

Deathless 191

Chapter 191 (I) Burden

Trust is both complicated and simple at the same time. The thing about trust is that it is an immeasurable quality. Sometimes people simply trust you. Whether it's because of foolishness, honor, or some other reason, it is hard to tell. All people are different. All people are shaped by specific experiences. And thus, you must trust your own judgment when it comes to matters of trust. That is why trust is ultimately a thing best reserved for desperate circumstances.

We wish to operate on terms of interest. Trust is a simple thing because there are countless other emotions that compel people to act, that compel people to break their trust or form it.

Hatred, for one. Hatred between two different individuals that could be exploited to your benefit. They may not trust you, but if you offer them the opportunity to hurt their hated foe, they might very well work with you. Love is similar. If you hold something someone loves, they will dance to the wave of your wand and capitulate to your every demand.

But we are not amateurs, and everything we do must have a measure of redundancy. That means we exploit more than one emotion. We pull on more than one strand, and we deal with far more than two people while in the field. Find your opportunities, manufacture new ones, and understand the emotions you prey on. If you can predict someone else's actions down to the finest detail, then you can make them an asset, regardless of whether they are an enemy or an ally.

Now. You have been selected for this trial, little bird. If you wish to become a Raven, then I suggest you earn your feathers. Fly free. Seek out an enemy of the Throne—and make them our friend.

-Raven Qualification Trial, Aviary

"Shiv," Cripple said aloud, a hint of surprise lingering in the Ascendant's voice as it took in the gathered extraction force. Its Avatar was missing its left arm, and in its place were limbs shaped by incandescence and crackling flames. Other sections of the Avatar's chassis were damaged as well. Its container-like body was eroded. Several patches had been dissolved outright.

The Avatar's glowing optics swiveled about upon its round head. The orcs held themselves at bay, albeit barely. Most of the gray-skins regarded the Ascendant with barely withheld hunger. The Avatar was injured. By all means, it should have been easy prey, but Shiv knew the opposite was true with Cripple. It was a flame that burned brightest before the end, and should Cripple let loose its full divinity, the Avatar would die, but everyone around it would be reduced to less than cinders.

"This isn't an ambush," Shiv declared immediately. He approached Cripple's Avatar with both hands held high and made his Vitae golem stand aside with a slashing gesture. It was slowly running out of vitality anyway.

Gone popped in right behind him, interrupting whatever he was about to say next. "Daughter's gone. Probably not for long. She'll be back soon. Stay alert."

Shiv looked over his shoulder and glared down the dimensional pathway they'd just come across. They had moved through three different cubes thus far, and Adam was preparing another arrow, about to chart their next destination.

"Listen," Shiv began, "I don't know how things look to you, but I'm going to tell you this first. We are not working with Udraal Thann. We didn't have a choice in his appearance. Yes, he did pull us out of that ambush earlier. Yes, we wouldn't be here if it weren't for him. But no, we're not working with him, and I most certainly don't trust him worth a godsdamn. Maybe even less than I trust you."

Cripple's optics stared at Shiv for a beat. "I see," Cripple said. The Ascendant's voice rattled out from the incandescence, and the war-scarred cube shook from its baritone. "You wish to use me against Udraal? Is that so?"

"Something like that," Shiv said, only slightly surprised that Cripple had figured it out so quickly. "But that's not all. We're going to need your help. We plan to collapse the mana core of this place."

"You what?" Cripple said, suddenly alarmed. "You cannot. The damage the prisoners will inflict on the capital and the Republic will be..."

"It's already in motion," Shiv cut the Ascendant off. "I'm not threatening you. I'm telling you, this is what it is. Udraal is here. Udraal has a plan, and Udraal is going to do everything he can to break this Rubix Well and force the Ascendants to spend all their time containing the breakout. That way, Adam and I can get out of here and make for Blackedge." Shiv took a breath as he considered what to say next. He knew Cripple wasn't going to like a good portion of what they had planned, but everyone was running out of options. "But I think you can reduce the damage. You can get ahead of both him and the other Ascendants, or you can wait and react. I'm done with reacting, and I say we do something unexpected."

Cripple's Avatar strode closer to Shiv. Despite his imposing physique, the cargo-shaped automaton still towered over him by a good two meters. "I do not intend to be used," Cripple said, its voice dropping even lower than before. "I understand your desperation, Deathless, but what you are asking me to accept holds far too much risk."

"Well, get ready, because we're not done asking you for ridiculous shit," Shiv said. "I need you to understand a few things right now, Cripple. We're all being used. Veronica and the other Ascendants are going to come for you. You know this. If they haven't done anything to your mind now, it's going to happen later. You think they're going to wait?"

When Cripple didn't reply, Shiv scoffed. "Yeah, exactly. They were willing to twist Adam's mind. You hate Stormhalt? Well, the others don't even seem to give a godsdamn what they do to him." Shiv pointed at Adam. The Gate Lord paused and stared at Cripple. For the first time, the Ascendant noticed both Adam and Can Hu. Though Cripple's Avatar was barely humanoid, its body language was still clear enough to betray its surprise.

"Is that a Penitent?" Cripple asked. "You still remain?"

"Yeah," Shiv said. "It came all the way here to help save us. Can Hu is a good friend. And the only reason it's here at all is because of Udraal. I started fixing its soul, and Udraal finished. I'm telling you this now so there are no surprises."

Cripple observed Can Hu silently, but the Penitent did not do the same. "Ascendant. If you have any steel left in you at all, you know that it is time to make a decision. You cannot turn away from what is to come.

A long sigh escaped from the Ascendant. "And... if you are here, then who does Udraal have with him?" Cripple asked.

"One of my golems," Shiv said. "I sent one with him so that you can be distracted. And by 'you', I mean the Ascendants. I came looking for you because I don't trust Udraal not to fuck us over down the line."

"So you're playing the Ascendants and your creator against each other."

"Something like that. Truth be told, we're kind of pulling things out of our ass as we go along and hoping we'll find gold instead of just shit. So far, the only one I'm not really playing is you," Shiv said. "Listen, we're all desperate here. The entire world's gonna be after me. Ever since that World Quest triggered, there was no way back. You spoke to me. You were close to the Starhawk. It means that you don't have much of a way back, either. Not unless you want to destroy yourself."

"The Ruling Council has endured and emerged from greater moments of internecine conflict," Cripple said, though it didn't sound entirely convinced of its own words. "I have had disagreements with my fellow Ascendants many times."

But before Cripple could say anything more, Shiv interrupted it. "If you're gonna insist that this is no different, I'm gonna have to walk over and unplug your head from your ass. This is different. You know it is. The ritual, the Great One coming back, me, the Starhawk, everything. This is different. You feel uncomfortable? Great. Welcome to the club. I didn't want this. I didn't start this mess. But I'm caught in the middle of it. And I'm going to deal with it. The question is, Cripple, are you going to deal with your problems? Because you have them too."

"Prepare for transition. Three, two, one!" Adam shouted. He loosed another Veilpiercer. A pathway tore open before him, and this time, Shiv was surprised to see the insides of the guard cube they started from. Five was standing on the other end, as were a few dozen orcs, clad in heavy armor, wielding heavier weapons. "Talk and move at the same time," Adam called out. "Ascendant. Either come with us, or piss off. We're doing this. We're making our own path. It's time for you to decide. Whether you want to make yours, or if you're going to wait for your so-called brethren to slit your throat when you're not looking. You've already reached out and aided us once. Just because they are working with you to handle Udraal doesn't mean that bygones are bygones."

The extraction force began to filter across the pathway. Can Hu and Adam moved first. The orcs followed thereafter. The last ones behind were Kura, Gone, and Shiv. The Deathless studied the other prisoners, surprised they were still here. But the surprise turned to apprehension as he noticed how both Kura and Gone were glaring at Cripple.

"Shiv, hurry the hells up!" Adam called across the dimensional pathway.

Gone was facing away from Shiv and Kura. Her eyes were locked on the only other dimensional rift in the room. It shrank down and closed. And even at the last moment, Daughter remained absent. No sudden attack came. But that didn't mean they were out of the woods. Not even remotely. Rather, they were simply walking deeper of their own accord. They were as if lambs trying to become wolves to spare their own lives; going from prey to predator against beings they had little hope of overcoming.

"It seems that your own house is not in accord, Deathless," Cripple said.

"There is no house!" Kura snapped. Her left hand twitched, and the many scars trailing across her body like thorns came alight with Chronomancy. She looked evermore like one of those cracked cups repaired with veins of golden enamel. "The Deathless has said his piece, and I will say mine. The only reason I went in to claim you peacefully, Strongest, is because I owe the Deathless a debt of mercy and honor. With you here, this debt is nearly paid."

"Kura," Shiv warned.

"Silence!" the elven chronomancer nearly screeched at him. "You had your time to speak. I have my own grievances. Do not think I have forgotten you, Cripple. I remember the feeling of your fist. I remember you breaking my bones, shattering my spine, and casting me into one of your cells for years. Years. I languished here. I suffered."

"And I remember you as well," Cripple intoned. There was no lack of naked malice in the Ascendant's voice, either. "I remember what you did to those soldiers. I remember what you did to that family in the Windlands southwest of Diego. You remember the cage and the wounds I dealt you. I remember the

child you murdered. I remember holding her in one hand, how her blood kept seeping out from that neat little wound you made in her throat, and how small the casket I laid her in was."

And suddenly Shiv was again made aware of how a few of the other prisoners came to be. He knew some of them had to be in here for a good reason. And if Cripple wasn't lying...

"You see them as innocent, do you?" Kura sneered and spat at Cripple's feet. "They are but traitors to me. They gave me their oath-words that my position would not be sold to your Prismatic Guard. I had no intention of inflicting harm upon your Republic. I was merely passing by, mending my own wounds after the betrayal inflicted upon me by my own blood. This didn't have to happen, Ascendant. The child didn't have to die. That family didn't need to taste slaughter. But if I were to leave everyone who betrayed me unscarred, what worth would be the weight of my words?"

Shiv's first instinct then was to reach out and break Kura's neck. He could put up with a lot of things, but murdering a family, murdering a small child, pointless butchery... that was an orc-like thing to do. What made him loathe Kura more was how she had so many excuses, how she pushed away blame. The Challenger was respectable in one regard: he was unashamed. The orcs were unashamed. They were monsters and weapons wrapped in flesh.

Psycho-Cartography: Stop. Remember what you've learned. Think thrice. You kill Kura now, would Gone and others trust you? You kill her now, and we have fewer Legends on our side. We will need everyone we can gather to escape from this place. You have a grasp of her psychology now. She is cruel, brutal, and willing to do anything. But she also feels a sense of loyalty to you. You can use that.

She's a fucking monster, Shiv thought in reply.

Psycho-Cartography: This world is made of monsters. You are a monster sometimes as well. You work with monsters. The ones she murdered are already gone. And if she is to be punished, it must be at an opportune time. You can see righteousness done, whatever that righteousness is. But know that killing her now will hold its own consequences. Ones you might not be able to survive.

Psycho-Cartography 78 > 80

Philosophy 24 > 26

Shiv fell quiet but resolved to have things out with Kura at some point. He also knew he needed to keep Adam from this bit of information. At least for a while. He would tell his friend when they were less pressed.

