drawing his attention.

Five shook and groaned. As the wolf-man rolled over, he looked up and saw Shiv and Adam staring at him. Then his gaze shifted slightly to the right, where he saw Udraal Thann looking at him through half-closed eyes. Slowly, Five placed his face back down on the ground, pretending that he didn't see anything at all.

Comparatively, loud laughter came from Candles. He patted himself up and down, the strange, translucent flesh of fire surrounding his bones in the shape of a thin man visible more clearly than ever before. "Ah, the burns are gone! The flames like me again! Yes! Yes!" He pumped his fist in the air. His body came ablaze with a corona of fiery mana once more, and a sweltering heat choked the guard cube. "Yes! Oh, yes! No pain from the burns! Ah, I'm so sorry, babies! I didn't mean what I said earlier!" He started gathering up handfuls of fire with his hands and kissing it, and the absurdity of his antics made Udraal laugh.

"I do like the insane ones," he said. "They're most often the best Pathbearers, or the ones that have the deepest insight into certain things. Sanity is such a detriment sometimes. I wish I was more insane. Anyhow, did you get any of that?" He looked at Shiv, deliberately provoking the Deathless with a large, pearl-white grin.

Shiv stared at Udraal for a long moment. "Fuck, no. I have no idea what you just did, Udraal. You waved your hand, a bunch of shit came out of it, and now they're all fixed."

"Well, you are technically correct," Udraal replied. "I did wave my hand. Animancy did come out of it. Not shit. But yes, that is fundamentally what I did. Now, in detail, I managed to undo the damage marked on their beings. Animancy damage is a strange thing. When you are wounded at the soul and your vitality is compromised, a great many people regard that as fatal or an eternal injury. Not so. It's very easy to mend if you know what you're doing. The problem is, most people don't know what they're doing. Would you like to know what I did?"

Psycho-Cartography:He's making you engage with him. Forcing you to deal with him. He's trying to build rapport. Be wary.

Shiv narrowed his eyes at Udraal. When he finally answered, it was, "Sure. Let's hear you boast."

"It's not a boast. It's part of your education," Udraal said. "Something my father should have already shown you. Something that you're going to need to learn how to do when you compromise this place's mana core."

"When I what?"

Udraal ignored his question for now. "What I did," he began, "is simply transplant a version of the remembered past of their soul onto their present. There was a time when they weren't burned at the soul, when they hadn't sustained narrative damage. I pulled that moment to the present, and it cost them some of their legend. However, fundamentally, anyone can do this. It just takes a great many skills, a convergence of different skills, in fact, to effectively have this Animancy spell be channeled correctly."

"You moved someone's past to their present?" Adam breathed.

"A proper instance of their recorded legend," Udraal corrected. "There is always a previous version of you inside your soul. It is the collective composition of your legend, from all your skills, all that makes up who you are. It is how the System views you. Now, I can reach into all those instances using the skill. I can generate a new instance of your soul, and I can use that to replace all the damage afflicting your current soul. However, the current legends that you've built up will be expended in that case, lost because they will be shed." The words came in a burst of short phrases, trying to elaborate and simplify what he was doing.

Shiv made eye contact with Adam, but the Gate Lord shook his head. He was as lost as Shiv was.

"So, it's a bit like Chronomancy," Shiv suggested. "Like when you're injured but you use Chronomancy to forget your injuries?"

Udraal pressed his lips together. "I suppose that's a crude analogy, and now most analogies are crude, but yes, good enough. Think of it that way. Now, with that crude analogy in mind, you're going to need to use a rudimentary version of this technique so that our escape can be successful."

"Why am I targeting the mana core?" Shiv asked. "I have a way out right now. I can slip past the time loop. I know we're inside a volcano. I don't need to do anything that you say."

Udraal thought about Shiv's response and then shook his head. "No, I disagree. You're going to do this because it's simply the most optimal way for you to escape and stay escaped. You see, I know Veronica Chandler. I know how she reacts to certain things. She will not be scatterbrained or overwhelmed in the aftermath of my recent encounter with her. Instead, she will be spreading out her influence, using all

the Ascendants' collective power to hold this prison and to make sure that you don't get far. Even if you do escape." He regarded Shiv for a moment. "How long can you stay out of context?"

Shiv didn't answer.

"Not very long, then. Perhaps a few seconds. That's not going to be enough. Even if you make it beyond the time loop, I suspect that she will have Harlock the Midnight flood this place with darkness. And once he does, that darkness will effectively be a net that you cannot evade, as he will devote all of himself to this task. The dark will spread wider, it will be dense, and the moment it touches you, the other Ascendants will know where you are. They will then bring their Avatars across, and you will face the collective might of the Ruling Council. And this time, they will not be held back. You will not be facing the soft hand of your grandmother."

Both Shiv and Adam flinched back. "What?" they said together.

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"Oh, yes, that matter. I suspect Veronica Chandler is your grandmother," Udraal said nonchalantly. "Your father, he was adopted, see? I dug a little bit into his past, and beyond the fake memories that the Republic likes to dump into all its citizens' minds, he was adopted from an orphanage by the Lowe family, a group of middling, Adept-Tier Pathbearers who lost their own child during one of the great plagues."

A tornado was tearing through Shiv's mind. He had been hit with far too many things out of left field, and now he was beginning to feel dizzy. Adam clutched his arm. "Shiv? Shiv, are you all right?"

Shiv didn't say anything. He stared at Udraal as one of a million questions tore through him. Instead, all that came out was, "The fuck? What is this shit?" He couldn't help it; he started laughing. "I..."

"Yes, yes, I know, as if your life wasn't messy enough. But your father had to come from somewhere, and Veronica Chandler did have a special dalliance with a certain Marcus Graves." Udraal shook his head and sighed. "He was a good man, an excellent Pathbearer." And then Udraal clenched his jaw as he stared upward. "It's a real shame I had to kill him, but it was ultimately a mercy after ruining his soul. I was really trying to kill his lover, you see, and Veronica, but he was in the wrong place, and so was she. The wrong Pathbearer died a hundred and twenty years ago. Hm. Those were interesting days."

And if Udraal's actions with his parents weren't enough, apparently, he'd also murdered Shiv's grandfather.

"Hey, I, you—" Shiv could barely form the words.

"Anyhow, after I killed him, she made sure that the supposed child they bore together was placed in an orphanage. I suspect that was to ensure that she had no other weak links to exploit. It is difficult being the head of the Ruling Council. Not only do you have to worry about your enemies, but you have to worry about your friends as well. The things they might use a child to do. The power they would hold over you." Udraal smiled to himself. "My father got lucky when he had me. A weaker offspring would have made him weak and vulnerable. And weak and vulnerable Legends don't stay Legends for long."

Slowly, Shiv's hands came to clutch his head. A pounding headache had begun, and he was past the point of caring about this mess now. His anger had dulled to a cold hatred for Udraal, but also for Veronica, the Ascendants, and specifically for the System itself. His life had always been complicated. A miasma of misery and death followed him. The title Omenborn had been bestowed upon him since birth. Now, apparently, he was Ruling Council royalty. A grandchild of Veronica Chandler. Or perhaps Udraal was lying. Either could be possible, and Shiv was no longer in the mood to discover the truth.

The Deathless wondered if he was going to have the first stress break of his life. But then, a numbness hit him, and he pulled his hands away. He would deal with the overwhelming bullshit later. Right now, he was going to figure out the rest of Udraal's game.

"So, why are we going for the mana core, then? You said you killed a few of the Avatars. That means the Ascendants probably don't have their full power anymore. You still have more bodies. Why can't you go for the rest?"

Udraal threw his head back and let out a quiet laugh. "Do you expect me to do everything for you, Deathless? No. I am not going to be able to replicate my actions earlier. I had the advantage. I had preparation, and killing a few of those Avatars cost me dearly. I spent a demigod. Those don't grow on trees, you know?"

Udraal paused. "Well, not in most realms. I need to revisit Mahoraba sometime. Nonetheless, they will be bringing their full force to bear, and Veronica Chandler will be unleashing her grandmother's full might without any reservations. I will be focused on diverting their attention. I have already freed a great many prisoners, so that will be your smokescreen. However, I don't expect this riot to last very long. The Ruling Council wants both of you back. Unique Skills and your Unique Path notwithstanding, they cannot risk anyone claiming the reward for the hidden World Quest. Which means they will be hunting you without reservations."

Slowly, Udraal began to grin. "And you have the special ability to be in two places at once. I understand you have a Golemancy skill."

Shiv understood where Udraal was going. "You want me to send a version of myself to escape the loop? Is that what you want?"

"Yes, one to be accompanied by me. One with a Vitae signature to be spotted alongside me. Something for the Ascendants to track. That way, Veronica will dispatch everything she has. But by then, it should be too late. Especially if you manage to collapse this prison entirely."

"So, while you're luring them off, you want me, Adam, and everyone else to make a run on the mana core and devastate this entire Rubix Well? Just, dump it back out into the volcano? Is that the general idea?"

Udraal nodded slowly. "It will also be worth your while. Both of you have been abused and driven to the brink. When you collapse this core and all the prisoners slip free, the Ascendants will have to make a choice. Do they risk all the Legends breaking free from their prison and unleashing hell on the capital, or do they try to focus their power on seizing you? Chandler is many things; cold and calculated is one, but there is a limit to how cold and calculated she is. She still loves her Republic. Is it the truest love she has ever known? Truer than the love she feels for her so-called beloved? Definitely truer than the love she will feel for you. On top of this, however, there is a great benefit to collapsing a mana core."

"A special item," Adam said. "Shutting a High Dimension Rating Gate is how my father got my armor. Or so he claimed."

"Your armor," Udraal said. He let out a quiet breath of amusement. "Is that what he told you? Young Lord Adam, you underestimate your father. He didn't close a Legendary gate. He closed five. Five gates connected to a full set of armor. It is the indestructible armor you speak of, yes? Blue, like the color of your eyes. Unenchanted."

A hint of disquiet escaped Adam's expression. "How do you know?"

"Because I was going for the gates first." Udraal's gaze grew distant. "It was meant to be my armor at some point. You should have seen your father. And perhaps someday you will. At the height of his

ambition, he was vicious. He was borderline unstoppable. It mattered little that I was of a higher Tier. He came fearlessly. He struck strategically. And he never stopped. The Starhawk chose well. And considering you remain alive, I expect just as much from you. Especially if you wish to be a companion for my great experiment."

Regardless, Udraal wrinkled his nose as he regarded Shiv's Orichalcum blade. "You're due something more useful than a few Master-Tier pieces. I would scarcely call that Heroic, even if it does say so in the notifications. And with this mana core shattered and a new tool in hand, I think you will have good chances of escaping. From there, I think it's time for my father and me to have our long-awaited reunion. Once you lead me to him, of course."

"The father you broke, you mean," Shiv said coldly.