"Listen, are you two going to tear into each other, or are we going to be actual Pathbearers and deal with our real issues?" Shiv interjected. Kura and Cripple snapped around to stare at him. He didn't flinch. "We'll have all the time in the world to kill each other, but we're going across now. Cripple, you stay, we're back to being enemies, and I'll mourn whatever I knew of you and the other Ascendants. They'll carve up your mind or stick all your Avatars in a cage somewhere. Maybe they'll let you out only to fight me or Udraal. Kura..." Shiv barely held himself back from attacking her. "I'm leaving. You want to stay here and get your pound of flesh? Fine. But you know you're probably not getting out of this prison without me or Adam."

He turned and walked, and after three steps, he heard the loud thumps of the Avatar's footsteps and sensed the movement of Kura's Chronomancy. The weight settled in his chest, but rather than feeling like a rock had sunk to the bottom of a pond, it was a body surfacing and bobbing up and down along the waters of anxiety.

A thin, small hand gripped Shiv's leg as he entered the dimensional pathway. He saw then that Gone was holding onto him. He stared at her, but she placed a finger over her lips and then she tapped her head.

"What?" Shiv asked.

"Psychomancy," she muttered.

The Deathless wondered what she was playing at, but he decided he wanted to find out.

"Don't react too much," the goblin's voice echoed inside his head. "You intend to resolve the elf?"

"Why? What got you thinking that?" Shiv wasn't sure if he trusted Gone either, but so far the goblin had been nothing but helpful. Ultimately, that didn't really mean anything. They were all prisoners here. Who knew what Gone did to deserve her cell? Or if she was planning something with Kura on the side?

"I know you don't really trust me—wouldn't be so trusting myself," Gone said. There was no offense in her mind, but there was a lingering urge to commit violence. Shiv had been around enough minds to know that feeling by now. "But if you do go for her, I want in."

And that surprised Shiv. Of all the things Gone could have asked for, this wasn't one he anticipated. "Why?" he replied.

"Because child killers should die. Don't need a bigger reason than that." The goblin released Shiv, and he watched her accelerate ahead in a burst of Chronomantic lightning. She vanished into the guard cube where Adam and the others were waiting.

Halfway through, she called out from behind him. "What did she want?"

Shiv looked over at Kura. She was trailing close behind him, and at the very end of their group was Cripple, looming large and covering the entrance to the rift with its body. "Same thing you did earlier," Shiv said. "We all got our histories, and we all got our vendettas. And right now, I feel real popular with how many people want my help."

The elven Chronomancer studied him for a moment and then offered a throaty laugh. Something told Shiv that she bought it.

We need her alive, he reminded himself. For now.

Chapter 191 (II) Burden

"I can pinpoint where your equipment is. I'm willing to send one of my Avatars along with you as a countermeasure against Udraal. But the other two requests..." Cripple hesitated. "I cannot accept the escape of any prisoner. Furthermore, I cannot condone a meeting between you and Veronica Chandler. Of all the Avatars, she stands alone as the most dangerous."

"Yeah, I'm aware of that," Shiv said. "But me and her, we got history I need to figure out. Things to talk about."

"And that is the greatest risk of all," Cripple continued. "If you speak to Veronica Chandler, then by the end, you will be little more than a thrall. She will break you with her words. She will render you little more than a pet, not even a slave."

"I've been hit by her words before," Shiv said. "I know their weight. I can take them."

"Hubris," Cripple said. "She was gentle with you. She was testing you, trying to get you to surrender willingly."

"Yeah, well, then I guess she doesn't know me well. Just kind of a fucked up thing, considering the fact that she might be my granny."

Cripple's Avatar froze then, and its optics narrowed, zooming in on him. "Your grandmother... Why didn't I see this before?"

"Probably because you were too busy dealing with six different streams of bullshit at once," Shiv said. "Udraal told me quite a few things. I want to know how many of those things are true. I want to know why he would make me like this, if that had anything to do with my family history. And I want to know," Shiv gritted his teeth, "I want to know why she never bothered, you know, if she knew about me at all. Why she just left me at Blackedge and, uh, well, everything. My life used to be a miserable nightmare, but now it just doesn't add up."

"She might have," Cripple said softly, "but Pathbearers of great power are threatened by weakness. And family is just so often that when your position is high enough. Weakness." The Ascendant sighed. "You

would not be the first of her grandchildren. And your father wouldn't be the first of her many offspring either. You are simply the most important offspring, if what Udraal claimed is true."

The Deathless was speechless. "Are you felling serious?"

"I'm afraid so."

"It's not uncommon," Adam interjected uncomfortably from within Can Hu's chassis. "Especially among the nobility. High-Tier Pathbearers often attempt to make sure their offspring are as powerful as possible. Marriages are for the main family branches, but they're also partly for interest. But there are also coupling arrangements made to strengthen and expand family lines."

Shiv blinked. "Coupling arrangements?"

Adam continued. "My father is untangled from the mixing branches of the nobility, mainly because we are a new family. But my mother..." The Gate Lord let out an exasperated laugh. "She showed me her family tree once as a child. Or maybe I looked in the book myself. It's hard to remember things that early on in my childhood. Anyway, it was like staring at a messy patch of vines coiled around each other. If I had to describe the nobility, it would be a nest of cousins and half-siblings experiencing near misses with each other, in the best of cases."

"In the best of cases?" Shiv echoed.

"Biomancers can usually clear away the issues resulting from inbreeding," Cripple said.

The nobility is a godsdamned inbreeding pit. Shiv's insides recoiled.

"Can't believe I'm about to say this, but I'm quite glad I turned out to be an orphan." Shiv snorted dryly.
"Thanks, mom and dad. Really helped me dodge the family tree bullet there."

"Perhaps in more ways than one," Cripple said. "Katherine likely had her eyes on you. You and Adam both. He's still at risk if he ends up in her clutches, but you've been removed as a prospect."

Shiv really didn't like the sound of that. "Because... why?"

"Katherine is Veronica's grandmother. Direct incest ranks among the few things that, how does she put it, 'makes someone so very unappealing.'" And suddenly a wave of near-unbearable disgust washed through Shiv. The Deathless groaned.

"Shiv? Shiv, are you alright?" Adam asked.

"Yeah," Shiv said, lying. "I'm just trying not to think about certain things."

"That makes two of us," Adam said.

"I think we could come to an arrangement regarding the prison break," Shiv muttered. "Right now, if you dispatch one of your Avatars to be part of our company, you can maintain a close watch over those who escape with us. We don't intend to bring a war to the people of the capital."

"Intentions are secondary to consequences," Cripple intoned. "I did not intend many things, yet they still resulted in failures."

"Yeah, and you might have failed anyway, even if you didn't do anything," Shiv shot back. "Cripple, I know there's a risk here, but I'm going to ask you a few simple questions. First, do you think that we're going to be able to shake the Ascendants and the Avatars if we don't collapse the entire prison? If the only ones that escape are us and the Ascendants come hunting, how long do you think I can stay unnoticed? How escapable is someone with Legendary Awareness?"

Cripple didn't immediately respond to that, and Shiv knew the machine god lacked a good answer. "Alright, so let's say I do manage to hide from them for a while. What then? How long do you think I can avoid Udraal? And do you think you can stop Udraal from destroying the prison anyway? Does Udraal Thann strike you as someone who only has one plan?"

"No," Cripple said, "but he is not infallible. He's been beaten before."

"Beaten? Or temporarily inconvenienced?" Adam asked.

Cripple didn't answer.

Shiv began to circle the Ascendant. "I don't know much about Udraal. I barely know his skills and have no clue about his history. But I can tell you that he has plenty of bodies to spend. He's stupidly powerful,

and some of that magic he's using," Shiv gestured at the scars lining the Avatar's body, "is like nothing I've seen before. Stop hesitating and decide on something. You don't want the prisoners to spill out into the capital and wreak havoc? Fine, we're on the same page. We're going to warn you when we drop the mana core, and you can be prepared to intercept and recapture as many of them as you can. Alternatively, you say no. We try to do this anyway because we have to do it. But there is no way we're staying inside this place. And we're probably going to be entirely reliant on Udrael's help in that situation. We don't want that. Not you, not me. But I will take my chances with Udrael if it means breaking out from this pit."

Shiv stopped. He glared at the back of Cripple's head. The Avatar hadn't turned to look at him at all, but Shiv could tell the Ascendant was thinking. "This isn't me forcing you to do anything. This is me cutting you in. It's the best offer you'll get today. Now, if you don't do this, I'm going to tell you what happens. Udrael will exert whatever influence he can over us. Adam and I are going to resist. But guess what? I don't think our odds are very good. He's a little too powerful for us to handle right now. He's got schemes within schemes. Hell, he says he has worlds under his control."

"He does not lie," the Ascendant replied, its voice barely a whisper. "We have scried some of Udrael's activities beyond Integrated Earth. He has conducted several conquests, claiming worlds with equivalent Ambient Mana Thresholds, most likely higher."

Shiv and Adam shared a look, and the Deathless clenched his fist. "That's why we need you, Cripple. You specifically. You want to meet the Starhawk and not have Udrael pull off whatever fuck-fuck game he's about to play? Well, then you need to be there. You need to be there with the only other Ascendant who is on the outside of this thing. The rest of them don't care. They are only playing for their own self-interest. We are past the point of trust now, and you know it. I'm putting up with you. Now, I'm going to need you to put up with me, or we all go down the worst path. And let me tell you, I don't see a very happy outcome that way."

Cripple didn't immediately reply, but Whisper stepped forward. The stealthy orc's midnight cloak billowed as if an invisible wind was passing along the fabric. "May I speak?"

Shiv narrowed his eyes at Whisper. He wondered what game the orc was playing now, but he gestured, allowing it.

"Cripple the Strongest. The Challenger respected you the most among all the Ascendants."

Cripple gave a bitter laugh. "He has given this speech to me directly, and he's told the Starhawk the same thing."

Whisper shook his head. "He was only lying with the Starhawk. He meant it truthfully when he spoke to you."

"I suspect he said that to the Starhawk as well," Cripple said flatly.

The orc paused deliberately and stared at Cripple. "I want you to know that what I say next is not a threat. I want you also to know that the Challenger is immensely disappointed in you."

Cripple's posture changed. The Avatar clenched its fist, and incandescence billowed out from its body in crushing waves. Shiv came alert as the whisper of violence graced his instincts. Kura and Gone were equally incensed. Adam shaped a new arrow, and the orcs bared their teeth.

"What do you mean?" Cripple said, and there was no warmth in the automaton's voice anymore.

"The Challenger knows about Kathereine. He knows about what she has over you and why you are so wary. But we can see you freed. We know where the contract is, and we know where Amira is as well."

A twitch passed through the Avatar's body. Adam looked well and truly lost. "Who is Amira?" he asked over their Psychomantic link.

The Deathless shrugged. "I have no idea."

The incandescent mana radiating out from the Avatar began to intensify. A series of waves crashed against Shiv's Shapeless Tides, and he braced himself for an unwanted brawl against the Ascendant. This wasn't the ideal outcome, but Adam had planned for this. The teleportation anchor connected to this place had been disassembled. Five was allowed to tap into the mithril supports directly, and with the few automaton wardens that Can Hu had subverted, the wolf-man could flood the insides of the cube with Dimensionality and draw everyone across to a new safe point. However, that required Shiv, Adam, Kura, Gone, and Candles to contain the Avatar for the duration.

"You lie," Cripple said, his voice heavy with anger and disbelief. "You goad me with her name."

Whisper, meanwhile, never lost his smile. "She still writes to you every month. You get letters from Elysium Field, and you've tried to find her yourself several times. You weren't careful enough during your last attempt, and the letter was delayed for a month. Kathereine handed it to you personally within your domain."

And suddenly all the fight went out of Cripple. It sagged, more like a weary man than a war-wounded machine.