"The father who decided to get in my way after suffering his own crisis of faith," Udraal snarled with a faint hint of anger. "But that's over. It's all well now. I can forgive him. I can." Udraal forced a smile on his face, and Shiv felt a chill crawl through him. For the first time, the Deathless felt truly worried about his so-called mentor. Valor was scattered, still a shadow of himself, and thus far, Udraal had proven a threat to even Ascendants. If Udraal meant harm to Valor, Shiv needed to protect him. Shiv needed to protect everyone from the return of this man. But he wasn't sure if he could, and he didn't know how.

"Are you considering how to defy me?" Udraal asked.

Shiv stopped himself from shivering. But he didn't lie. "Always," he said.

Udraal nodded. "Honesty. Directness. Brutality. You would have made quite the Vanguard, but these are not good habits to have if you want to be a Legend for a long time. It'll get you killed."

"Getting killed's what I do," Shiv said. "Just builds me up."

"Your deaths are to be an education, yes, but don't use them as a crutch. There will be a point where dying has more cost than benefit. I tell you this right now because you should know that your enemies are learning from you. They will adapt their strategies to contain you. And it's not a good thing, to be trapped and eternal. Someone will use you as a tool."

"Like you," Shiv shot back.

Udraal nodded once more, not even denying it. "Like me, perhaps. But I care. So far, I'd prefer to see you flourish, to see you push this world to the brink."

"What do you want? An incursion to happen? Why?" Shiv said, moving on to the point Udraal mentioned a while ago.

"Because I need the Ambient Mana Threshold to rise. More importantly, I wish for it to be connected to a world I've claimed."

And that was another unwelcome revelation. "You conquered a world," Shiv said flatly.

"Not one," Udraal noted. "And conquered is a vulgar word. No. I control several. In a chain of escalating Ambient Mana Thresholds. Worlds I need strategically integrated with this one."

"Why the hells are you even back here?" Shiv asked. "If you're already this powerful, what's the point of this world?"

"With higher Mana Thresholds, there is more power. There are greater extents of skill, yes, of course. But there is a lack of something."

Shiv's thoughts started racing, but Adam figured it out first. "There is no Great One on those worlds," he said slowly. "But how powerful is the Great One that they are this crucial? Why do they matter so much?"

"Now that's the question, isn't it?" Udraal replied, offering the Young Lord a genuine smile. "Quite sharp you are. Perhaps more focused than your father when he was younger. Remarkable what good breeding and exemplary environmental conditions can do. But yes, the Great One. I need something that might be able to rouse it once more. Properly rouse it. Not make it slightly aware while it's dreaming, not make it lucid, but to restore it. And if I wish to restore it, then I need far more power. Far more than what Integrated Earth has right now."

"And so all this conflict, everything you've done, it's all to build up to this?" Adam asked.

"No," Udraal said. "I always have more than one goal. Several, all moving in the same direction. Multiple choices building toward the same path. In fact, multiple choices that expand outward. Because the System itself is multifaceted and complicated, it will not be overcome even if I finally awake and mantle myself upon the Great One."

Shiv felt a lead weight build inside his stomach. "Mantle yourself. You're trying to become the Great One?"

"No," Udraal snapped, frustrated. "Think carefully. What did I use earlier against the Ascendants?"

"I'm not sure what you used," Shiv said. "I was busy running away."

"What did I say a few moments ago? I used a demigod to save you. I don't wish to be a god. I don't wish to be constrained and contained in such a manner, to be restricted. I do, however, wish to guide their power. And so a lobotomy is in order."

"A lobotomy," Adam echoed. "Gods, you're planning to rip out the Great One's mind?"

"Yes, and store it within a special vessel. One specifically for fallen gods." And at that, Udraal turned to stare at his banner. It glistened, and from its depths came a mind-rending chorus of echoing screams, screams that emanated from the countless Pathbearers trapped within. Shiv stared at them, their small bodies gliding along the banner's length. They reached out. They called out. They struggled to break free, but they were trapped, trapped as if the threshold of the banner was all there ever was, the totality of existence.

"Oh, fuck," Shiv muttered. His life had gotten extremely complicated in a very short period of time, but next to Udraal here, Shiv realized things were on the verge of getting even more chaotic.

"Now you see the scope of what's at play," Udraal said. "See? Exciting, isn't it? And whether you like it or not, you're going to be an essential part of this entire endeavor." The Abyssal Lord hummed. "And I do respect your snarling, vicious self-regard. You're right, you're not a slave. You're right, I do have need of you. In fact, you will be essential for several things, myself included." He looked at Shiv, and an

inscrutable expression came over him. "I will have a special need for you when it comes to the Great One itself. After all, what is dead cannot come back without a proper means."

And Shiv's mind whirled. "Holy fuck. You're going to use me to help you resurrect the Great One."

Udraal's eyes glinted with pride. "Oh, he finally thinks. He finally sees."

Shiv put everything together quickly after that. At least he had a guess. "You want the Ambient Mana Threshold to rise so that I can level faster, so that I can..."

"Exactly." Udraal smiled. "If you can resurrect Rose Van Erren, if you can resurrect my mother in the future, if you potentially can resurrect Adam's sister, then why couldn't you serve as a returning womb for the Great One itself?"

And a weight that Shiv didn't know existed pressed down on his shoulders for the first time.

"So with all this revealed and everything settled, I think there are a few things we should discuss. A number of technical details." Udraal twisted his hand, and an Animancy symbol formed between them. He stared at Shiv and Adam at the same time. "There are spells I would like you to learn, spells that will be very essential for reverting the mana core here to an earlier state, to an unstable state. So, are you going to continue resisting me and making a mess of all this, even after I have laid my proverbial cards down on the table? Or are you going to play along?"

Shiv looked at Adam and cast his Psychomancy out into his friend. At the same time, the Gate Lord activated his commander's foresight. Everything came to a halt.

"Holy fuck," Adam said, echoing Shiv.

"Holy fuck is right. What the hells are we going to do about this guy?"

"We're not going along with him blindly," Adam declared. "Absolutely not. He's staying far away from my parents. He's staying far away from everyone we know."

"No shit," Shiv said. "Especially Valor."

"Especially Valor," Adam agreed with even more vehemence. "I mean, gods, Shiv. What the hells did we get dragged into? The Ascendants were bad enough. Now we have to deal with this madness. Multiple worlds. A plot to resurrect the Great One. My sister still being alive inside of you." A sheer bout of stress radiating out of Adam would have given Shiv anxiety most of the time. Unfortunately, Shiv suffered from the same thing right now.

It was all getting too much for the both of them. They needed time away from... all of this chaos.

"Did you mean it earlier?" Adam asked, his voice suddenly softening. "Did you mean what you said about ending yourself?"

"Yeah," Shiv replied immediately. "I'm not going to be a slave, and I'm not going to let him threaten me. It's the only leverage I got. He seems to need me alive, so we can use that against him."

"And you'd do it?"

"Yeah, of course I would do it, Adam."

"You're not afraid?" Adam asked, a hint of apprehension in his voice.

Shiv thought about that for a second. He thought about all the times he actually came close to death, close to that final oblivion. He thought back to the one time he'd crossed it within his Delve, yet not truly. He had been slain over and over again and faced pain most people could never fathom. And none of that bothered him. But death, the potential to never be once more...

Shiv considered it.

And he considered it a pathetic fear. "Yeah," Shiv said, "I would. You don't get to live forever if you're afraid to die. And there's no living if you let someone else choose who you are, what you are. I'm not afraid of what comes after, if there is an after. I've enjoyed the here and now a lot. Good friends. Good fights. Good life. Short, maybe, but it'll never be enough. Hells, forever might not be enough. But I got to be happy. Truly happy."

Shiv paused. "That's more than what most people ever get. But my life's still not over yet, so..."

"Still not over yet," Adam agreed, though this time it sounded more like a plea than anything else. "Shiv, I—"

"It's alright, Adam," Shiv said. "You're worth my life. You, Uva, Valor, everyone. I would die and stay dead for any of you." An uncomfortable awkwardness filled the Deathless as he admitted that. Vulnerability was a bitter pill. "Yeah, I would. It's just, I don't know, it feels weird to say it."

"I'd die for you too, Shiv," Adam said. "I'm... I just don't really..."

"I know. You're not a coward. Never think of yourself that way."

Adam coughed mentally. "Right. So, instead of us dying, you got any ideas about how we can resolve Udraal? I don't think we can even kill him for good right now, even if we do destroy one of his bodies." Adam's attention wasn't on Udraal anymore, however, but on his banner. "That thing is constructed of pure Animancy, and more of him seem to spawn out from that. I think that might be the core of his strength. Do you know what it is?"

"Not a damned clue," Shiv said.

"Then we need a closer look. We need more information about him, and we need a means of understanding him without him noticing."

"So, what does that mean?" Shiv asked.

"That means..." Adam swallowed his discomfort. "I think we play along for now, and we try to figure out who he is. We learn his limitations, we learn his habits, and eventually, we learn how to deal with him."

It's like you said, we have some leverage, and we might be able to use him to our advantage as well. Maybe we can finally get a moment of peace after this."

"Adam."

"Yeah?"

"I think you're hoping for too much."

"Let me dream, Shiv. Let me dream. For now, let's see what he has to offer. It's him or the Ascendants. And frankly, fuck the Ascendants."

"Fuck the Ascendants," Shiv agreed. "So. We're going with the devil that made us."

A cold hate returned to Adam. "For now. For now."

Chapter 189 (I) Anticipate [I]

Inconsistency is the greatest wound a soul can sustain. Beyond just damage, beyond losing parts of your own history, there is the danger of being seeded by someone else's Legend—for your soul will see to right the scales by destroying the inaccurate. If the progress of your feats, challenges, successes, and failures are rendered compromised, then your skill will be as if a cancerous tumor rather than a power you can wield.

Such is the greatest danger posed by Animancy: a misrepresentation of who or what you are, inflicted by the caster.

There are spells specifically meant to induce these negative effects in Pathbearers, either to torture them or simply to leave them as permanently broken fixtures of who they were. These spells have a specific name: Entropic Revisionism.

To cast an Entropic Revisionist spell, you simply have to do a few things. First, you must access a Pathbearer's skills and install bits of your own history into them. After 20% of their skills are compromised, usually, they will begin a process of narrative rejection, and the mana within them will also become unstable due to spiritual destabilization.

Note that you cannot drastically change what happened before, or the System will turn its ire on you instead. However, if you've made a few incorrect changes, minute though they be, and they add up over the many skills you compromise, the effects will follow without impediment, for you are simply transplanting someone's flesh back into them, as the analogy goes. Yet, you are moving pieces wrong, placing them in the wrong order, and now the body does not know what it is anymore. It accepts the flesh, but the architecture and the function is broken, and soon the organism can only do one thing: die.