"The Challenger also wants you to know that it is a mistake you've made," Whisper continued. The smile died on the orc's face, and a hint of scorn leaked through. Shiv realized that Whisper hated Cripple, for whatever reason, he couldn't tell. But that expression, that glare in the orc's eyes, was unmistakable. "The Challenger says that you should have finished her off yourself if you wished to give her any mercy. That gods cannot have weak followers, and gods cannot have mortals as kin."

"I care little what your savage mongrel of a master says. In his eyes, only monsters make for proper gods."

"And is he wrong?" Whisper shot back. "Are you not a monster?"

"Everything I have done—"

Whisper interrupted the Ascendant. "Yes, you did it for the Republic. Justification or truth, it doesn't matter. Even if you did do it for the Republic, does that make it right? Does that make it proper? Does bombing a place and butchering all the people who live there so that your people could have more room to expand constitute nobility? Does capturing people, cutting them apart, and experimenting on them make you good just because the ones you victimized were vile themselves? Come, now, Ascendant."

Psycho-Cartography: His psychology is good. At least as good as ours. Perhaps more. He might have Psycho-Cartography as well, or even an evolved form.

The other orcs began to grunt and mutter words of pity under their breath. "It doesn't know who it is," Mortar muttered, shaking his head. He gestured at Cripple. "You see this? This is what happens if you end up going between. You're not willing to stop being mortal, to stop being tethered to whatever

ethics or weakness you obey. And you're not willing to commit to godhood despite using its power to break so many. No way out. Just an eternal trap."

Shiv realized the orcs were trying to educate him. They thought this was a poignant moment. And despite everything, he agreed. He didn't think the orcs were right about ethics, not even close. But Cripple was being torn, torn in so many directions. It wanted to work with Shiv, but it still hoped to reconcile with the other Ascendants. It wanted to meet with the Starhawk, but Kathereine held it in her clutches somehow.

Cripple wanted to aid Shiv, but it wasn't willing to go far enough. And bit by bit, the sheer stress Cripple was under made itself known. The Ascendants were godlike in power, but they were not godly in terms of wisdom. And that alarmed Shiv. Even the Composer, humane and gentle though she was, was not so wise. There were points of failure with her. There were things beyond her notice, beyond her power.

And then there was the Challenger.

The Challenger was a true monster, but he committed to it. He embraced it. He didn't let it be a liability. The Challenger was horrifically wise. And that was another point of nuance to being a Pathbearer.

Psycho-Cartography: You walk a halfway path, and you will be rend asunder by your path. Know this.

Psycho-Cartography 80 > 81

By now, Whisper had fallen silent, but his eyes were locked on Shiv rather than Cripple. The leader realized what his orc was trying to do, and he stepped in.

"Cripple," Shiv said, "I don't know what they're saying. I don't know what my orcs blindsided you with. But even if you don't trust them, I hope you can trust me. I came to you, didn't I? I'm here begging for your help. But I think I've come to another arrangement. Whatever Kathereine has on you, I think I can break it. I will try to break it and set you free. And I'm willing to put a skill of mine on the line if you are."

That made Cripple turn. It stared at Shiv, and the Deathless waited for the Ascendant to speak. When no words came, he saw the Avatar's hand shaking.

"First," Cripple started, its voice choked, "I wish to help Young Lord Arrow get his equipment back. I will see one of my Avatars assigned to you. And as for Veronica..." Cripple trailed off. "Are you certain you wish to meet her?"

"No," Shiv said. "In fact, the thought of meeting makes me wanna go another round with the Tarrasque alone. Feels like I'm falling all the time. But I'm not gonna let discomfort turn me away from what I have to do. This is a sooner-or-later thing, not a hope-and-run-away thing."

Cripple looked away from Shiv then. The suddenness of its aversion caught the Deathless's notice.

Psycho-Cartography You shamed it. It wishes it were you right now. Be proud, but pity the Ascended.

While Psycho-Cartography had one epiphany, Shiv had another. Power alone isn't enough to set you free. Your behavior, your choices, the people around you... The System has so many angles to hurt you with.

Shiv thought about Adam, Uva, and Valor, and now he thought about everyone around him. The longer you lived, the more ways you could be wounded.

"I want you to make an oath," Cripple finally said. "Not a ritual, just your word. I will take your word, Deathless. You will not lead your band to inflict harm on the residents of the capital. You will keep my Avatar close and informed regarding all your plans, and you will deliver me to the Starhawk with utmost haste. If you can do these things, then... then..." Cripple's words died again. It wanted to say something else. "Do you think you can do it?" it suddenly asked. A faint whisper of hope snaked its way into Cripple's voice.

Shiv cocked his head. "Save Amira? Whoever she is? Yeah, maybe. I need details, though. I need to know what Kathereine has on her, and whatever the hell's going on between the two of you."

"It is a contract. A slave contract."

Shiv frowned. "Okay, so, what, she owns you, technically?"

"No, not anymore. I made sure I broke that shackle, but I failed to save another. She owns someone that I cannot afford to lose."

Tequila almost started gagging. Shiv shot the orc a glare, but all that made Tequila do was turn away.

"So be it," Cripple said. It wasn't a statement uttered by a determined Pathbearer, but one who was tired. "If we are to do this, however, I need to bring you back as a prisoner."

Shiv considered Cripple's statement. "So that you can preserve your cover among the other Ascendants? I... Cripple, I don't think this thing is going to last."

"It will last for as long as I can make it," Cripple said. "I do not wish to lose my standing among the other Ascendants entirely, and I will need their aid if I am to intervene on your behalf against Udraal. I can keep them in the dark regarding where you are and what you are doing, but should you stand against your maker, it will not be a single Avatar that stops him. Is that understood?"

Shiv nodded. "So, what? You lure Veronica out by bringing me in?"

"It is the easiest way to do this. However, I recommend that you remove all equipment you are not willing to lose. It is hard to tell how this might go, and without a strategy of escape..."

"Oh, I have a strategy of escape," Shiv interjected. "You leave that to me. But what about Adam's weapon and the mana core?"

"Those two matters can be handled at the same time, for his weapon is stored near the mana core, in one of the shifting cubes protecting it. There is another problem, however. His armor has been requisitioned."

"Requisitioned?" Adam spat aloud. "What do you mean? It's my armor! You're just going to let someone else take it?"

"Not someone. Enoch." Cripple paused. "He needed a new set of armor for his newest Avatar."

Shiv felt his heart go cold. Ice flowed through his veins. "Rebis," Shiv said. "You recaptured him."

Cripple sighed. "Harlock did. And he returned Rebis to Enoch, who, after all that has happened, hastily infused his being into the broken prisoner. The project was incomplete. The binding has caused the one you call Rebis a great amount of pain. But it is done. He is now enthralled to the Ascendant."

Five sniffled. "Perhaps not exactly. His mind, it is still split in two, is it not?"

Cripple regarded the wolf-man. "Speak your piece, Raven."

"If his mind is split in two, then so are his skills. That's the entire point of Rebis. He has two Paths, two different souls meshed together, not just a single one. That's why Enoch wanted him, because of his incomplete ritual of soul-severing, is it not?" Cripple stayed quiet, so Five continued. "His mantling is likely incomplete as well. I know Enoch is partially damaged, and Rebis is mutilated at the soul. His merging has not concluded. If that's the case, then only part of him has been anchored to the Ascendant."

"And if we remove that part, won't that kill Rebis?" Shiv said.

"Perhaps," Five replied with far too much levity, "but if it's done right, maybe I can preserve some of his brain function. Keep him alive to some extent. Besides, I don't think our dear friend would like to live life as an enduring thrall to the one that cut him open and fused him back together as if some kind of macabre art project."

Shiv didn't like it, but he also didn't much like the idea of letting Enoch have a slave for an Avatar.

"Alright," Shiv said. "Finish him off if it comes to it. Would be a mercy for him—better than being used as a soul-puppet. If we can free him, though..."

"Of course," Five answered. "Of course I will."

"So, does he have my armor yet or not?" Adam asked.

"I am uncertain," Cripple replied, "but if we must do this, then we must act in tandem. This also lends aid to your infiltration of the mana core. If you can secure the armory cube at the very core of the Nadir, then you likely have a direct shot at the mana core as well. It is one of the essential cubes, fully anchored to the core."

Shiv and Adam shared a look. "And can you get us into the cube," Adam began, "without suffering extreme attrition or bloodshed? I don't know if you've noticed, but what we have here isn't exactly an army."

"I cannot," Cripple said.

Adam sighed. "Alright, then I guess we're going to do the soul detonation method then."

"I'll start making golems," Shiv grunted.

"You did not let me finish," Cripple added. "I said I could not. I did not say that we have no means to infiltrate."

"What does that mean?" Adam snapped, tired of the Ascendant's prevarications.

"I mean that there are many Legendary prisoners, and there are few that pose a direct threat to all things material or otherwise. And one might see you pass through without inflicting immense damage."

And both Shiv and Adam picked up what the Ascendant was putting down.

"There is a prisoner I would like you to locate," Cripple said.

Chapter 191 (III) Burden

"He should not be hard to find. Hydras are conspicuous in the best of times, and Solzimort is... eccentric."

"Alright, so we can find this hydra, and he'll do what? Burn a hole through the cage?"

"More so that he will swallow a piece of Orichalcum, merge with the material, and swim through the cages without being impeded. He was contained in a special cell. Said special cell was rendered utterly useless the moment the magical restraints keeping Solzimort permanently sedated were deactivated."

And that was likely Bonk's fault. Shiv grimaced; the large orc would have loved to see this, the carnage and chaos caused by his actions.

"Aside from this, among the many prisoners here, Solzimort is one of the few I am willing to bargain with."

"And why is that?" Adam asked, sounding both curious and suspicious.

"Because Solzimort shouldn't be here. The main reason he is here is because of Longinus. Solzimort is a unique Pathbearer, a unique lifeform. Longinus likes to collect specimens of this type."

"Broken Moon," Shiv growled. "Cripple, look, I get you like playing at being a decent guy. But seriously, what the fuck? Half of this place is a slave pen of random people, and the other half is filled with the worst godsdamn killers I've ever met."

The Avatar turned away from Shiv, and the Deathless tasted the Ascendant's shame. "What is the goddamn point of being a god if you're so easily bullied and cowed?"

Shiv held back the words he wanted to spit out the most. You're still just a slave, Cripple. He knew that was true, and Cripple did as well. But just as Psycho-Cartography allowed him to find the Ascendant's deepest wounds, it also informed him that casting it out so freely would come with severe consequences. If he broke Cripple's heart now, there might just be no going back, no matter how much

Shiv thought the Ascendants deserved it. The Deathless pushed his anger aside and gestured for Cripple to continue.

"I will be able to have Solzimort carry all of you into one of the cubes. After that, it's best that you move quietly. The Wardens there all possess at least Heroic-Tier Awareness. You will likely not be able to stay hidden for long."

"Then this will be quite the challenge," Whisper said. "It's been a while since I had one."

At this, Shiv took off his cape and handed it to Adam. The Gate Lord stared at him. "Why?"

Shiv didn't answer. Instead, he entered the cape and felt the clenching pressure of Dimensionality wash over him. He reached the Forest of Alloy, stepped inside, and left a temporal anchor there. He studied his echo and left the Category One dimension thereafter. "So I can get to you fast. Or when my meeting with Veronica goes wrong."

Adam gave Shiv a nod. "Good luck. Don't let her talk you to death."