That's all. And a story is not so different. After all, you can tell a story with mixed chronologies, using the end as the beginning and the beginning as the end, but if there are flaws in the beginning and end, and enough details are missing, and should these details not be of your own legend—details that build up to a critical mass of apocrypha—then dissolution is the only path a soul can take.

-Valor Thann on Entropic Revisionism

"Now, before I begin my demonstration of this Entropic Revision spell, let us give thanks to Vicar Sullain for being our most stalwart volunteer." Udraal clapped the badly mutilated Sullain on his shoulders, and the Vicar let out a piercing screech of pain.

The orcs around Shiv laughed at Sullain's misery, but the Deathless just frowned. He cared little for Sullain as a person. Indeed, Sullain had a great many things coming to him for what he did to Blackedge, for what he tried to do to the people Shiv cared for. But ever since Shiv emerged from his Legendary Skill Evolution, something in him had changed.

The weight of his actions felt heavier, especially after facing everyone who'd died because of his carelessness. Sullain wasn't exactly the same as the slave boy someone killed or Guardshead Leu, but something within Shiv's awakening ethics told him that this was wrong, that this was pointless torture.

Worse, usually Adam would be the one outraged. Right now, the Gate Lord glared at the badly burned Vicar, his eyes filled with venom and hate. Shiv couldn't blame Adam. Sullain had done catastrophic damage to Blackedge and killed countless people there, all for the sake of murdering Roland Arrow. More than that, he'd unleashed an Undying Tarrasque that now threatened all of Integrated Earth. But it wasn't a matter of death or being slain, but of living with torment. And it just seemed like such an orc thing to do. A vile thing to do.

Something tightened inside Shiv. And I don't want to be this kind of animal...

Psycho-Cartography: You can torture someone to punish them. That is true. But ignoring morality and general ethics, if you're trying to torture someone to feel your own pain, it might not be that effective. It's also just as possible that our appetite for revenge can be boundless as well. That's probably why we just want to kill Sullain and move on. Because torturing him might be fun for a while because we hate him, but if we start enjoying it, then maybe that'll give us another bad habit. That'll make us like an orc. And there's no easy way back from that.

That thought made Shiv cringe. For all the orcs were capable of, for all the benefits and advantages that came from being their leader, Shiv didn't want to be anything like them. Existentially, enjoying struggles and challenges was one thing, but becoming addicted to pain and suffering seemed like a poor drug to choose.

"Let's begin," Udraal began, waving his hand. A burst of Animancy came free, and from the vagueness of faint blue mana came shapes of all complexities and sizes. They coiled around the mutilated Vicar like chains, and then a few of the larger shapes spread out, becoming as if planetary bodies orbiting a star.

With every passing second, more of these shapes sprang free, and Udraal continued gesturing at Sullain, even as the vicar struggled and cried out to the Great One for deliverance. "Great One! Please! Deliver me from this misery! Deliver me!"

Udraal mouthed Sullain's words as he wailed them and giggled. "This, as I mentioned before, is an Entropic Revisionism spell. It is meant to do one thing: collapse the soul into a state of instability and cause the death of a Pathbearer or a mana core it is connected to." For the first time, Adam flinched. For all the hate he had in his heart regarding Sullain, the concept of collapsing a soul was still a staggering thing to face. "How it works is quite simple, but it's best for you to do rather than to observe. Now, please, Deathless, join in. Use your Vitaemancy. Press yourself upon his soul and follow my spellcraft. Your unique magical lore has its own eccentricities, but it's close enough to Animancy that I can control it to some extent, and that means that you can mimic some of what I can do as well."

Shiv hesitated for a moment. His Psycho-Cartography warned him that participating in this act of torture would cleave both ways, yet the eyes of his orcs were upon him. Surprisingly, it was Adam that broke his stalemate.

"Do it," Adam said. There was a hint of venom in his voice as he glared at Sullain. "Do it. We'll need to bring down the mana core and leave this place. And he deserves worse." As Adam fell silent, he

frowned. "Wait, why can't we just strike the mana core using Necromancy? If I can recover my equipment?"

"The mana core here is closer to a Category 20 core than a Category 1," Udraal replied. "You know what that means, Young Lord Arrow. It means that even if you spend all day firing arrow after arrow into it, the damage you deal will be paltry at best. And mana cores are well guarded, well defended, and are overwhelming compared to a singular Pathbearer. For the same reason why I cannot just assail it with my Animancy; yes, it will suffer some extreme damage, damage that will be near impossible to fix for someone who does not wield Animancy, but it will not be enough to break the prison immediately. No, to do that, you need to induce a structural vulnerability, and that is what I am teaching you right now. So, Deathless, if you would, please."

Tentatively, Shiv hooked a few tendrils within Sullain, who flinched and wailed. Udraal's grasp held the Vicar still. He shuddered and fought with all his might as he saw the white and red of Shiv's mana slowly encroaching. A fear chain, harder than anything Shiv had felt before, solidified between him and Sullain.

"No, no, Deathless, no, please! I was wrong! I was wrong, Shiv!" Sullain's shrieks were near hysterical now, and it was bad enough that Shiv stopped.

Udraal noticed his hesitation and narrowed his eyes. Then, with his other hand, he channeled a burst of translucent mana into Sullain. At once, the tears and screams came to a halt, and a smile pulled at Sullain's nightmarish features. His melted flesh swung from the barred bones of his skull, and the joy he offered Shiv was a hollow thing; his grin the kind found on a lifeless doll. "Please, reach into my soul. Twist me to your heart's content. There is nothing I would enjoy more." He grinned at Shiv. His few remaining teeth felt glistening, like pearls upon a patch of melted flesh and ruined soul-stuff.

Shiv's stomach churned. The disgust in him only grew.

"Does that make it easier?" Udraal asked, seeming oblivious to Shiv's true discomfort. "Or is it the deed itself?"

By now, Adam was shaken as well. He still hated Sullain, but to watch Udraal just casually twist someone's thoughts, someone's mind into yearning for torture...

Psycho-Cartography: Uva does this all the time. To some extent, at least. You don't complain about her. Her actions don't burden you with worry.

Shiv nearly shuddered at his skill's declaration. A feeling of offense followed. No, she doesn't. It's different with her.

Psycho-Cartography: It's different because you are romantically and sexually attracted to her. She is also more aware of what she is doing to some extent compared to him. Perhaps she even cares more in certain ways. But fundamentally and functionally, she is not much more moral than he is. He is simply self-serving. She does things with the justification that she operates for our benefit, or to help and protect you and Adam, and her people.

The sourness inside Shiv became near-unbearable. Supposed to make me feel better, Skill? Feel like shit now.

No, I am not supposed to make you feel better. I am supposed to make you realize the psychological truths you are avoiding. Now, either commit to a bad decision or tell Udraal no. You are wasting time.

"Can you do it now?" Udraal asked, sounding impatient.

The feeling of disgust lingered in the back of his throat, but he accepted that he needed to understand the spell Udraal was casting. He didn't have to like it.

"No, no. Halt," Udraal said, interrupting Shiv. The Deathless looked to his maker, and Udraal shook his head. "Before we begin, explain to me why you are so uncomfortable."

"Aside from the fact that you just twisted someone's mind and soul without any care whatsoever?" Shiv replied.

A contemplative look filled Udraal's gaze, and then he nodded. "I see. You value personal agency. That makes sense, especially after a lifetime of being treated like something less than human."

Psycho-Cartography: Be very careful what you reveal to him. He is learning to manipulate you, just as you are learning to understand him.

The Deathless flinched as he realized that, but Udraal moved on without a care in the world. "I do find it odd that you are so shaken by such a trivial matter. You are a lion of the flesh, fearless when it comes to pain or risking your own life, and yet this..." Udraal frowned as he hummed. "It's best that you be fearless, Deathless. There will be many uncomfortable choices you have to make, so be the lion of your heart as well as of your flesh. I will not judge you if you think poorly of my methods and means, but I need you to be committed. These spells cannot be learned halfway. Information in science is not something you can master while holding yourself in reserve. Commit, always commit fully, or back away. Are you committed?"

Shiv met Udraal's gaze without flinching. "Just show me the godsdamn spell."

The Abyssal Lord nodded as a faint smile flickered across his features.

For the next hour, Udraal instructed Shiv on the finer aspects of entropic revisionism. The process of learning the spell, however, was far harder than Shiv expected. Shiv and Udraal's understanding of magical theory was light-years apart. The Abyssal Lord had mastered practically every magical lore in existence, on top of pre-Integration science, and was possibly the foremost genius of integrated Earth when it came to Animancy.

Shiv, meanwhile, didn't even have the Magical Theory Skill yet.

Adding to this the fact that an Animancer required in-depth knowledge of both Necromancy and Divination for them to fully begin their journey of weaving another's soul, Shiv found himself asking for clarification regarding every other word Udraal uttered. His explanations then begat more explanations, as Shiv found himself faced with a deluge of magical theories he had never heard of. He simply lacked the context to fully understand. Even Adam looked overwhelmed. He knew a few things Udraal was talking about, but only at a surface level, not truly deep enough to contribute or aid Shiv in his endeavor.

To Udraal's credit, he was a most patient and superb teacher. He adapted halfway through teaching Shiv to utilize the Deathless's intuition. Ultimately, it was about teaching Shiv the process he needed to engender and the intent he needed to hold in his mind for his spell to truly take shape. Shiv saw echoes of Valor in Udraal. He did things strategically, with oversight, and had personalized plans for everyone he spoke to when it came to training them.

The difference, however, was the feeling of detachment. Valor still prodded and mocked, albeit in a warm way, when Shiv disappointed him or said something stupid. Udraal, though? There was a sense of alienation there, that he had divorced himself from his own humanity at some point, and was now going through the motions of social interaction when dealing with Shiv, or anyone else, for that matter.

Even so, Shiv's understanding gradually built. An Entropic Revisionism spell was a horrible thing to comprehend. Effectively, you were breaking someone's skills apart from the inside out, changing small pieces of them, and then shuffling them until they became a mess. Thanks to Shiv's Vitaemancy, he could do this directly. His skill infusions allowed him to infuse pieces of his own skills inside Sullain.

Udraal had to use Animancy like a surgical tool. He cut away at himself and moved it into Sullain. The process for the Abyssal Lord was far more complicated. Every cast of Animancy mana would use the user's own soul as a foundation. There was far more danger involved for Udraal. One mistake, one miscast or drastic incongruence created while rewriting a skill's legend would see him suffer soul damage—or worse. And unlike Shiv, he couldn't fix himself so easily either—or so it seemed.

But Udraal never made a mistake. And as he showed him just how much of a skill needed to be broken and reshuffled until the collapse began, Sullain never stopped smiling throughout the process. He cheered Shiv on and whispered about how he deserved this. It unnerved Shiv the most about the entire process.

Sullain wanted to live. Sullain deserved to die. And now there was practically nothing left of Sullain, nothing behind those eyes. All it took was a single wave of the hand from Udraal, and Sullain was practically gone before he was truly slain. A mind was a fragile thing, and a Psychomancer was a murderer of the ego before they were a slayer of the flesh. But Udraal, Udraal was an absolute killer. He could take your mind from you, and then he could reach in and mold your body, and finally, he could collapse your soul itself.

An unsettling realization dawned on Shiv. He felt like a frog that had spun out from the bottom of a pond, and as he got to shore, he realized there were still mountains looming in the distance, and still a sky above that mountain. The Legendary Tier seemed like the culmination of many a Pathbearer's journey. Shiv had reached it. Shiv thought he knew power. But when faced with the Ascendants, and now Udraal, he realized it might never be enough.

He had to keep growing, keep learning, across all disciplines, across all fields, if they wished to face the true monsters that lurked across Integration.

After Udraal showed Shiv how to compromise the first skill, he made him do the second alone, correcting him every time he made a mistake. By the time he got to the third, Shiv was mostly moving on instinct and memorization, repeating the actions he performed earlier.

Udraal sighed as he watched Shiv progress. "I must confess a certain envy as to your Vitae," he said. As Udraal spoke, a ghostly effigy that resembled Shiv manifested over him, superimposed upon his body. A swirl of Vitae twisted around that Shiv, and he grinned at the original.

"Cut that shit out," Shiv growled under his breath. He made a mistake then, and part of Sullain's skill collapsed. A section of the vicar's lower back burst apart in a spray of red, but it was immediately remedied as Udraal did something. A sealing symbol of Animancy slammed into the Vicar's wound, and as it ground deeper, burrowing past the point of Sullain's physical body, it reconstructed the damaged skill in an instant, allowing Shiv to try again.

The Deathless blinked at how easily Sullain's skill was reconstructed. Udraal held up a hand. "Don't be disheartened by failure now. Remember, be the lion for your mind as much as you are the lion for your flesh. Failure is just another data point. It is interesting to encounter failure. Fail, review, study, move on. Such is how you should live."

Shiv centered himself and began pulling bits of detail out from the depths of the skill. He still didn't fully understand what he was doing, only that he was drawing away specific legends recorded in Sullain's past. The effect was even greater as there were bits of Sullain inside Shiv's history as well.

As Shiv worked, Vitae bubbled free from his torso, becoming spell shapes that vaguely resembled a few of the patterns Udraal created with his Animancy earlier. Shiv's spells were quivering, unstable, but

ultimately they came together. Despite the awkwardness of his process, Shiv learned to ape Udraal's Animancy. While he failed to grasp the greater nuances of magical theory, he could still follow the basics of analogy, and his Vitae made it easier for him to alter the skills from within.

When he was done, a profound change overcame Sullain. He shuddered, and the burns coating his body briefly faded. He returned to who he was a few moments ago, untainted by Shiv's vitality cycling. His flesh was whole, his beard flowed pale and white, and between blinks, his mind was his once more.

"Udraal, why! How could—" and then Udraal reasserted his Psychomancy over Sullain, and the complaints ceased right then and there. As Sullain seemed healed, Shiv looked at him, expecting the Abyssal Lord to instruct him on what he had done wrong. This was supposed to cause some kind of collapse, but thus far Sullain looked better than he was moments prior.

"Just wait," Udraal said, holding up a single finger.

And so Shiv did. After about five seconds, the first sign that something was wrong arrived. Cracks began to spread across Sullain's being. They weren't cracks that fit on someone's skin, however. Blood didn't spill through. Instead, Sullain was coming apart as if he were wood. Mana began to seep free from his compromised being, unattuned mana that choked the lobby of the cube as a dust cloud of a dull-gray. Shiv took a step back as Sullain started to dissolve. Bits of him flaked away, and even the unattuned mana began to die down. The pressure choking the air softened, and Udraal began his explanation.

"His skills are attacking one another, you see. It's a bit like..." Udraal paused. "Do you know much about immunology?"

"Some," Shiv said. "Not fully versed in it, but I got the basics."

"Well, with what you do know, it's a bit like having your immune system attack your eyes. Your immune system usually doesn't notice your eyes. But with what you just put in him, you made his soul notice his so-called eyes. And now it's tearing itself apart, trying to expel these foreign elements. But since everything has been mixed in, and the changes are only minute, it is effectively collapsing the overarching architecture holding itself up."

And soon, as Udraal got to this point, Sullain's legs crumbled, and he crashed down to the ground. He splattered apart, not as a melting corpse, but as a collapsing marble pillar. More unattuned mana flooded the air. Sullain reached upward, his gaze vacant and blissful. Did he even know that he was dying? Did he even care? Shiv would never know.

Bit by bit, his body came asunder until he was dust dancing through the wind.

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An orc held out a massive paw, allowing Sullain to trail through his fingers.

Chapter 189 (II) Anticipate [I]

"This is what I need you to do to the mana core," Udraal said. "As mentioned before, it would take far too long to break through it, and you won't have that much time. But you will be able to compromise it far more easily than I can. And now that you know the basic principles and have conducted the act once, you'll be able to do it again."

Shiv wasn't sure about that.

"Don't doubt yourself now," Udraal encouraged, reading Shiv's expression. "It's not that complicated. You know the process. If you're missing anything, you'll at least have a direction to work toward. Failing that, I recommend you try to make a run. I am certain you can escape, but the others?" Udraal shrugged. "I have doubts about that possibility, to be honest. Maybe Young Lord Arrow can come with you. But there will be a great many losses with how tightly the Ascendants hold this prison now. The longer we give Veronica, the worse our odds get. Which is why I intend to distract her and the other Ascendants for as long as possible. To that end, I have something I need from you."

"Golem?" Shiv said. He began constructing a golem before Udraal even finished talking. He drew from his Vitality Drain skill first, and then he followed up with his Leviathan of the Shapeless Tides, Inertial Overdrive, Pillar of Orichalcum, and Strider of the Unbending Path. The golem emerged from Shiv in a burst of vivid color, and Udraal looked it up and down.

Golemancy 22 > 24

"Ah. So, directly from the substance of your soul. How efficient. Do you know most golems take years to make? Extremely tedious and difficult. It is one of the few major advantages the ancients had over us: Their machines could be created and built in a day. As intelligent as people—more, even."

"Not in terms of vitality," Shiv grunted, trying to stay upright. "It has a Vitality Drain Skill. You might need to consider kidnapping a warden or something because—"

Udraal waved him off. He marched up to Shiv's golem and let out a quiet sigh. The humanoid mess of Vitae stared at Udraal, and Shiv prepared to give it orders. "There isn't a need, and I'll keep it bound to myself." Before Shiv could ask what the Abyssal Lord meant, Udraal extended a finger, and a thread shot out. It was a thread of the faintest blue, and it connected Udraal to Shiv's golem. At once, Shiv felt a strange presence pierce him. It was as if he had been the one threaded instead of his golem. Just then, a scene took shape before him. His golem vanished, and it was absorbed into Udraal. A moment later, it

emerged behind him, acting as if Udraal's shadow rather than a separate entity. Their vitality flowed as if a conjoined river then, and Shiv found himself flabbergasted at the feat Udraal just performed.

"You're not the only one with a Unique Skill, Deathless," Udraal said with a slight smirk. "Truth be told, you've offered me quite a few useful tools for life and for testing. Returning so quickly was worthwhile."

"Was it worth abandoning the conquest of a new world?"

Udraal frowned as he considered that. "That is uncertain, but I have time to finish that at a later date. For now, I will be off. The moment I leave, I expect you to have around two hours or so to raid and take this place's mana core. After that, there are no guarantees. I only came back with so many vessels, after all. And facing gods, false though they may be, is ultimately a costly endeavor."

"And what happens after it's done?" Adam asked. His jaw was set as he glared at Udraal. "What happens once we're free?"

"Free." The Abyssal Lord chuckled. "What a naive and intoxicatingly innocent notion. But I get your meaning. After you escape from this prison, I advise that you try fleeing into the capital during the chaos. The moment this Rubix Well collapses, Veronica will adapt immediately and place the entirety of the capital under quarantine. You might be fast enough to get through, and you should if you can. If you fail, find a place to disappear. Perhaps a little bird among you might know somewhere."

Five shifted uncomfortably. The wolf-man didn't much like being noticed by Udraal.

"I'll try to find and bring you out of the encirclement with me once that happens. If you do manage to escape, I would like to meet you at Blackedge, or wherever Blackedge used to be. There are things we

must do there. People I wish to meet again. So much to catch up on." Udraal looked away then, and Shiv realized he was thinking of his father.

Adam, however, found himself worried about another as his stare hardened. "I won't let you hurt my father, and I won't let you lay your hand on the Starhawk. I state this now to make things plain. Prove yourself an enemy, and I will strike you down. I will find a way."

Udraal studied Adam for a moment, and Shiv saw him consider several replies. Ultimately, Udraal settled for a shrug. "Alright, you stated it plainly. Not wise, in my opinion. Shooting someone in the back is the best way to fight. I don't think it matters so much what you intend to do, but I respect the resolve. Who knows, you might surprise me, as your father did."

Udraal turned and regarded Shiv thereafter, and an inquisitive look overtook him. "I assume you're going to side with your friend against your maker if this comes to blows."

"Is that even a question?" Shiv asked, his voice low. "You're not blind, Udraal. You know something's coming down the line between us."

Udraal squinted at Shiv. "Why are both of you so openly aggressive?"

"He's having an exceptionally shitty day. For me, it's just how I am," Shiv grunted. "And there's no point in hiding from this. You know it's coming. I know it. Pretending doesn't do anything."

"Hm. Very good. Understandable. And maybe..."

"Maybe?" Adam asked, confused as to what Udraal was saying.

"Maybe the two of you combined can bring down one of my vessels. It will be difficult, though. You're immensely gifted, with a plethora of skills, but emotional and easily goaded. My Deathless is rough, sloppy, but powerful, with a growing grasp over his own psychology to boot. I've been surprised by weaker Pathbearers."

The narrative has been taken without permission. Report any sightings.

Shiv's eyes fell on where Sullain had lain, then, and he saw that only a portion of the Vicar's head remained. A coldness flooded Shiv's bones. One second ago, he was still there. And now, he was gone—a Legend slain as a tutorial, gone with a whisper and smile rather than fire and triumph.

And across from him, Udraal studied Shiv's Vitae Golem without a care in the world. There stood a true Legend—a true monster. One that had stepped beyond humanity and was more than capable of dipping a foot back over to exploit any empathy or psychological weakness present in another.

Psycho-Cartography: The fact that he can admit that without shame means you won't be able to exploit his ego. It also means you can't beat him like you beat Sullain. He's not interested in proving himself to you, or to anyone. He has no emotional wounds you can reach into. If you wish to beat Udraal Thann, you have to be better than him. And we are far from better right now.