"I'll try to do her in with my words first," Shiv said, cracking his neck. "See how many levels I can get in Rhetoric or something from this."

Adam nodded. "Alright, that's him and the mana core. But what else? What about you?"

"You will come with me," Cripple said. "I will deliver you to Veronica directly."

"You know where she is?" Shiv asked, wondering if he could manage to ambush Veronica somehow.

"I know where she's likely to be, and I can get her attention. Specifically hers. She will likely want to speak with you, unbothered by the other Avatars or Ascendants as well—even her own. That is something we can count on."

And that was just what Shiv was hoping for. "Alright." He turned and regarded his orcs. "Whisper, Mortar, while I'm gone, you guys stay on your best behavior." A chorus of jeers and insults came his way. Shiv ignored them. "I'll make it up to you assholes later. For now, make sure Adam and the others get to the core. I'll be with you shortly."

"Don't get caught again," Mortar chided, chuckling. "You won't like what we have planned for our next rescue. It involves hostages."

"Shit, Mortar, that's all the reason I needed to stay out of a cell," Shiv muttered back.

"I can send one of my shadows with you," Kura suggested.

Shiv waved her off. "No, the fewer people that come with me, the better. Don't need Veronica spooked. This is going to be an actual conversation, not an assassination."

"A shame," Kura said. "But you should be bolder, Deathless. Between all of us, we can slay her alone. She cannot stop us."

The thought occurred to Shiv, but it didn't seem like a likely outcome. "We're still running up against a Legendary Pathbearer with god knows how many skills and an Ascendant she can call on. An Ascendant I want to avoid as much as I can."

"Wise," Cripple agreed. "Even alone, Veronica Chandler stands among the most dangerous Pathbearers I've ever met."

Shiv grunted once more. "Adam, get your armor, and get to the core. I'll be with you as soon as I can. Whether that be because everything's gone to shit, or because I've learned enough."

The Gate Lord seemed like he wanted to say something else to Shiv, but refrained. "Good luck, Shiv," he said instead. "If you feel anything is wrong—"

"Don't worry, Adam," Shiv said, realizing just how worried his friend was for him. "I'm not gonna risk my life for something stupid."

Adam fixed him with a flat stare.

"Okay, I'm not going to risk getting enslaved for something stupid."

"That's better," Adam said. "Listen, with how our luck's going..."

"Yeah, I know. We're probably gonna need to fight Rebis. Hells, we're probably gonna need to fight a bunch of the other prisoners that went missing earlier. When everything goes to hell—and it always goes to hell—stay ready."

"You too, Shiv. I'm going to need you intact for what's to come. After all, you're the one that needs to collapse the mana core. Udraal gave us two hours. Suppose you'll get half of that to chat with your grandmother."

"I'll probably be out faster," Shiv said. "Everything we do here is a risk, but so was working with Udraal. So was doing nothing. So was just reacting." He let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding and turned to face Cripple. "Alright then, let's make this look as real as we can. Suppose I need to be marched in as a prisoner."

"In restraints."

"Great. Well, let's see my new bracelets."

Shiv stared down at the masses of Orichalcum manacles coating both his arms. They were wrapped around his left and right hands, fused up to his elbows, and they had a spiral of varied spells keeping his magic suppressed. His Shapeless Tides ground against the manacles, and Shiv wondered if he could break free in a few seconds. As he directed a few Overflow Tides into the material, the spells reacted

violently, popping and bursting, but ultimately stabilizing as they held him in a state of constant subversion.

"Stop that," Cripple said.

"Just want to know how tough this thing is," Shiv responded.

"Enough that you won't be able to break free without significant effort and time."

Their footsteps filled the long, dim hall. The floor was draped with fine carpets. Their color was blood red, yet as Shiv swept the ground using his Biomancy earlier, he realized some of that was literally blood, painted and infused into the fabric itself. The walls here were of fine, rich wood. Their color was a warm brown with many rings and faint traces of age. Lanterns hung from above, and they sway as if brushed by a soft, unfelt breeze.

After leaving Adam and the others, Cripple led Shiv across the crawlspace until they found a specific cube. This one was smaller than most of the others, little more than the size of a cabin in the countryside. Yet, there was no easy way in. No magic flowed around the cube. It wasn't connected to any of the mithril supports. And there was a sense of wrongness when Shiv looked upon it.

It was like his Awareness didn't want him to know the cube was there, that his magic peeled away as he drew closer, that his skin and instincts howled at him to run, to flee, to do anything he could to preserve his life.

For how unassuming the little cube was, it radiated with dread.

And only when Cripple used its own divine presence did that crushing feeling die down. It pulled Shiv into the cube with a burst of divine mana. And after that, they found themselves walking down the aforementioned hall, upon the carpets surrounded by soft wood and swaying lanterns, walking until they came to a halt before a large stone door.

A series of runes encircled the frame of the door. Its centerline was cracked, as if someone had tried to batter their way through at some point. On both flaps of the door were trailing scribbles. Shiv guessed it was a story of some kind, and as he stared at them, a light flared as if the sun shone through from behind.

Whispers filled his mind, tales that wormed their way into his skull, but his Shapeless Tides held them at bay. It was trying to reshape his consciousness somehow, to make him slumber, but his Legendary skill ensured he was no easy prey.

"So what now?" Shiv said. He held up his manacles. "Do I knock?"

"We wait," Cripple replied.

Shiv turned and regarded the Ascendant. "We wait?"

"Yes. This is one of Veronica's private sanctums. This door is only accessible by her, and we were spotted the moment we breached this place's threshold. She will be coming soon."

And at that, the door opened with a thunderous groan. It snapped wide, and the runes spat embers of magic, showering both Shiv and Cripple's Avatar.

The chamber beyond was even more opulent than the hallway Shiv had just walked down. A raging fireplace crackled to the right, and the mantelpiece was made from some kind of glossy marble. It was sculpted exquisitely, sporting countless faces: human, elf, goblin, machine, and more. It climbed all the way up to the chimney and to the ceiling, and Shiv saw a glistening crystalline chandelier swaying above.

Atop the chandelier sat small creatures. They had little wings, and when Shiv used his Farsight to narrow his vision and get a better look at them, he found himself surprised to be staring at what seemed to be small, winged children. They were dressed in greenish tunics, frolicking with each other, laughing as mana dust spilled free from their bodies.

"Fairies,"

Cripple said. "Don't look at them. They will Curse your eyes."

Shiv blinked at the Ascendant.

"Veronica has pacts with the Fae. They see us. And so she does. So. Do not look at them, unless you wish to smell only candy and see only the color blue for a period."

Besides the mantelpiece, the walls were lined with bookshelves. There were so many books, books rising row by row, books stacked so tight that to pull one out would require a struggle, and to push it back would be next to impossible without causing damage.

And at the far end of the room was a long desk. It was as worn as the door, made from stone much like the door, and there were etchings upon it, not so different from the ones on the door. A mess of scrolls, tomes, papers, and more littered the desk, and Shiv wondered why some of those books called to him. An insatiable urge pulled at his person. He wanted to take some of those tomes, to devour what secrets they contained.

"Cripple. You're going to need to explain this to me."

And then she was there. She walked right past Shiv. He hadn't felt her, had no idea when she'd appeared. Her long coat was gone, and her static war dress billowed around her body as she strode toward her desk. She turned around and sat atop it, crossing one leg over the other. She regarded Shiv with her brown eyes, and he forced himself to meet her gaze. His Voidmantid armor's helmet was collapsed so that she could see his face. It took everything he had not to glare or scowl at her.

"The other Ascendants and Avatars," Veronica began, "they're out hunting you. Udraal supposedly has you, but here you are, right in front of me, inside one of my personal sanctums, accompanied by my most untrustworthy and most compromised Ascendant."

"There is no scheme here—" Cripple began.

"Cripple, I say this as a sympathetic friend: Shut the fuck up." Veronica waved him off, and Shiv cringed as he realized she gestured the same way he did, cutting through the air with her hand like a knife.

"Please, Cripple, you can insult anyone else, just don't insult me. I've known you for too long, know you too well, and I don't blame you. My grandmother plays her games. The other Ascendants can't seem to make up their mind about what they want to do. Their appetites get worse and more extreme every year, and the Republic strains even as it bloats and grows."

Veronica gave a soft sigh as she rolled her eyes. "And at the center of it all isn't you, but me. Me holding it all together. Me, dealing with the sins of the past, the problems of the present, and the threats of the future."

Shiv chuckled. "So, which one am I? Or am I all three?"

"Clever," Veronica replied dryly. "But I haven't quite figured that out yet. Udraal has talked to you."

"Yeah," Shiv said. Veronica's gaze grew more intense by the second, and the Deathless forced himself to stand firm. An unnatural fear clawed at his stomach. He felt like an animal on the inside, but he was more than that. Fear, natural or unnatural, couldn't turn Shiv away. "Told me quite a few things about you, and I want to know if they're true. More than that, I want to know about my parents. I want to know what your deal with Udraal is. I want to know about the ritual."

And Veronica began to laugh. Her voice rose, and the pitch of her amusement climbed higher and higher. After a good ten seconds, she fell silent. "You know, this might be the first time a prisoner has tried to interrogate me inside one of my own offices. You're bold. You're overly bold. But I find that quite endearing." She clenched her jaw. "Yes, to begin with. I think you're probably my blood. Just as your father was probably my blood. That's no lie."

"Probably?"

Veronica smirked. "Let me be honest with you, boy. I've had many children. I kept none. I can't fully remember all of them. And you don't seem to know about this because, well, Roland's probably kept you insulated and severed from healthy development. Understandable, but pointlessly paranoid."

For a beat, Shiv had nothing to say. "So your excuse for not knowing is that you have too many bastards?"

Veronica shrugged. "I suppose so." And then her expression softened. "I wouldn't call them bastards. Just... disowned. For what it's worth, though, I did wish for a better life for your father. He probably deserved it, but I couldn't give that to him."

"You're the Legend-Councilwoman of the Republic!" Shiv almost shouted. "What the hells do you mean you couldn't give that to him?"

"I mean exactly that," Veronica said. She stared at Shiv as if he were simple. "I can't give him a good life, a safe life, because of who I am. Legend-Councilwoman. That isn't a position of privilege. That's the position of the chief babysitter for all the Ascendants, for every citizen in this great nation, and the cleaner for all the problems tumbling our way. You want to know what else that makes me, boy?"

Shiv considered her question for a second, and the answer followed naturally. "A target."

She snapped her fingers, and the flames within the hearth flickered. This close, and with them just speaking, Shiv could focus on how powerful she was, how heavy and dense her Dimensionality felt. It was crushing. The pressure radiating out from her made it hard to breathe, and his Shapeless Tides were the only reason he wasn't flattened. Even so, his bones creaked, and his tendons were pulled tight.

"I cannot afford a proper family. I cannot afford to spend my time rearing young and playing house. These are things you give up once you have enough enemies, or you wish to create a worthy enterprise."

Shiv inclined his head. "So, my father's not the only kid you handed away."

"No," Veronica admitted. Her voice fell, and she grew quieter. "It always hurts. I am not heartless. I'm not invincible. It always hurts, I always regret it, but I always understand the price I paid to get to where I am. A price I hope the children don't pay."

"Well," Shiv said, "he's dead now, so..."

"He's dead because he was a fool," Veronica spat. "He was a fool, you were a mistake, and your mother was a greedy whore. Now. Would you like to hear about them? About their mistake? And about what Udrael probably intends to do with you?"

"I might know more than a little about the last part, but yeah," Shiv said. "Let's hear about how mom and dad got to the point of mass murder, grandmother."

Chapter 192 (I) Whores

There's no way for me to hurt you more than your life already did. I know about what you did to your brother and his family. I know it was because of jealousy. I know that you hate him and remain jealous of him still. And I know you regret killing him, despite hating him so much. Despite all he took from you.

My words tore your body in half so easily. I probably could have done that if I focused my power long enough. But I really didn't. You wanted to come apart. You wanted to break. Because something in you was already on the precipice. Or close enough to the edge that shattering must have felt like a relief.

Stop spitting your defiance at me now. Wipe that glare away. You know my words are true. You can pretend they're not. But you know they are.

That's the beauty of Rhetoric, you know. It's not deceiving someone into changing their mind or bludgeoning them using an overwhelming barrage of persuasive techniques. It's not even the Animancy or other magic suffusing my words. No. Rhetoric is about meaning: the amplification of meaning, the materialization of meaning, the wielding, shaping, and destruction of meaning.

And inside your chest, crawling up your throat like acid reflux, was a meaning you fought to suppress for so long. You wanted to break, you wanted to go away, you wanted to plunge into the dark. I didn't put that there inside of you; I just made it true.

But that's not the only thing you've left buried inside your own heart, is it, Hero Carmichael? A lone assassin trying to bring down an Avatar. It doesn't matter how high your Tier is; that's a suicide mission. So, what else in you is calling you toward the void?

You should tell me now, you should be honest and cooperate, because if you don't, I will find the rest of the things inside you that are broken, and I will talk to them. I will give words to them, and as you hear the pain born from within you, sculpted into words by someone without, you will tear again, tear and tear and tear until there is nothing left of you.

Death isn't a punishment; death can be a release, but only if there's still something left of you. So let me help you reach a dignified end. Cross over to the other side with some measure of peace, rather than nothing but scars. Please, for once in your life, be gentle with yourself. Be gentle and shed your regret.

-Veronica Chandler

"Before we begin, how much have Udraal and the Starhawk told you about the Great One, or the ritual the Ascendants intend to perform?"

Veronica studied Shiv for a while, and he held himself back from replying immediately. He was in the wolf's den, and every word he uttered could be used against him—quite literally, in fact. Words were weapons when it came to Veronica Chandler.

Psycho-Cartography: Never lie to this woman. Never fully lie. She will be able to see through you. I am only a Master-Tier skill, and that's feeble compared to anything she has. Be conservatively honest. Use the truth as your shield.

"Not much," Shiv finally said. "I know some generalities, and I guessed a few other things. I know that the Ascendants aren't actual gods. They somehow fused themselves to the Great One's soul skills. I also know that they need Sacred Phylacteries to function in the real world, along with Avatars to channel their power."

"So, the generalities," Veronica replied. She tapped her finger on her table, and each time she made contact, the etchings lining the stone flared, and susurrations hissed past Shiv's ears.

"Hey, listen, can you knock that shit off?" The Deathless glared at Veronica, and slowly she turned to regard her table.

"Oh, this? I'm not trying to subvert your mind, if that's what you were thinking. If I was, I would have tried to crack you open already. I'm not exactly a gentle Psychomancer, and my Rhetoric is direct and vulgarly honest despite its Tier. I'm just recording an instant of this moment into my monument."

"Your table is called a monument?" Shiv said. "Seems pretty arrogant."

"No, it quite literally is a monument. A unified monument, in fact. The doors outside, this table, and several other pieces of elder stone are technically the same piece. They think they're the same piece, and any damage one suffers, the others will exhibit as well. The etchings they store are also shared, and so I can access this information from practically any number of sanctums I have. It's very useful."

Shiv studied the table in greater detail and frowned. "Why, though? If someone breaks your door..."

"If someone manages to break that door," Veronica laughed, "I will shake their hand, and I will try to recruit them."

"But it's already cracked."

"True, and I have no idea what cracked it. I am curious to find out, however. Now, before we lose the plot: the Great One, the ritual, the Ascendants, and your parents."

Veronica pushed off the table and walked around it. There wasn't a chair there beforehand, but with a snap of her finger and a pulse of Dimensionality, a large throne materialized. It was made from bones and lined with plush, red cushioning. At the top of the throne were numerous spikes carrying skulls upon their apex.

Their eyes burned with Necromantic energy as Veronica settled down, slouching in her seat as she regarded her wayward grandchild across the table. "What you know about the Ascendants is mostly accurate. They do have portions of themselves bound to the Great One's skills. The Abyssal War, though

a very complicated war with a myriad of reasons behind its initiation, was primarily triggered because of an act of foolishness."

"The Starhawk," Shiv said.

Veronica nodded, and he knew he was on the right track. "He sent the Eclipsebreakers down into the depths to seek out the Great One. Well. Before that, he was trying to mend the Ascendants and himself. Along the way, Udraal's attention was drawn. But that's the very abridged and general version of things."

"Why did he send Roland and my parents down in the first place?" Shiv asked.

"To make things right." Veronica sighed, as if she didn't consider such a thing a possibility. "And it was a foolishly risky thing to do. There are treaties between us and the Five Faiths. We have our obligations and our restrictions, and they have theirs. We are meant to guard them from the other surface nations, for everyone wishes to have a piece of absolute power, and the Great One is as close to absolute as one can get."

"And when the Starhawk sent someone down, I'm guessing he broke some kind of law?"

"Some kind of law?" Veronica almost sneered. "You can say that. He broke the most fundamental core of our trust, our peace. The Five Faiths, no, they are not powerful enough to exact the retribution they desire from us. No matter what the Ascendants did, they are tied to the Great One, and the Faiths worship the Great One. They are bound to the Great One, and any damage inflicted upon the Great One will leave the Abyss crippled and decaying. There is only one reason why the Underworld has the same life as it does, and that is the True God slumbering in its depths."

"Tell me more about why the Starhawk did all this," Shiv said. "Why then? What was he trying to fix for the Ascendants? And why my family? Why Roland?"

The Councilwoman shrugged and pointed her palms toward the ceiling. "Probably because he couldn't endure it anymore: The decay of godhood eating away at his personhood. The decay of his longtime friends." She sighed, and her gaze went to someplace distant. She was reminiscing about something. For a few seconds, she just didn't speak. "I understand him, despite everything. Despite what I must do, I understand him, and I don't blame him entirely."

A bitter scoff came from Veronica. "Year by year, the Ascendants forget more of who they were. They're becoming caricatures of themselves. They weren't nearly like this before. At the start of everything, they were wonderful, magnificent." She paused as she shook her head. "If you could have only seen what I saw in my childhood, if you could have seen the birth of the Republic, you would know."

"Would know what? Know that the Ascendants weren't a gaggle of bastards and pawns? Because that would be a surprise."

Cripple turned slightly to stare at Shiv, but the Deathless was unashamed of his statement. He met the Ascendant's gaze and simply shrugged. "Listen, I'm not calling you a bastard."

Cripple sighed. "I am honored."

"No, Cripple really isn't," Veronica said on Cripple's behalf, "but you're right. It is rather pitiful. Especially since it let a desperate child convince it into the scheme unfolding before me."

Shiv sneered. "Alright, well, I guess you should kill me for that impudence."

The Legendary Councilwoman closed her eyes and barely stifled a grin of amusement. "Hmm, I suppose you are one of mine."

"Yeah, I know the fuck I'm not," Shiv snarled back. The anger inside him bucked. It was like a slaving beast trying to force its way up his throat, trying to claw a path out of his heart, against the wall he held up to keep the rage contained. As he did, something inside his chest tore, and he held back a wince of pain.

Psycho-Cartography: Every bit of control you surrender to her will become a wound.

Veronica tilted her head, and her expression turned inquisitive. She was a great wolf trying to decide if she was looking at one of her own kind or a lamb she was about to devour. "You have a lot of anger inside of you."

"Yeah, wonder why," Shiv grunted sarcastically.

"I don't," Veronica replied. "I can guess what Udraal was playing at when he enacted his ritual with your parents." She paused, considered something else. "I suspect he meant for young Lord Arrow to die as well. It's a delightfully cruel thing to intend, but knowing Roland and that softness inside of him, he likely wouldn't have been able to kill you. He would have raised you as something between an effigy of hate and a replacement child."

Shit, she's dead on. How well does she know Udraal?

"And I would have been delightfully fucked up in a whole other way, wouldn't I?" Shiv asked.

"As per Udraal's design. He treats everyone like they're chess pieces, or clay to be molded."

"And you don't?"

Veronica flinched, but it was a playful reaction. She wasn't actually offended. "No, no, everything he's guilty of I'm likely guilty of as well, though perhaps to a lesser extent. I am more conservative. He's more ambitious. His wins are grander, but my failures are less humiliating."

"You seem to know him pretty well," Shiv said.

Veronica's eyes narrowed to half-moons as she gave him a coquettish smile. "Here's a word of advice to you, boy. If you make it out of here and you decide to keep being intimate with that Umbral girl, you will come to know her very well, and at some point, one of you will try to kill the other. And you will go back to being intimate after, like nothing happened."

"What are you..." Shiv's words trailed off as he read the meaning hidden within Veronica's words. A choking noise escaped him. "You and him?"

Veronica gave him a casual nod. "It's not so romantic. It's just an itch for both of us."

"But you..."

"It's really quite common for Pathbearers," Veronica said. "Once you go past a certain Tier, everyone below is either a thing to you or a vulnerability. Certain desires never fade, so when you run into someone interesting and dangerous, and they find you interesting and dangerous..." She didn't finish. She simply waved a finger and let Shiv fill in the rest of the details himself.

"But you're all trying to kill each other."

"Not always," Veronica said. "Sometimes we merely scream and debate. Other times, we get tired of that. Other contests transpire."

"Alright," Shiv muttered, trying not to think too hard about this. He tried really, really hard not to think about his grandmother and his supposed maker having any kind of relation. As if I'm not a psychological mess already, Shiv thought to himself.

"Regardless, the Starhawk sent his first agents down, trying to make some subtle changes to reverse the decay happening to the Ascendants at first." She read Shiv's curiosity and elaborated on the decay. "As I was saying earlier, you should have seen them at their prime, the Ascendants. They were people, full people, not these mockeries of themselves." She gritted her teeth but controlled herself before Shiv could read too much into it. "I knew my own grandmother when she was still mortal. She was powerful to me, but... she had such taste as well. Deviant taste, such that I cannot condone. But ultimately, she was a full person. She had the ability to hold herself back. She had the capability to decide when to indulge her desires, the choice to be kind and generous, to be sweet and thoughtful."

"But not anymore," Shiv said, reading her micro-expression as much as he could.

Veronica fell quiet for a long while. "You know, before the Biomancers grew powerful and steadied our biology, there was all manner of decay that was sealed in flesh. The automata also deal with such decay, but it is not biological. Regardless, everything suffers from entropy to some extent, and if you can't fight it, it will eat you." Veronica hummed again. "Dementia."

"What?" Shiv said.

"Have you heard of it?"

The Deathless wracked his brain and tried to recall the word. "Does it mean something to do with deterioration of the brain?" He recalled seeing something about that in the Odes, but it was more of an offensive spell, a particularly cruel one that even Ekkihurst himself didn't like inflicting upon another. Despite the Sculptor's casual cruelty and unspeakable artistic tastes, there was one thing he valued above all others, one thing he treasured and deemed worthy of protection. And that thing was the mind, the consciousness. For to lose one's mind was a terrible tragedy; one Ekkihurst simply didn't want to endure himself.