Only right now, Shiv thought to himself. But I'll find a way. Someday I will find a way.

"See that you do," Udraal said casually. Shiv's eyes widened. The Abyssal Lord's smile grew sweeter. He winked at Shiv.

But my Shapeless Tides... Shiv looked down at his hands and saw the kinetic vectors were still circulating through him.

"Oh, there's more than one way to guess at what you're thinking." Udraal shook his head. "Truthfully, you have the potential to be a bit more unpredictable. But you hesitate a bit too much still. I didn't make you to be entirely human. I mantled your mind to the greatest monstrosity the System has ever known. Let the beast guide you every now and again. It will take you to places that surprise you. At least it will surprise me."

At that, Udraal reached out and grabbed hold of his Animancy banner. At once, his body was consumed by a soul-rending flame. And he began to shrink and splash, merging with the banner. The blue light grew so bright that Shiv had to look away. A tickling presence crawled over his skin and then made his very soul shudder as the banner flared one final time and then collapsed inward. The next second, only a glass scar remained where it was, cleaving a deep gouge into the Orichalcum floor.

"Remember," Udraal's voice suddenly echoed through the room. "Two hours. Quite a bit of time for some things, but never enough. Not nearly enough. Time is the great betrayer."

As the Abyssal Lord's voice fell silent, Shiv and Adam shared a look, and they broke into motion.

"Orcs, to me!" Shiv called out. The grayskins responded immediately and began to arrange themselves in neat rows within the lobby of the cube. They growled and chuckled with glee. Some of their number had been lost during the rescue earlier, but those who remained were undiminished of morale, and more

than a little excited about keeping this war going. At the same time, Adam gathered the escaped prisoners and checked over each one of them.

"What's your composition?" Shiv said to the orcs. "Tiers and Paths. I wanna know."

Leadership 4 > 6

"The ones that didn't get lucky enough to die fighting the Tarrasque," Whisper said. "So we'll have to make do with the consolation prize of saving you." A unified chuckle went up among the orcs, and Shiv couldn't help himself from smirking as well. Whatever the orcs lost, they were down for blood, and he needed that right now.

"How about the consolation prize of going down fighting the Ascendants?" Shiv said. He saw a gleam light up in some of their eyes.

"Oh, are we not doing what He Who Walks Beyond says?" Tequila asked with a taunt at the end of his voice, as if he wanted Shiv to defy Udraal. "I thought we were supposed to make a run on the core?"

"No, we're still doing that," Shiv said, "but I got another idea on top of it. Consider it a bonus objective. Adam, a moment."

The Gate Lord gave him a nod, and once again they conferred privately. As Adam activated Commander's Foresight, he inquired what Shiv's new plan was.

"You still got Cripple's reactor core?" Shiv asked.

"Yes, it's a bit cracked now, but I managed to preserve what's left of it. I'm surprised I didn't manage to drop it in that chaos."

"Yeah, you and me both. But I was just thinking. We don't really have any way to counter Udraal. He's too powerful."

A feeling of discomfort and frustration passed through Adam. "We can find a way."

"No, Adam, let me finish. He's too powerful, he's got too many High-Tier skills, and he has too many bodies he can spend. That, and the damn flag-thing he has my hairs standing up. So we need something to balance him out, right? Or someone."

And now Adam caught on. "You wish to free Cripple?"

"Wish to make contact with him at least," Shiv said. "If we can 'kidnap' Cripple's Avatar, then whatever Udraal does, he'll find himself faced with a force he can't just walk through. And... maybe I'm going for more than just Cripple. I think it's time I had a bit of a family reunion. See what she can offer me against the Abyssal Lord."

"What?" Adam said, alarmed. "Shiv, we barely escaped from her minutes ago. Are you insane?"

"Yeah, I know it's a shit idea, but right now, we have multiple shit options in front of us. I don't trust Udraal worth a godsdamn. He doesn't much care about us beyond the fact that we're interesting, and I'm his experiment. Sooner instead of later, he's going to do something that we don't like. And we won't be able to stop him. I'm not waiting for that to happen. I'm dealing with that right now. With the only options we have. You said fuck the Ascendants earlier, right? Well, I say fuck Udraal, and we use both of them to fuck each other."

Psycho-Cartography 76 > 77

Deception 33 > 35

The young Gate Lord was utterly speechless. "This is absolutely mad."

"One of us has to be," Shiv replied. "The other one has to be sensible and strategic. Tell me this is a bad plan, Adam. Tell me where the flaws are. Talk me out of it." And Shiv realized he was practically pleading.

The Gate Lord hesitated. "Too many things can go wrong. If we try to collapse the mana core... Damnation, just collapsing the mana core itself is a difficult operation. It'll be heavily defended. And we need to find it first as well. Then, I need to track the Ascendants and their Avatars too. Cripple, Chandler. Godsdammit, Shiv."

"But you can do that?" Shiv said.

"Of course I can do that!" Adam scoffed. "Who do you think I am?"

"Lord Scorn's favorite boy in all Integration."

"Exactly—oh, go eat shit, you bastard."

Shiv laughed.

Chapter 189 (III) Anticipate [I]

"But the Ascendants," Adam said as he continued looking for flaws, "they can recapture us. They can. Well, they definitely want to recapture you and me both. We're risking a lot dealing with them. But... Oh, gods damn it, you're right. Shit options all around. Fine, talk to her. But do you have a plan to get out?"

"I've got a few," Shiv replied. "I'm going to leave a temporal anchor here and blink back."

"No, not here," Adam interrupted him. "I'll find you somewhere else. We don't stay in one place for long. The risk is too high. Here's what we're going to do in order of operations. First, we're going to find out where the mana core is. Second, we're going to try to triangulate where the Ascendants and their Avatars are, if they're all together or if they're scattered. After that, we strategize. If you're going to talk to your grandmother and if you want to seize Cripple's Avatar, we need to do that first. And we need to make it fast. At the same time, as soon as you're done with that, or if it goes awry, you need to get to the core immediately. And then compromise it. Otherwise, you will re-center the Ruling Council's attention on us. And we can't afford that."

"Right," Shiv replied. "I know it's bad, Adam, but the way I'm thinking about it is this. If we have Cripple's Avatar with us, the Ascendants might not be able to do whatever they were going to do against him

earlier. And we'll be able to contact them at any time if Udraal gets too much to handle. I don't think Cripple's going to be that fond of his own people after what they just tried. It might be close to turning."

"Right, there's logic there," Adam said, "but we don't know if we can fully trust Cripple, or if Cripple's still itself right now. The other Ascendants might have done something to it already. The part I'm more worried about is your grandmother."

"Yeah, maybe don't call her that all the time now," Shiv said, feeling the bitterness pounding inside his chest. "But she's still going to be useful. She seems to have history with Udraal, so maybe she can tell me something. He revealed a bunch about her, so maybe she can give me something about him, something that we can use."

"That's..." Adam hummed. "Maybe. There's no guarantee there, either."

"No guarantee for anything anymore,"

Shiv said. "The world's going to be coming after me."

"Us, you mean," Adam said.

"This doesn't need to be your life, Adam."

"I'm not going to let anyone kill you."

"Ah, can't stand the idea of living without me now, huh?"

"Can't stand the idea of someone else getting the ten Legendary Skills," Adam shot back.

Shiv snorted. "Hey, that's pretty good. I'll make a bastard of you yet, asshole."

Silence passed between them. Then Adam spoke once more. "There is something else I want too. Something selfish."

"You want your armor and bow back?"

"Yes," Adam said. "I don't think I want to leave my things with the Ascendants. Especially not something gifted to me by a proper goddess."

Through their connection, Shiv could sense a notification appearing.

The Composer smiles upon you.

"Got it," Shiv replied. "And I have a feeling that Cripple might just be able to tell us where your stuff is."

Adam sighed. "All the more incentive to follow through on this mad idea."

Where Shiv was individually and psychologically calculative, Adam was structurally and strategically brilliant. It didn't take him long to locate the mana core.

But immediately, they knew it was going to prove a problem. It was surrounded and warded by 36 cubes. All of them were interlocked around the others, and all were festering with wardens. Spells crawled across the surface of those cubes, preventing any telepathy or spatial magics from spilling through. Functionally, this meant that if someone wanted to access one of these cubes, they needed to enter directly through one of the exterior doors.

Said exterior doors were made from Orichalcum, but it was further reinforced by some manner of glistening silver material that neither Shiv nor Adam had ever seen before. To make matters worse, Adam caught sight of a crawling darkness coiling around the core. Harlock the Midnight was present, and his presence was felt throughout the area.

Shortly after Udrael had left, the Abyssal Lord had cast a massive spell that seemed to shroud the cube Shiv and the others were in from Harlock's awareness. The spell was created from several interconnected rings that cycled faster and faster, but slowly the mana empowering it was fading. Furthermore, if they wished to move outside, they were going to have to get past Harlock's notice. Or at least distract him. Adam came up with a solution to that relatively quickly: Golems.

There was nothing stopping Adam from firing Necromantic arrows into a series of Golems Shiv created, so long as Shiv had time and focus available to restock his vitality. Harlock had been burned earlier; Shiv remembered hearing the Ascendant scream. Burning him a few more times might force him to retreat

from the area, but it would definitely draw his attention as well, and they could exploit that. After they created an opening, however, they needed to move fast.

This is where Five came in. He knew the general layout of one of the inner guard cubes. Beyond being a structural hardpoint, they were also literal hardpoints as well. Even if someone managed to breach the exterior of the cube, the insides were built more like a fortress, with multiple checkpoints in the form of protective spells, dense walls, elite wardens, and more. A direct assault would be costly, and if one cube failed, it would simply be moved out and replaced by another. The mana core didn't need thirty-six cubes to protect it. The outer structure could shrink until there were only eight. Hence, if they wanted to make a raid on the mana core, they needed to do it fast or find a way to bypass it altogether.

"How about we just blast our way through?" Shiv suggested. Everyone turned to look at him. "I drain some more vitality, I create a bunch of golems, and then, after Adam briefly burns Harlock, we send the rest of the golems in, and he keeps shooting them. We blow a hole through the cubes."

Adam tilted his head. "It could work, but that silvery substance..."

"I don't know what it is," Shiv said. "But I don't think it can take one of my soul detonations."

"That's an assumption," Adam replied. "And this is one of the most defended places in the Republic. Assumptions kill here. Nonetheless, it is an option, but I want to work on a few other avenues first."

"Yeah, those being...?" Shiv asked.

"The Avatars and Ascendants will be trying to track us down. Udraal has led the bulk of them off on a wild chase, and they will likely not be able to respond to matters happening across the rest of the prison." Adam's eyes were glowing then, and Shiv realized he was jumping from point to point using his

Seer of Horizons. "I think that we could use a recruitment drive. There are a great many more Legendary tier prisoners here, aren't there?"

"Yeah," Shiv said. "There were. Well, we already got about 80 Master-Tier orcs and 32 more Heroes."

"Not nearly enough," Adam said. "We need something properly overwhelming or a way to infiltrate."

Five cleared his throat. "Well, if you need someone to slip in, I might be able to provide some options." All heads turned to the Aviary agent, and the Gate Lord nodded at him. "If you manage to find me a high-ranking automaton warden, I might be able to perform a bit of persuasion."

"That is in progress," Can Hu declared. Shiv saw a chain of ones and zeros spilling out from the Penitent's eyes. "The local automata need to improve their Firewall skill. They have also unwisely chosen to develop the Radio Frequency skill. I will see several diverted to our vicinity. You may have your pick."

The wolf-man's jaw dropped open, and Shiv wasn't far from making such an expression himself. Truth be told, he still wasn't over the shock of seeing Can Hu mostly restored. What a restoration this was. The Penitent was more focused and far more powerful. But ultimately, it was the now-banished fragility in its actions that made it seem so imposing.

"You... You're a Penitent," Five breathed, having recognized something in Can Hu. A note of awe entered his voice as he bowed deeply before the automaton. "New Albion remembers its debts. Always."

Can Hu regarded the wolf-man. "So you say. Now let's see if your words prove true, Raven. Make use of your skill. Find us a vulnerability. I shall do the same." Can Hu shifted, and as it did, its body made no noise. No wails came from its joints, no screeches from its chassis grinding against itself. There were still

a few dents and cracks lining its armor, but overall, Can Hu was a Pathbearer reborn. And it was mostly thanks to Udraal. That brought a note of bitterness to Shiv. But right now, he wasn't going to be a choosing beggar. He was going to take what he could get.

"Pathbearer Adam," Can Hu said. "I recommend that you assume the pilot's position within me. You are deprived of your armor, and you lack Magical Resistance. My interior is the safest place for you at present."

The Gate Lord just blinked. "I... Can Hu, I understand that you have been restored somewhat, but I don't think there is a need."

"Get inside the pilot's seat, Pathbearer Adam," Can Hu said more forcefully. "Please, do not be foolish. I have need of additional firepower and Toughness, and you have need of redundancy."

Adam blinked once more and almost swallowed. "Now?" he squeaked.

"Yes," Can Hu replied. "We are on an active battlefield. The best time for you to assume the position was an hour ago, when we first met." As Can Hu finished addressing Adam, it turned to Shiv. "Pathbearer Shiv, I apologize if this induces any jealousy. My apology is muted since I see you are still wearing that mistake."

"It's a good piece of armor," Helix called from nearby.

"And you are a piece of meat that turns to a function of physics when struck by a projectile moving at sufficient velocity," Can Hu declared.

"Holy shit," Shiv said. "It's like your spine regrew as well."

Can Hu's optics, ringed by curved lengths of metal within its sockets, turned to dots. "Do you disapprove of my present demeanor?"

Shiv waved it off. "No, it's fine. It's, uh, I'm just glad to see that you're feeling better."

"It is in part thanks to you," Can Hu said. "I will be eternally grateful." And then the Penitent looked at the knife Shiv was holding. "And I will express my gratefulness in another manner towards you, should we survive this endeavor."

Shiv looked down at his Orichalcum blade and nodded. "Looking forward to it."

Adam did as Can Hu asked. He approached the restored Penitent and gasped as it opened up. Where the Penitent had been little more than a skeletal frame, barely holding together before, now it was a multi-limbed behemoth, sprouting six guns, dense but cracked titanium plates, and thrusters that allowed for flight.

Shiv suspected Can Hu wasn't nearly as durable as Adam was right now, but with the Gate Lord's Physicality, they might just work together with a whole new level of synergy. Can Hu's insides were altered as well. Instead of it just being some kind of rig for a Pathbearer to lie upon, there was a full capsule there, with padding and a protective window that could be lowered over their body.

As Adam lay in place, the window came down and quickly pixelated. It turned opaque before Shiv, and he found himself unable to see Adam. A few moments later, the rib plates that lined the outside of the Penitent closed, clasping like closing fingers. Can Hu's eyes flashed as its helm came down and sealed in place over Adam's head.

"Pilot integrated," Can Hu said. "Skill improvements applied."

"Skill improvements?" Shiv asked.

"Penitents gain boosts to all their skills when they have a pilot inside them," Five explained from the side, still seeming somewhat awed.

"Pretty godsdamn neat," Shiv said. He considered Uva. When they found her again, maybe she could serve as a pilot.

"This is just uncanny," Adam's voice echoed out from inside Can Hu. There was a crackle to the Gate Lord's words, but aside from that, he came out loud and clear. Can Hu held up a hand, looking at it, and Shiv realized it was Adam performing the action. He had control of the second set of hands Can Hu had, those resembled human digits, with guns sticking out from the wrists. The guns looked awkward to Shiv, and he wondered why the Republic automata didn't develop such projectile-related skills.

Just then, a heavy tremor shook their cube. Everyone looked around in worry, and Can Hu turned its head leftward, staring up at the corner of the lobby. Shiv didn't know what it was looking at, but then Adam spoke once more.

"Udraal's on the move," the Gate Lord said in a hushed tone. "I... I think he just shattered an entire portion of the prison."

"He what?" Shiv said.

"He just erased a fourth of the bloody Nadir! It's... it's just gone. It's fading into motes of Animancy. Gods, how many people did he just kill? Wait, wait! I have eyes on her."

"Veronica?" Shiv said.

"Yes. She doesn't seem to be with the other Ascendants. She's... I lost her." Adam growled in frustration. "She's teleporting too often."

"What about Cripple?" Shiv asked. "You got eyes on it?"

A moment passed, and then another. And then, as ten seconds dragged on, Adam shivered. "Yes. It's in the field as well. But it's with the other Ascendants. They're all going hard after Udraal. It's going to be difficult to separate it from the others."

Shiv frowned, and then his features flattened. He turned his head to the side. "Kura. I need your help. And also, I need to borrow your Chronomancy skill again."

The elven Chronomancer frowned. "What is your plan, Deathless?"

“Your time clones can swap places. I need one to get a hold of Cripple while my Vitae Golem distracts and confuses the other Avatars. You up for helping me kidnap a god?”

Kura said nothing for a beat.

Then gave a feral grin.

Chapter 190 (I) Anticipate [II]

Listen, kids, the easiest way to claim a High-Tier Pathbearer as a prisoner is to blackmail them or to bribe them into surrendering through asymmetrical means. Trying to overpower them usually requires you to be much stronger than they are, have a lot more resources than they have, or be willing to throw lives into the grinder until the job is done.

I strongly recommend against the last option, because lives matter. There are commanders and soldiers who don't give a shit, and that's not going to be any of you. You kids are going to be good Pathbearers, and you're going to be serious Pathbearers who don't waste the lives of their comrades.

Besides, throwing lives usually ends up pointless and wasteful a lot of the time anyway. Especially if your target kills their way out. Seen that more than a few times myself.

If you absolutely have to snatch a High-Tier, you'll need surprise, speed of violence, and exploitation of vulnerabilities to bring them down. Killing them is far easier because you don't need to hold anything back. Capture? That's precision, control, restriction, and more. Against a foe that's outright more powerful than you, no less. It is my experience that if you're dealing with a Master, you have approximately five seconds to figure them out and drop them before everything goes to hell for you.

Think of it this way: we've been doing hypotheticals in this class, but hypotheticals usually pale in comparison to real encounters. There is no Pathbearer that has Master-Tier Physicality and Sub-Adept Toughness, for example. It doesn't work; they'll simply die. It's the same reason why you're likely not going to run into a Master who doesn't have options to handle an ambush or to reposition themselves immediately.

You have to live and accumulate experiences through battle to reach Master-Tier. And that means that straightforward ambushes lacking intensity typically don't work, and they know about their vulnerabilities, hence why no one has killed them yet.

So to put it plainly, your odds—and specifically I mean this class's odds—of bringing down a Master-Tier opponent and taking them prisoner is low. Not impossible, just low.

If you want them to fold and go with you, give them a reason. A carrot. A stick. Or just find a way to fool them.

The goal of war is to win, not to fight. Remember that.

-Captain Harry Irons, TacStrat 101, Phoenix Academy

"Alright, one more time: we're going to make this quick, we're going to make this chaotic for the Avatars, and we're going to be constantly moving so they don't manage to triangulate our position." Adam's voice echoed out from inside Can Hu as the Cripple extraction force

made their final preparations.

Before Adam was a small group of thirty orcs, aside from Shiv, Kura, and Gone. They were surrounded by approximately a hundred golden shadows. Ninety of which were spawned from Kura's Chronomancy, but nine originated from Shiv's Vitae Golem, who stood amongst Kura's time clones as the odd one out.

Not far away from the extraction force, a dimensional pathway slowly shrank. Five, Candles, and all the other orcs remained within the warded guard cube that Udrael had commandeered earlier. Soon, there would be no tunnel connecting the guard cube to the prison cube the extraction force currently resided.

That was part of the strategy, after all. Move. Reposition. Hop from one place to another when running high-risk missions within the prison. Adam came to the conclusion that they wouldn't be able to avoid the Ascendants' notice for long, but they could constantly break contact to make themselves harder to track. This also had the added benefit of cube hopping. So far, Harlock's darkness flooded the crawlspace between the cubes. Anything moving in the blackness was known to the Ascendant of Midnight. Inside the cubes, however, with the mana flowing through the mithril bones engulfing prisoners and guard stations, there were places beyond Harlock's touch.

Places that Adam would exploit to the fullest for their coming assault on the mana core.

"We're going to move from this cube to the next one after I fire the shot," Adam continued. "Shiv. Vanguard. You blunt anything that comes across the pathway. Once that's stabilized, the time clones will go across and grab Cripple. We keep moving right after that for the next cube—and we keep going, so there's no trail they can easily follow, even if they do manage to find where I fired from. Are we clear?"

A chorus of confirmations came from the extraction force.

"Good. I'm going to prepare to loose the shot now. Prepare yourselves, and look out for each other."

Some of the orcs made eye contact and leered at each other. Shiv rolled his shoulders and called out to his Vitae Golem. "Move fast. Stay hidden using Kura's shadows. Do everything you can to reach Cripple."

His golem held up a large fist, and its nine other temporal clones repeated the action. As they did, Shiv felt an odd sensation. It was like he was the one raising his fist instead of them. With each golem he made, it felt like his connection to them was growing deeper...

Golemancy 22 > 25

Vitaemancy 112 > 114

Adam drew his bow back. He shaped two hydrokinetic hands out from Can Hu's spine and took aim. The Penitent stared up at the Orichalcum ceiling looming high above. They were the only people left in this prison cube. Bodies littered the ground, blood painted the walls, and along the floor were hollows leading into vacant cells. A faint stench in the air told Shiv that Daughter had been through here, and he kept his eyes open—glared at every shadow around them as he waited for the nightmarish Ascendant or one of her Waifs to jump out at the last moment to cut him and the others down.