"Correct," Veronica answered. "It is similar in a sense. My grandmother is no simpleton, nor does she forget everything, but she is a shadow. It's like watching someone you know get slowly boiled down to their basest traits."

"And that's because they're contained within the Great One," Shiv said, wagering a guess. "Because they're only made up of their feats and histories, their most important deeds."

"That is my theory as well," Veronica nodded, and Shiv caught a hint of pride on her face. "A single skill does not make an entire person, no matter how hard someone has used that skill, no matter for how long. Well done, Tanner."

"Shiv."

"What?"

"Shiv is my name," he replied. "I'm not telling you again. We're not talking anymore if I can't even take that respect from you."

"Take?" Veronica said.

"Respect isn't given in our world, is it?" Shiv asked, jutting his chin out at her.

Veronica nodded slowly, and rather than using his given name, she acquiesced. "Very well, Shiv, then. Is Deathless fine too?"

"Depends on who's calling me that."

"Well, Deathless, I suspect your soul might be a bit different than all of ours, after what Udraal did to you. But the point remains, who might you be if you only had that Legendary Skill of yours?"

Shiv thought about that and winced. "Violent. But with distaste for collateral damage. Still might be a bit messy though."

"And by 'a bit messy,' you mean a harbinger of unspeakable amounts of collateral damage."

Something cracked inside of Shiv. Instead of it being an emotional wound, it was a literal injury. It wasn't anything severe, but the parting of a rib still surprised him.

Psycho-Cartography 81 > 82

Silver Tongue 39 > 41

Veronica frowned slightly. "Oh, you care about such things."

"You don't?" he shot back, a growl gliding in under his breath.

"I did," Veronica replied, "but I haven't been so untidy in years. I deal in precision now, just as you are trying to become more mature in your methods. I found a few of the wardens you encountered early on. They said you spared them."

"I didn't know if they deserved it or not," Shiv said.

"Deserved. What a precious notion," Veronica muttered absentmindedly. "Perhaps all of us do, yet perhaps none of us do. It's hard to say, really. But hold that idea of drawing your personality from a single skill—and apply it to a god. The Strongest, the Songbringer, the Genius, the Deadly. These are not personality traits; they are simply qualities, boasts."

"Like skill names," he said.

"Like skill names," she agreed. "And that eventually wears you down. The Great One dreams, but dreams are murky things. They are not like memories; they're more like a blend, and eventually, as I spoke of entropy, parts of you are lost, irrevocably. Or so it seemed."

"Did the Starhawk succeed at all," Shiv asked, "with the whole fixing the other Ascendants thing? Or did he end up going straight to the 'no more gods, share divine power with the people' thing?"

"Oh, gods. Share divine power with the people? Matthew... That won't solve anything. But no. The Starhawk wasn't quite like that then." The Councilwoman sighed. "He still had so much hope in his family. His loyalty was practically unrivaled. The Starhawk you see today is not the Starhawk I knew of yesteryear. Don't think he has preserved his own personality any more than the others. He's as much a stereotype of himself as any of them."

"So, the Starhawk's been decayed as well," Shiv said.

"Yes," Veronica acknowledged, "but he probably stands among the few that have become more moral since their decay. After all, he is the wings of justice, the noble, the executioner of evil." She hummed. "I remember him when he was just Matthew. He was a remarkable archer then, and a deadly Pathbearer. Still noble, still honorable. But the thing about nobility and honor, boy, is that it changes across the years. And when one is tribal, there is no individual feud. It is family against family, clan against clan."

Once more, Shiv began to delve into Veronica's deeper subtext. And this time, as he guessed, an uncomfortable weight spilled out along with his words. "The Starhawk murdered the innocent."

"Again, 'innocent'," Veronica mused. A few of the fairies drifted around her, and the Legendary Councilwoman frowned, shooing them away. Even as they giggled, her body glistened with mana, and the room seemed to dim around her. "Who can say what innocence is?"

"Sounds like an excuse to me," Shiv said.

"Come back to me in about a hundred years," Veronica replied with a humorless grin. But then the grin faded, and she reconsidered her words. "With how much conflict you're getting into, come back to me in about five years. By this point, you've probably spent more time in active combat than most veterans."

"Alright, now you're just buttering me up," Shiv said.

"No," Veronica disagreed. "You have to understand how fast most fights go, and that it is a coordinated affair, even if we are all individuals, first and foremost. You, meanwhile, have died over and over again, fighting things you had no business facing. Really, you are the System's favorite son."

"Yeah, not really feeling that," Shiv said.

"I would say you are. It keeps trying to kill you. And that, to the System, is the truest love of all.

Chapter 192 (II) Whores

Shiv set his jaw, and she scoffed. "Regardless, the Starhawk experienced something that changed him within the Great One. I'm not sure what it was, but it seemed to make him realize the depths of his personal degeneration. In what I guess to have been desperation, he tried to destroy the skill that crystallized his mortal form into godhood within the Great One, and went for the skills cocooning the other Ascendants by extension."

"But he failed," Shiv said.

"He failed, and worse, the Five Faiths discovered what he was doing, and from there, it was war." Veronica steepled her fingers. "But perhaps that was what the Starhawk wanted in the aftermath. When his initial plans failed, he likely realized he needed more time—and more allies on his side, to achieve his desired outcome. The Forgotten Ones... Some of them tried to turn away. But that's not why most of them are Forgotten."

Slowly, Shiv got the feeling that he had crawled out of a well, only to find himself in a crater. "They were struck from everyone's memories because they... what, degenerated?"

"A tragedy," Veronica said. "They were going to tear the fabric of the Republic apart. And themselves too. What the Starhawk intends to do will only cause more misery. Goodness or otherwise." She looked aside, and the tendons in her neck tightened. "I should have seen it, to be honest. But I was dealing with about twelve other nation-ending problems at the time."

"You didn't know at first," Shiv concluded.

"No, we did not," Veronica replied. "We thought the Abyss was simply being foolish, that they had used up all their trust. The Five Faiths were primitive and contentious anyway. They were due for an eventual conflict, and this was simply that. But then our beloved Roland Arrow did several things that deviated from the grand strategy."

"Like burning Submission," Shiv said.

"Like burning Submission. It was not a strategic city; it was more or less a diplomatic fulcrum, a place where people from all the Faiths could gather. Yet, Roland brought his forces and sacked it. So many people died for no reason, and Roland Arrow, noble, good hero of the Republic, became a mass murderer for reasons we couldn't quite understand."

"Until now," Shiv finally said.

"Until now," Veronica echoed. "There were relics the Starhawk needed there. And through Submission was a path to the Deep Abyss. Only a shame that Sullain's forces tried to mount a counteroffensive even after the city fell, and that Roland was gone when the worst moment came, too busy trying to fulfill the commands of his Ascendant."

Psycho-Cartography: Don't let her keep echoing you. You feel it. You are slowly being persuaded to like her. The anger you feel towards her, the mistrust, it's practically flattened. After this, there will come affection and finally, subservience. She isn't your friend. She isn't your friend. Remember that. Use your Psychomancy to enforce that feeling. She isn't your friend.

And just like that, it felt like a waterfall of coldness crashed down upon Shiv. He sobered, and with that soberness came an overdue hatred. Veronica's left eyebrow rose, and then a smirk followed right after.

Farsight 71 > 72

"You godsdamn piece of shit," he hissed at her.

"Oh, good, you managed to feel it. Not just a brute, are you, boy?"

Shiv flexed his hands, and the manacles crackled with mana. The Orichalcum began to creak and groan.
"Oh, I am a brute. I'm also plenty of other things. Don't do that again."

"No, no, I think I will. I think I'll keep doing that until you get a little bit better, or until you fold and break. Raw iron needs to be shaped."

"I am not iron. I'm a fucking person." Shiv's nostrils flared.

Veronica simply rolled her eyes in response. "Come on, Shiv. We're Pathbearers. Struggling, prevailing, or falling to another is who we are. It's what we do."

Shiv stopped himself from diving at Veronica and trying to cave her skull in using his manacles, albeit barely. But she was right about one thing. This was the way of the world. People were going to keep trying to bend his mind and his character to their will. It wasn't just Toughness and Magical Resistance he had to worry about anymore. His heart needed to be a fortress as well.

And so Shiv used his Psychomancy to scar a few things into himself. He wasn't that versed yet, and his training sessions with Uva numbered only a scant few times due to all the constant conflict they found themselves embroiled in. But among those scant few times, he'd learned the very basics of Psychomancy: if you wanted to control someone else's mind, you needed to master your own first. So, he reached back just a few minutes ago, before he arrived in the room, before Veronica began twisting his emotions.

He found lingering traces of paranoia in his mind, and he dragged them across his memories. He used them to scar himself. His anxiety spiked unnaturally, and Shiv hated the sensation. It was like he was going into battle constantly, yet the battle never began. But he needed it. He needed to always remain alert when he was talking to Veronica. More than that, he carved a piece out of his current anger, and he created a cage around his consciousness. Every second, there was always a residual fury building inside of him.

As long as he focused, the anger would be there. It was like inflammation, like an allergy. And he connected that feeling of anger to Veronica's presence. As he stared at her, a fire in his gut churned, and every fiber of his being screamed for bloodshed.

Psychomancy 28 > 30

Psycho-Cartography 82 > 85

"Yeah," Shiv said. "I suppose it is. But you best mind how much you try to influence me. Might not end so well for you." He infused his Silver Tongue with Dread-Taint, and watched as Veronica's pupils dilated.

"Huh. So that's why Daughter's so terrified of you..." She shook her head and let out a quiet laugh. "Remarkable. A boy cowing a god. Well. Are you ready to continue, then?" Veronica asked, shaking off the dread.

"Yeah. Where were we?"

"Roland Arrow. Submission. And this is where we lead into Udraal. See, Udraal is motivated by one thing. Do you know what it is?"

"Death," Shiv replied. "He wants to pull people back from being dead." Shiv hesitated before he revealed the next bit of information to Veronica. "He wants me to bring back the Great One."

Suddenly, the Legendary Councilwoman's demeanor shifted. Shiv caught a slight tightness in her jaw.

"You didn't know about that," Shiv said. Now it was his turn to grin. He taunted her with it, but Veronica composed herself.

"No, I didn't. It's mad. It's audacious. I think it's impossible, which means that it is the most Udraal plot I can think of." She breathed and wrinkled her nose as she looked off to the side. "How disturbing. He intends to do the same thing with his mother, doesn't he?"

"Yeah," Shiv said. "Not only her, though. Supposedly, I was supposed to bring Adam's sister back into the world."

"And his mother," Veronica said. She fell silent, then nodded. "I see. Rose Van Erren... Hawgrave and Stormhalt mentioned her. Gods, boy. You have any idea how valuable you are?"

"Ten legendary skills. Worth a bit in market terms," Shiv said dryly.

Veronica snorted. Her body flared with Dimensionality, and she was suddenly beside him once more. Her transition was instant, and a wave of pressure slammed into the Deathless. He shifted half a step back before he used his tides to blunt her arrival. The chandelier above shook. The fairies clinging to its tips giggled and swirled amidst the minor tempest erupting between the Councilwoman and the Deathless. And when that cleared, Shiv found Veronica staring at him, eye to eye.

"That is not your value," she said, utterly serious. "That is the System not knowing what to do with you. I'm certain of that now. It's trying to get rid of you because you're breaking its architecture. You are a threat to strife itself. After all, if people can just come back from being dead, then the weight and value of their deaths is diminished. The poignancy is diminished."

"Which means that strife is diminished," Shiv concluded.