The sudden assault never came. But the anxiety never left Shiv. It probably wasn't going to leave him for a while.

"You got a shot?" Shiv called out. His Voidmantid armor had been regrown thanks to Helix. Some of Kura's golden shadows were crawling into his cape as well. He didn't intend on going across, but if Kura managed to get her hands on Cripple first, she could have one of her time clones swap places and transition the Ascendant's Avatar into his Forest of Alloy.

"I do," Adam said, "but I'm just waiting for an opening."

"An opening?" Shiv asked. "What do you mean?"

"I mean it's bloody chaos out there," Adam muttered. "Udraal's casting spells through a massive flood of Animancy. No idea how he's doing it. He's currently trying to bury Cripple's Avatar beneath a barrage of magical attacks. The Avatar is large—it looks like a cargo container with arms and legs. You can't miss it—and even if you can't see it immediately, the sheer amount of divine mana spilling out from Cripple will show you where he is. The other Ascendants are coming up behind Cripple. They have a strange translucent dome that they're hiding inside. It's prismatic in color, and looking at it is tearing at my senses."

The Gate Lord let out a slight groan of discomfort. "No idea what kind of device that is. But I don't want to find out. Udraal's another problem. I can't even tell what kind of mana the bastard's hitting Cripple with. The colors are all strange and ashen."

"Is he as powerful a mage as Sullain?" Shiv asked.

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"He uses a lot more Animancy," Adam replied tersely. "He's not throwing as many spells as Sullain, but like I said, I have no idea what he's casting half that time. But every time one of those spells goes off, a section of the prison just goes faint blue or ash-gray. Gods, he's powerful."

“But Cripple’s taking the hits?” Shiv asked.

“Yes. Most of the—Oh, godsdammit.” Adam growled.

“What?” Shiv asked, alarmed.

“Udraal. He’s using your Vitae as well. He’s casting new spells. The mana is red and white. I think Cripple’s left arm just went missing. Ah, I mean its Avatar’s left arm. It dissolved into a spray of vitality and vanished.”

Shiv blinked. “What? My Vitae can do that?”

“It appears so.”

“Shit,” Shiv grunted. “Felling Udraal’s figuring out my skill faster than I am.”

“On the basis of Animancy,” Adam said. “He already has a notion of what soul magic might be able to do; he’s just using your Vitaemancy to achieve the same ends, I think.” The Gate Lord paused. “Hold... Hold... Almost... Cripple is pushing forward. It’s pulling apart from the other Ascendants. When I fire—Kura, send some clones to distract the Ascendants, make sure—”

"I know, boy, you've already repeated this request seven times," Kura snarled. "I am not short of memory or lacking in experience."

"I'm just trying to make sure," Adam muttered.

The elven Chronomancer sneered. She flicked her golden eyes and Shiv. As she channeled a bit more Chronomancy, her body came alight in a mess of golden scars. "Keep your golem close to my clones. But know that I will not stay and fight your pet Ascendant if this goes poorly. I have come too close to freedom to risk myself again. It is only because of my debt to you that I remain."

"Debt, and a chance at revenge," Shiv added.

The elven Chronomancer sneered even harder. "If it is allowed. I learned my lesson in this place. Will and want are not rewarded. Only calculation and caution. I tried striking down an Ascendant before. I managed to slay an Avatar, but they are replaceable. The Thief-Gods themselves? They were beyond my grasp. Remember this when you play your dangerous game, Deathless. Do not become a fool like me."

Shvi gave Kura an affirming nod. "Yeah. Thanks. But I don't think we really got that many good choices ahead of us. We need the Ascendants to counter Udraal. Need Udraal to get away from the Ascendants. We're just using them to get more breathing room."

Kura fell quiet for a beat. "Understand that the more time you give Udraal, the more dangerous he will get. I have heard things about He Who Walks Beyond. I have seen the aftermath of some of his experiments. This is only a temporary measure. You may be able to gain some autonomy if you can gain this Ascendant's aid, but Udraal will manipulate you and strike at you with methods and powers you cannot imagine. There is only one kind of safety, Young One. It's power. Your power. Your knowledge. Your mastery. Anything else will betray you. Friends will betray. The world will betray you. Only skills. Only that."

Shiv realized the elf was trying to impart some wisdom on him. "Right. Thanks. Listen. I didn't really come by my Chronomancy the typical way—"

Kura gave a hissing laugh. She sounded like her throat was hollowed. Shiv cringed at the horrible sound, and several orcs shot her odd looks. "No one gains Chronomancy the typical way," she said quietly. "We are all children poisoned by the absurdity of time. But we survived. Quest Reward or temporal anomaly?"

"Quest Reward," Shiv said, understanding her question.

"Ah. Not the best way. You lack an education, then? You wish to seek my expertise? Learn from me after this is done? If we survive?"

"You're pretty perceptive," Shiv said.

"It's obvious. It makes sense." Kura fell silent, and her eyes went dead as she considered his request. "I want to strike a new bargain: There are people I need to kill. Powerful foes. They betrayed me. They allowed the Ascendants to capture me. I will share my knowledge if you will share in my vendetta."

Beneath his helmet, Shiv frowned. He wanted to agree, but something told him she wasn't offering the full story. "I want to know more about who they are and what they did to you, if we're going to be killing them. Ah, to hells with that. What I want to know is if you had it coming."

Kura's nostrils flared. "You accuse me of deserving my fate here?"

"No. I don't know who you are or what your story is. I spared you. You saved my ass after. We work well together so far. That's our relationship. I need more if we're going to be killing anyone or teaching each other anything."

The elven Chronomancer regarded him for a moment and breathed. "Then we can... talk after. If we survive this." She sounded uncomfortable, like he was sinking a finger into one of her injuries. "I have more to offer than just Chronomancy. I know many other things. Many secrets. We can trade favors."

"If we survive," Shiv said.

"If we survive," Kura agreed. She looked Shiv up and down again. Something in her gaze softened. "You're tense. But you are not scared. You are not worried about your potential fate?"

The Deathless considered her question, and he thought it kind of laughable. "What fate? It hasn't happened yet."

"You are a creation of Udraal Thann and an enemy of all who exist on Integrated Earth," Kura said. "You will be used or hunted."

"No. People will try to use or hunt me. A lot of them will live to regret it. I'm just going to be getting levels out of this. Udraal's dangerous and powerful. The Ascendants are dangerous and powerful. Maybe I won't succeed. But the System wants us to struggle and die anyway. There's no retreating here. No way out. No point in bending. We're going forward, Kura. Be scared. Be angry. Be whatever you want. But we're going forward."

The elf's softened glaze turned to a sour look. "I harbor no fear."

"Yes, you do. That's why you're still making small talk with me and going over everything in our way." Kura went quiet. "I wouldn't have been able to guess just on my own, but the orcs have been sneaking looks at you, and it isn't because you're pretty. They're good at homing in on weakness."

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"I'm not mocking you," Shiv said before she could respond with anger. "But you're not that good at hiding your heart. You should know that."

Kura almost seemed to flinch, and she stopped talking right after.

Shiv's thoughts, however, continued to race. What Kura said about Udraal—and how Adam described his power earlier—both left Shiv feeling raw. It took Udraal Thann little time to copy one of Shiv's Unique Skills. And now he was learning its nuances. Something told Shiv that Udraal would be using Vitaemancy better than he could in a relatively short time. That offended the Deathless. It was his skill. He got it through sacrifice, death, and constant pain. And here was Udral, coming back and simply copying it without paying any dues.

Psycho-Cartography: He did create you. Technically, everything you've achieved is partially attributed to him.

Yeah, and I would be completely fine with giving him props if he weren't such a sociopath.

Psycho-Cartography: Psychopath. Between the two of you, you are closer to a sociopath, though you are slowly veering more towards becoming a slight psychopath in terms of behavior. Our capacity for incredible violence has been consistent throughout, but we're getting much better at figuring out what people think and feel. But it's also making us more empathic. And making you more mature. You do feel remorse for things you did wrong, and you wish to be more responsible for the lives of others. There is a balance here.

Shiv frowned. Why the hell was I a sociopath?

Because previously, you were guided by anger and brutality in battle. You had almost no close attachments other than to Georges, Uva, and Adam. You cared little for what the law says, and your morals carried—and still carry—deeply rooted double standards. You lied constantly, and your aggression was your defining trait. All of these things are technically accurate. And you do have tendencies. But it is not the whole picture. Just as it's not the whole picture for Udraal. Do not underestimate him.

I won't.

"Shiv, Kura! We have an opening. Are you ready?" Adam called.

Shiv shot a look at Kura, and she simply gave him a nod. Just then, her Chronomancy flashed out from her body, and her golden shadows sprouted curving fingers from their chests.

"What's that for?" Shiv asked.

"To clamp onto the Avatar," Kura said. "It takes a few moments of contact for another to be pulled into one of my temporal clones. It won't be as easy for your golem."

"Yeah, but Cripple will realize which is my golem; it'll probably just try to strike your clones down," Shiv said. "Either way, we just need to get our hands on Cripple and bring its Avatar across. We do not fight it. We absolutely do not fight Cripple. We got that? I need its ass alive." The Deathless eyed the orcs and Kura.

"I will refrain so long as it does," Kura said with a slight hint of disgust. It was about as much as Shiv could expect from her, considering the Ascendants were part of the reason she was in this hellish pit in the first place.

"Alright," Adam said. "First arrow is about to be fired. A path will be opened up to where the Ascendants and the Avatars are. We have five seconds to secure the target. Udraal's stopped casting for a moment. The moment we go across, I'm going to fire another arrow to connect us to the next cube. We move—we keep moving, and we don't stop even with Cripple secured. Not until we are certain our trail is clean. Is that clear?" Adam looked around at their assembled force, and a unified grunt of affirmation came from the orcs.

The Gate drew his bow back. Two orc Vanguard's bearing large, mana-infused shields stepped forward; Shiv followed in their wake.

"In three, two, one," Adam breathed. "Firing!"

Chapter 190 (II) Anticipate [II]

His shot tore a gash open on the surface of existence. A pathway formed, and on the other end came scenes of disaster and devastation. Billowing waves of destructive mana poured down the dimensional pathway. Adam had anticipated this, so the Heroic orc vanguards held up their shields and kept the stray blasts at bay. Magic of all varieties came surging down—including more than a few that Shiv had never seen before.

The air itself seemed to hiss as ash-gray spells cleaved and shattered other mana types they came in contact with. They slammed against the orcish Vanguard and burst apart in clouds of ash. The orcs were driven back, but Shiv stepped in behind them. He planted his hands against their backs and circled his Shapeless Tides through their bodies. At once, the magic was stymied. Instead of driving the orcs back, it scattered apart like waves dashing upon the jagged face of a hanging mountain.