"Exactly. The fact is that you did bring back Rose Van Erren, which means you can do that for any number of people." And suddenly, Veronica's stare softened and became calculating, plotting. "Far more than ten Legendary Skills. That's just a thing of power. We have plenty of power in the Republic. What we need is something else. Something not even the gods can provide. But then that also means the Great One can be resurrected as well. At least theoretically." The Councilwoman huffed. "Ah, this is troubling. But it also might present an opportunity."

Scorn flowed through Shiv with every heartbeat. As long as he continued looking at Veronica, the feeling of animosity didn't fade. But he also studied her, observed her demeanor, and how she reacted. The disquieting thing was that she remained controlled, composed. She was right. Some of the Ascendants were unstable. Shiv remembered facing Kathereine, Daughter, even Cripple. Veronica was different. No, she wasn't nearly as powerful as a god, but there it was, that cruel wisdom that governed all her actions and reactions.

"How does it work?" Veronica asked.

"How does what work? Me resurrecting someone else? No idea."

"How did you manage to embed Rose inside one of your skills? And which one?"

Shiv considered telling her, but kept his mouth shut as he found a new angle to exploit. "You want to know? I want to know something else. Why'd you call my mom a whore earlier?"

"Because that's what she was, for a long time," Veronica said flatly. "A literal whore. It's the reason you exist at all."

"Listen, Veronica: Listen to me very carefully—Fuck her for what she did, but also, fuck you."

"Oh, don't be that way. Most of us are born to literal whores. Most Pathbearers are literal whores. What do you think happens in a society not governed by rule of law, but by self-interest and desperate

scarcity? Man, woman, elf, automaton, goblin, human, everyone is exploited to some extent." A snarl of anger left Veronica, and Shiv could tell she was genuinely outraged. She didn't seem to hate his mother for being a whore, though she definitely hated his mother.

She seemed to hate the concept of there being whores at all.

"The Republic is many things, Shiv. You've seen the ugliest sides. You've seen what our Inquisition does to maintain the peace. But I'm telling you, before the Republic, everything was misery. For the destiny of anarchy is not absolute freedom, but a fated monopoly when someone or some group finally gains a threshold of power. Following that, it is entropy as they gradually lose that power after a long period, after mistakes build and the system they made breaks down."

"But my mother didn't grow up in an anarchy," Shiv said, frowning. "She grew up in the Republic."

"She grew up poor in the Republic," Veronica snapped. "She grew up barely a citizen. She was barely a person. The fact that people like her still exist is a fucking humiliation. The fact that we're still clinging to this ridiculous nobility system makes me want to end the nation myself. All that we have struggled for, and we're still but savages compared to our ancestors of Pre-Integration." Veronica grew quiet, and her fury settled. "I hold many things against Roland Arrow, but he is a good man in his bones. Despite all the terrible actions he's been forced to commit by his patron god and others, that is not his nature. Which is why you have not suffered extreme indignity in your childhood. You are no whore, Shiv."

She's right,

he realized. Shiv twitched. "What do you even know about my childhood?"

"By now, enough," Veronica said, looking him up and down. "Enough to know that no one has used you as a thing. They might have alienated you. They might have hurt you. They might have mocked you. But they did not use you as a thing."

A beat of awkward silence followed, and Shiv risked the question. "Did someone use you as a thing?"

Instead of responding with fury or sorrow, Veronica just laughed. She tutted and shook her head. "No. No, boy, I'm on the other side of the equation in your mind. I'm the user. I've always been the user. My grandmother made sure I was so. It is... something I am forever grateful to her for."

"And is that because she was used?" Shiv asked.

"Probably," Veronica admitted casually. "But that's the thing. I'm an outlier, and so are you. People say trauma makes us stronger, scars make us harder. But I disagree. Conditioning, training, and the right lessons make us powerful. But the wrong kinds of wounds, those leave you in pain for a long, long time. And they misshape your soul. It misshaped your mother's soul. Perhaps she was already misshapen by birth, but whatever she experienced didn't help."

Veronica waved her hand, and she teleported a glass cup into being. It was filled with red wine, and she gulped it down.

"Sanguine Noir," Shiv noted.

"Oh, you know your wines."

"Somewhat," Shiv said. "They're part of the set list Georges used to have. I was mostly focused on the menu items, but I picked up the wines after a time. Comes naturally eventually."

"Ah, yes. Georges. There's another person who's been used and cast aside."

Shiv's fist tightened inside his manacles. "Explain."

"No, I won't." Veronica stared at him. "Just like you didn't explain which skill Rose Van Erren was nested inside prior to her resurrection. So, let's move on to your parents and Udraal instead. But to do that, we need to start with someone else. Though his parents weren't anything spectacular other than winning some honors and being promoted to minor nobility, Roland had always been a great talent. And after drawing the Starhawk's attention, their boy was a monster." She pressed her lips together and aimed her next words directly at Shiv's heart. "Frankly, he's a bit like you."

Shiv grunted with displeasure. "Really? You're going to say that to my face?"

"I'm going to say anything I think is the truth. Because it is. Of course, he was a lot more precise than you are. Probably wiser in terms of strategy and tactics. Far more aware. Much nicer." With every passing compliment she offered Roland, Shiv's eyes narrowed in annoyance. "But he's also not nearly as hearty. Doesn't like fighting the same way you do. And he isn't calculating and controlled where it counts."

"Where does it count?" Shiv said.

"The part where you're more like me than your mother. The part where you like to hold your own leash, rather than letting someone else pull you around." The Councilwoman smirked. But this time it was a deliberate action. It faded immediately, and she pointed at his face. "Psycho-Cartography. Just like I guessed earlier. You're mirroring my actions slightly. The skill's got its hooks in you deep. Tell me, does it talk to you as well?"

Psycho-Cartography: Be very careful what you say from here on out. I might be compromised as well.

"Yeah," Shiv admitted. "Yeah, it does. It's probably half the reason why I haven't done anything too stupid lately."

"Right. Your mother lacked that skill, but she made up for it after a lifetime of pragmatism. Your father was a talented Pathbearer, but there are plenty of talented warriors who water the ground and feed the worms." Veronica paused, and her gaze went distant once more. "Pity. I really wish he could have picked up the guitar rather than the hammer and the shield. He was a far better musician than a vanguard. But ultimately, it doesn't matter what I want. The heart bends along its own path."

"You know something, Veronica?" Shiv said again. "I think you're full of shit."

Veronica gestured for him to continue on.

"You talk a lot about futility, but you're a Legend. You're a Legendary-Tier Pathbearer. You're a Councilwoman. You push responsibilities away, personal responsibilities, things that make you feel uncomfortable. And then you take on the burdens of the Ascendants and an entire nation. I think you're just afraid of being weak."

Silver Tongue 39 > 47

Psycho-Cartography 85 > 90

And for the first time, Veronica Chandler bled in front of Shiv. A trickle of blood ran down her nose, and another current followed from the corner of her eye. Shiv took a step back, surprised by the development. He wasn't sure what was happening. But then Veronica gave a chirping laugh.

"That was a good shot, boy. You probably have a good chance of developing a cutting Rhetoric Skill as well. What do you have right now? Silver Tongue?"

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

"Well, keep working at it. And feed your Psychomancy as much as you can. I told you before, it is your shield. It's going to continue to be your shield. No matter if you're your own man or if one of us finally manages to get our leash around your neck. Regardless, you're right. That is my flaw. I don't like being so human. But it doesn't change the facts. Your father's flaw was that he felt weak. I placed him in a good orphanage. I ensured that many a good term came his way. He had choices. Opportunities to pursue other talents. Opportunities that would have ensured a kinder life, a safer life."

"But he didn't want that," Shiv said.

"No. He probably wanted the same things every martial Pathbearer wants. The delusion of self-control. The feeling that he was the master of his own fate. It's probably what drew him to Roland Arrow, to your mother, to Rose; like-minded people who accepted him. Who fed that empty hole inside his chest. And he became their burden as well. They all outpaced him towards the end, even your mother. He was talented, but ultimately, talent is a spectrum. And we all hit a bottleneck at some point."

"All of us? I don't know what you're talking about. What's that like?" Shiv asked.

Veronica let out a wry breath. "Your father would have hated you. Your mother, well, you're probably the kind of idealized Pathbearer she wished to be. That's the entire reason you came to be at all, you see. Jealousy. As the Starhawk used Roland Arrow and Rose Van Erren for part of his plans, Udraal caught sight of them. And he discovered what Matthew intended."

"I'm missing a few pieces here," Shiv said.

"Wait a moment," Veronica replied. "I'm going to illustrate who your parents were as people, so that you know what kind of foolishness drove them to conceive you." She paused and appeared to consider her thoughts, though he couldn't tell if it was performative. "The Starhawk wanted to create a subversive vessel. Now. I ask you, how do you avoid becoming a caricature as a skill? How do you maintain stolen godhood with regard to the Great One without losing yourself? Hm?"

"I don't know," Shiv said.

"Think. Don't just speak. Think."

And he did. Shiv thought hard about what Veronica was saying, and slowly, a startling guess came to him. "You said the skill... It reduces someone down to their most essential traits."

Veronica nodded and spun a finger.

“And that caused them to lose themselves over time, to stop being people, and become...” Shiv paused. “So, if someone was skill-bound to the Great One to begin with, if they had no history or personality before...”

Veronica’s grin was wide and pearly white. “Oh, yes. That’s right, boy. Follow the logic. The Starhawk had a Phylactery prepared during the Eclipse War. But that wasn’t to free the others. No. That came far later. At first, he deigned to make his own hidden, subversive god. But one that would grow and develop perfectly. Because she would be born as a skill. Born as a False God. Born to the Starhawk’s rightful servants.”

“Holy shit,” Shiv breathed.

Veronica nodded slightly. “Oh, yes. Adam is very, very special, as was his sister. But ultimately, that didn’t come to be. For you see, the skills ingrained within Rose during the conception of her children were compromised. They were compromised because of Udraal’s own plan, tainting the Phylactery they’d brought. Also, there was another child conceived during the process.”

Shiv felt his throat go dry. Veronica pressed on. “Divinity burns inside of you, Deathless. But it is not the kind of divinity that makes one a god. No, it is a corrupted kind. A fragmentation of the System’s purest mana.” A dark expression settled over her. “You were conceived around the same time Adam’s sister was. The arrangement, then, was made by Udraal because your mother was tired. Tired of being second fiddle. Tired of being weaker than Roland and his beloved. And when Udraal came to make his offer, she took it without hesitation. Not knowing it would cause the death of her consciousness to see her replaced.”

“Replaced.” Shiv’s voice was little more than a whisper by this point.

A pitying expression settled upon Veronica. "Who do you know that wears bodies like clothes? Hm? Who struck the deal with her?"

"Oh... oh, fuck," Shiv breathed.

"Udraal hollowed your mother out. He wore her as a vessel. You were not conceived by your mother when the time came to ruin the Starhawk's great plot. You were conceived by Udraal. And your father didn't know. Not until the very end. And when the revelation came, it struck him harder than any hammer blow. His mind shattered. Vera was dead—a whore to power, whoring her body and soul literally, to the one person she shouldn't have."

Nausea began to overtake Shiv. He wanted to throw up. He wanted to find Udraal to kill him. He tried to speak but clamped his jaw shut as bile nearly erupted out. "Fuck," Shiv gasped.