Shiv felt a clinging sensation from the spell. It was like swallowing ash, or dragging his skin across gravel. But then, it was gone. The gray faded, and Shiv's Magical Resistance prevailed. A gap was open, and on the other end, Cripple awaited.

"Go, go, go!" Adam called aloud. "Time clones! Cross! Golems! Cross!"

The orcs parted for a brief moment, and Shiv took the brunt of the spillover magic that seeped out between them. As he did that, his Vitae Golems splashed through his body and slammed into the crashing waves of destructive mana. They were lined with Shapeless Tides as well, and it took eighteen orc vitality donors to see them all created.

Where once the dimensional pathway was bathed in clashing colors, there now were spots of shadow gliding in the mix. The golems were battered from all sides by leftover blasts of magic that the ashen spells didn't destroy earlier. A few of the golems even lost chips of Vitae along the way, but they didn't break. The Shapeless Tides kept them together, and as they moved, they formed an arc-shaped flight pattern that kept the worst of the magic at bay. Shiv and the orcs stepped away from the dimensional rift entirely, and Kura's temporal clones started flooding in.

At this point, Adam fired another arrow. This one tore a new rift open on the Orichalcum wall to their left. "Cross, cross now!" Adam called out.

The orcs all rushed along the dimensional pathway in short order. The ones with the highest Reflexes went first. They were followed by Kura, one of her time clones, a Vitae Golem time clone, Shiv, Whisper, and finally, the tail of the group, consisting of Adam and the orcish vanguard. When they arrived in the next prison cube, Adam already had a Veilpiercer drawn, and he aimed his bow high up at an angle, searching for their next potential cube.

Shiv gripped his knife tightly and felt his body grow taut with tension. Even though he wasn't in the fight himself, he couldn't shake the feeling that violence would be upon them soon, that the Ascendants would suddenly appear and finish the job they couldn't earlier. They'd taken many precautions to avoid unnecessary risk, but the Ascendants and Avatars had proven themselves to be a most dangerous collection of foes.

If something went wrong—

A cry came from Kura. Shiv flinched and saw that her abdomen was wounded. Blood seeped out from a deep cut that trailed from her stomach to the right side of her pelvis. Shiv wrapped her using one of his mana hydras and removed the injury in an instant. She gave him a thankful look, but an expression of focus clung to her features.

"What just happened?" Shiv said.

"We're trying to get to Cripple," the elven Chronomancer declared absentmindedly. "But I think... one of my time clones ran into Daughter instead. I failed to dismiss that one in time." True to her word, Shiv

saw a faint splash of blackness seep out from her now-closed wound. She gritted her teeth. “Daughter just vanished. We need to move. I see Cripple—I’m going... I’m going after it.”

The tension inside Shiv spiked to new levels as Adam called out once more. “Firing! Prepare to reposition! Gone! On standby! Anything comes, intercept!”

The hyper-fast Gone came alive with golden lightning. And a second later, she vanished—just as Adam fired another shot. A new dimensional pathway tore open. Something tar-black and fast tore out from the dimensional pathway they just crossed. A clash shook the air as Gone slammed into something—something barely larger than she was.

Shiv launched himself into the fray. Gone slashed and tore at Daughter’s new Waif, but the girl was laughing, her wounds spewing black tar that tainted the dimensional pathway she resided within. Her laughter died when she saw Shiv tearing through the air like a missile, his blade coated in Vitae. A flood of fear surged out from her, and his power climbed.

The Waif’s eyes widened. Daughter let out a whimper—and her Avatar promptly pushed away from Gone as she fled across the way she came.

Shiv struck nothing—found himself far too slow to catch up to the fleeing Ascendant. “Shit. Adam. It’s Daughter. She’s gone, but she saw me.”

“That’s fine,” Adam said. “They’ll be confused now. Udrael’s Vitae Golem has your signature too. They’ll still be scattered, but this is why we need to keep moving. So cross! Cross now!”

And with another dimensional pathway open, the group moved again. Shiv held the rear this time with Gone, and as he stared down the last dimensional pathway, he waited.

He waited for the Ascendants to come for him and the others again.

Or for one of Kura's time clones or his golem to bring Cripple back.

The System was screaming.

Cripple could hear the world around him howling with agony and confusion. Tumbling gears and broken fragments slammed against its new Avatar. Debris drifted in this ruined place, consumed by a faint blue fire engulfing the remains of countless prison cubes and even more prisoners and wardens in a space as vast as an Abyssal cavern.

The screams were coming from the damned Pathbearers. There had been no warning, no chance at survival for those unfortunates. One moment, they were either trying to escape from the Rubix Well or to quash the sudden rebellion. The next, a cataclysmic blast had consumed an entire portion of the Nadir, and it only continued to spread.

Udraal Thann unleashed his ruinous power recklessly and openly, and Cripple knew the Abyssal Lord was deliberately trying to draw the Ascendants to him.

There were many statements one could make about Cripple, but perhaps the most poignant right now was the fact that the other Ascendants raised no protest with regard to its participation in this operation. They knew it had performed an act of supposed betrayal by warning the Deathless and trying to provide him with means of escape.

But now, with Udraal on the scene and the Starhawk missing, the Ruling Council needed their strongest member. Someone willing to take the hits the others couldn't. To suffer wounds and indignities that the others couldn't. To unleash blows that devastated adversaries that the others couldn't.

Couldn't.

That was the word that also belonged to Udraal. They couldn't keep track of him. They couldn't tell what he was doing, and they couldn't guess what he was about to unleash next. Through the burning sea of Animancy he'd unleashed came more spells. Spells born of lores Cripple didn't even recognize, composed of symbols he'd never seen before.

The machine Ascendant flinched as its Avatar's left arm fully dissolved. Carrier 202 was a good Pathbearer, despite not being an exceptional combatant. After suffering a Cursed blow at the hands of a Storm Tyrant while performing a logistics mission, its core was permanently ruptured. Only a timely pact with Cripple delayed its inevitable end, and even then, Carrier was in constant agony.

Despite this, Carrier had proven to be among Cripple's braver Avatars—practically fearless for what was to come, for the end was always approaching it, in a way that was far more present than for the other Avatars. Which made it all the more disturbing when Carrier shrieked in pain when it was hit by some of Udraal's stranger spells.

Carrier wasn't shattered by the spell. It wasn't scorched by Pyromancy. Lightning didn't damage its circuitry. Dynamancy didn't crack its chassis. Instead, bits of it simply began to flake away, turning gray and ashen, just like the color of the spell that struck it.

Entropy, Cripple realized. Other such spells were tearing free from the faint blue that surrounded them. The Entropy spells were connected by faint veins, veins that pulsed with flashes of white. The color was so pure that it hurt when Cripple beheld it.

"Ascendant!" Carrier 202 cried out, its left arm turning entirely to ash. The Avatar became a void in Cripple's soul. It could pour more power into it—especially now that Carrier mirrored Cripple's own mutilation. "It is time. I am ready. Withdraw your power from my core. Let the wound finally arrive. I am ready. I wish to burn."

"Not yet," Cripple said to Carrier. "Soon, brave Pathbearer. But not yet. Not until we have our gaze on him."

A new chain of Entropic spells came, but they promptly dissolved as a pulsating wave crashed into them. Carrier 202 turned and saw the other Avatars approaching. They were shrouded within their protective dome, and a swarm of Animantic drones spread out from the wards. They drained the magic Udraal unleashed wantonly, unveiling more ruined cubes hidden in the existential devastation of the blue flames.

"Cripple," Maiden called from within the dome. "Do you see him?"

Cripple scanned fading Animancy, but saw nothing of the Abyssal Lord. Even its Divination was denied.

You have received a Divined message from Udraal Thann: Come now, Ascendant. It will never be that easy. Put some effort into your hunt.

“No,” Cripple said, burdened by the growing feeling that Udraal was just playing with them; distracting them from—

“Cripple! Ambush!” Enoch’s bellow shook the air as a dimensional pathway burst open beside Cripple.

Cripple’s frustration faded entirely and was replaced by a feeling of purpose. Finally. No more hiding. It was time for battle. It flooded Carrier 202 with as much divine mana as the Avatar could bear. Carrier’s missing arm was replaced by a massive piston of roaring flame, and as it turned to strike at whatever was about to emerge from the pathway, one of Daughter’s Waifs burst into existence beside it.

A flood of golden shadows spilled out from the dimensional rift. Cripple recognized them immediately: time clones created by Kura, Exiled Daughter of Scar-Tongue Cult. Her actions were obvious—revenge. She sought to strike back against the Ascendants for caging her in the Rubix Well, and thought now was a good time to strike.

Her folly was thinking herself powerful enough to challenge gods as a mere Legend.

Daughter fully manifested over her Waif and drove a wicked blade into a golden shadow’s gut. The clones writhed—almost all of them. A few broke from the others, and Carrier drew back a fist to leave them in ruins. But then, Cripple saw it. Mana colored red and white, the feeling of heat and lifeforce.

Cripple knew those golems. Shiv? it wondered.

The golems held up their hands as they drew closer to Cripple. They gestured at themselves, waving wildly instead of attacking.

“Face me, traitor to the Republic,” Carrier intoned dully. “Face me, and grant me a proper finish to my tale.”

All the golden shadows winked out, just as Daughter and a small army of her Waifs spilled across the pathway. But as the Vitae Golems drew closer to Cripple’s Avatar, they remained passive, waved harder, and Cripple knew something was off.

This wasn’t an ambush. This wasn’t how ambushes proceeded. So then, what was this?

Carrier drew its fist back. Cripple made a decision to take a chance. “Carrier. No. Make contact, but do not break the enemy. I wish to see what is being plotted here.”

Carrier hesitated. The flames of forming its new left hand flickered. “My Ascendant, the others—”

“Have made their choices. I am making one of my own. There is no point in waiting for a reckoning that is certain to come. There is only purpose in getting ahead. Make it look natural. Like we were surprised instead.”

“As you command.” Carrier lifted its fist and punched. A blast of howling fire tore over the Vitae Golem’s shoulder—and impacted one of Daughter’s Waifs in the side before she could take the golem from

behind. In the next instant, the golem crashed hard against Carrier's chassis, and a tearing sensation followed as the Shapeless Tides swimming down the golem's body tore against Carrier.

Then, there came a burst of Chronomancy as the golem seized Cripple's Avatar with both hands. At the same time, a new flood of Entropy spells slashed across the air like bolts of lightning and came for Cripple from all directions.

"Not a moment too soon," Cripple muttered, just as it felt itself drawn across space and time alongside its Avatar.

"CRIPPLEEE—" Daughter screeched in fury.

But by then, it was too late for second thoughts and regrets.

Cripple was across, and it found itself standing in an abandoned prison cube next to a Vitae Golem, surrounded by orcs, prisoners, an automaton, and Shiv.