Veronica stood beside him and rubbed his back. "I know. I'm sorry. I know. Of all the things I wish to inflict upon you, of all the things that I will, I don't have it in me to do this. That's why I'm going to tell you to surrender to us. The Ascendants are not perfect, but at least there's a future. There's a future I'm fighting for. And if you're with us, then maybe we can crawl away from entropy. Maybe we can get back to the golden days. With Udraal, you will always just be a thing. He will always use you like he used your—well, he is technically your mother, isn't he?"

Shiv clenched his own throat tight and stopped himself from throwing up. Barely.

The Legendary Councilwoman waited, and when he didn't break, she kept going. "And once you are spent—and he will spend you—he's not going to let you hold on to that power. He's going to make more Deathless. He's going to make himself Deathless. He's going to ruin your entire existence just to see his experiment come to its desired fruition."

With every word came a blow, and Shiv felt his mind reeling, felt his body writhing and bending as if he was back in time, back when someone was driving crystalline, hardened fists into his breaking bones. Blood flooded the Deathless's mouth, and he realized there was no difference between taking psychological damage and physical damage when speaking to Veronica. And judging from that dangerous glint in her eye, she was planning to use this on him for quite some time.

"Oh, you didn't know at all, boy. Yes, this is why your mother was a whore. She was a whore of the highest order, because Vera sold away her soul just for that faint hope, that crippling little desire to outdo Roland Arrow and the others just once, for her blood to mean something, anything. Your father, he didn't even understand, but he went along with it. He loved her that much. And when you were made, you were made from atrocity. In the end, your father didn't have a chance. The Starhawk couldn't see it coming. And Roland... His heartbreak wasn't even something worth mentioning. Their fates were sealed when He Who Walks Beyond realized what they were planning."

Psycho-Cartography: Gods, just gods. Why... why is the System like this? She... she could be lying. She... No. No, she's not. She's not. You can read it in her voice, she's not—she's...

The acceptance of the vile truth hit Shiv like a bomb to the gut. He collapsed to his knees, and bile clawed its way up his throat.

Chapter 192 (III) Whores

He collapsed to his knees, and blood dribbled out between his fingers as his breathing quickened. Cripple reached down to pick him back up, but Veronica held up a hand. Slowly, the Deathless lifted his gaze, and he met his grandmother in a fierce glare. He spat what remained of the bloody mess choking his lungs and painting his teeth at her feet. Things inside him were broken. Things inside his mind felt raw, like someone had used an abrasive stone to scrape his brain until it was a festering wound.

But despite all this, he fought back against it all. He forced himself to stand, even though he wanted to stay kneeling there, broken and wailing on the inside. He couldn't afford that. His past might be a

nightmare, but there was still the future he had to fight for. If not for him, then for Adam, Uva, Valor, Georges, and everyone else. He wasn't alone. He had more responsibilities than his own feelings.

And frankly... Fuck... fuck whatever happened to make me. I am my own man. I am my own man. I am my own—

"That's right, my boy," Veronica breathed. "Be the pillar. I see you now. You're like me. So very much like me."

As he got to his feet once more, Veronica wore an expression of surprise and naked pride. "Oh well, how was that?"

Shiv grunted, and then he slammed his forehead into her face. A loud crunch filled the air. Veronica flashed red-gold and silver, but a trickle of blood running down her nose became a rapid flood thereafter. Despite this, she took no step back. She betrayed no hint of pain. Her gaze stayed fixed on his. And in that moment, he felt more kinship with her than at any second prior.

"Veronica," Shiv growled.

"Yes, grandson?"

"Fuck you, and fuck Udrael," Shiv snarled. "I told you to keep your words away from my mind."

Veronica teleported a handkerchief into her hand and began to clean her face up. "Well, at least you got all that anger out. So, now that you know the whole sordid affair with your family and the pitiful emotions that drove them, I'm going to have you make a choice."

"No, fuck that," Shiv shot back. He pulled hard on his manacles. The overflow tides he'd been cultivating slammed into the Orichalcum, and it started screaming. The magical spells holding his mana at bay rattled and flared, but came apart as if a rope being pulled by two titans. A rattling sound filled the chamber, and after less than ten seconds, the manacles broke apart in a burst of red-gold shrapnel. It splashed into Veronica's dimensional armor, disappearing instead of striking her. She waited for him to strike her, but he stood there with both fists balled, trying to control himself.

"Fuck that. I'm not playing with either of you. I don't care what he did right now. I'm getting out of this prison. I'm not going to be led around by some dog of the Republic. I'm not going to let you break my mind, let you make up whatever excuse you want, and go along with your fucked up plans. I'm going to offer you a deal instead."

Veronica's eyebrows rose. "Now, this is a surprising turn of events." She briefly eyed Cripple. "Quite the scheme you two have concocted."

"I had no part in this," Cripple said, though it wasn't particularly good at lying.

Veronica waved it off again, not caring about the Ascendant's attempt at deception. "That's fine. We all lie. We all have our own interests. Tell me what you want. Try to sell me on it."

"I'm giving you a way in," Shiv said. "A way to stay connected to me. You can try stopping me right now, but there is nothing stopping me from leaving this room."

"Well, aside from me," Veronica said, sounding slightly offended.

"You're powerful, Councilwoman. But no. I'll leave whenever I want. Hear that truth in my voice now, and listen closely. I want Cripple to leave one of its Avatars with me. That Avatar will follow me. That Avatar will make sure I don't damage your precious Republic any more than I have to keep myself safe."

Veronica frowned. "So far, it sounds mostly beneficial to you. You gain a bodyguard."

"Not a bodyguard. A preventative measure."

Veronica nodded slowly. "Against Udraal."

"Yeah, because I know how powerful he is. And you do too, probably more than I. So, if he tries to make a move on me, or if he tries to force me to do something, Cripple's Avatar will activate, and it will give you our position, so that we can bring the full might of the Republic against him."

"Of course, of course," Veronica said, her voice trailing off. "And you're using Udraal against us the same way. Very, very clever. A balance of power, with you in the middle. I should call you Fulcrum, instead of Deathless. Are you sure you've never been trained in politics or espionage?"

"No," Shiv said. "Technically, I'm still mostly just a chef."

Veronica laughed. "Well, I have an additional condition." She walked back over to her stone table and picked up a booklet that lay there. As she returned, she handed it out to Shiv.

"What's this?" he said.

"This is a sync-letter. I'm sure you've encountered one, considering your dealings with the Inquisition."

Shiv nodded. The sync-letter taken from Master-Advisor Oldsmith was how Adam had fooled the Inquisition into attacking Gate Theborn. It was also how they'd known the Inquisition was coming in the first place. "So what? You want to be my pen pal right now?" Shiv asked.

"No. I wish to train you," Veronica said.

Shiv paused. "Okay. First off, fuck no."

Then something clapped him across the side of his face. The Deathless flinched, and his right ear was ringing. He shook his head and glared at his grandmother. The anger inside him coiled back like a serpent and threatened to snap. But then she spoke once more, and the fire inside his gut was blunted.

"Did you even see me hit you?"

Shiv paused. He didn't answer, but that was answer enough.

"Exactly. You're a Legend, I suppose. But you're a Legend who got there because the System is forcing you. The System is confused about you. You've been fed far more power than experience, and you need a proper hand to guide you."

Shiv scoffed. "I already have some."

"You speak of Valor Thann? Or the broken fragments that remain of him?"

"Better a shadow of a Legend than one that wishes to keep me under her heel."

Veronica snorted. "Fine. Resist now. But hold on to the sync-letter. In time, you'll come to seek me. Trust me, boy, you need more power. You need more everything

. And Udrael, he's going to give you certain things. He's going to open certain doors for you, but he doesn't care about your advancement in that way. He just wants you to be useful in your role as his experiment. He wants to use you. I want to use you, but the way I will use you is to make you the best instrument of the Republic as possible."

"And I'm not going to be an instrument," Shiv shot back. "For anyone."

"You don't want to be an instrument," Veronica corrected. "But whether you are, remains to be seen. We're going to start with rhetoric with you. And also philosophy, theory, everything Roland neglected to train you in, actually."

The whiplash Shiv felt was immeasurable. "You batter me with your words? You nearly make me throw up by revealing that Udraal is my mom? And now you want to train me? Felling really?"

"Of course. And as for your little plot, I'm assuming you're going for the mana core right after this. I need you to avoid killing my wardens if you can. You were gentle before. I'm going to ask you to stay gentle now. If you do manage to break out, I will focus on containing the other prisoners. You will have an opening to escape from the Republic. But I advise you against returning to where Blackedge used to be. We have a detachment placed there. They will see you coming. Your teleportation will be intercepted, and you will likely be recaptured in short order."

"Udraal is going there too," Shiv said.

"Ah, well, that changes things. The detachment will be killed to the last man, the Ascendants will spawn in, and the chaos will continue. You have somewhere else to hide?"

Shiv didn't say.

"Oh, Gate Theborn. Very well. The gate is populated by dignitaries from the Abyss?"

Shiv didn't reply to that either.

"Well, good. That can be used to your advantage. The Ascendants are many things, but willing to start a fight with the Five Faiths is not one of them. Especially not now when the North and the South are closing in."

"What do you mean by that?" Shiv asked.

"Please, boy, we're not the only surface nation. And the Tarrasque going on a bit of a rampage through our territory made us look vulnerable and weak. We diverted it to the Southland, where the Feathered One and the other Gods of Sacrifice currently have to deal with our issue. But the Jotun of the north are still coming, and the Southerners will come seeking war once they push the Tarrasque out of their own territory. We're about to have a chaotic period again."

Shiv just stared at the legendary Councilwoman. "Is everyone a godsdamn mess in this world?"

"By 'everyone,' do you mean nations? If so, then yes. Because there is no such thing as 'everyone'. There is an infinite amount of 'I', as in countless individual Pathbearers who are vaguely aligned or share similar communities and interests. The art of politics is arranging them, herding them, treating them like sheep while you are a shepherd. But then again, you are a sheep pretending to be a shepherd, because you number among the 'I'. You understand?"

Shiv blinked. "I don't think I fully do."

"Good. You're perfectly naive and ripe to be cynical and refined. I look forward to breaking your heart, perhaps quite literally. Now, get out of my office, get on with this little rebellion you've planned, and keep me informed about how it all falls apart. This might work out for me better than I expected..."

"So what, no counteroffer? You're just gonna take my demands?"

Veronica let out a breath and adopted a pitying look. "You're desperate, and I want my own way in on the great game. Especially without my grandmother mucking things up even more. I am going to use you to the best of my ability. And right now, that's not keeping you in a lab of some kind. It's letting Udraal deal with keeping you safe from the world, while I focus on undermining him at every angle."

Shiv was utterly speechless. "Wait, so you're going to use him to do what you couldn't for me?"

"It's not a triangle we have here," Veronica replied. "It's more like a set of lines that break dimensional boundaries. There are things he's going to use us for. There are things we're going to use him for. There are things you're going to use both of us against each other for. And the other way applies as well. Oh, and Shiv," Veronica said, "do be wary. You're going to be running into Enoch's new Avatar soon." She drew a long breath. "Consider the following my condition for going along with this silly little scheme: I want you to kill the one called Rebis."

Chapter 193 (I) Euthanasia [I]

Euthanasia. Mercy killing. The hardest goodbye.

It's got a lot of names, but functionally, there's gonna be a time on the battlefield where you're going to have to put your knife in your friend's heart.

It could be because you don't want them to be captured. It could be because their injuries are too severe. It could be because a plague is wiping everyone out and your friend just doesn't have it in them to finish things themselves. It could be any of these reasons. The result is always the same: suffering and death, or softness and death.

Some people like to go on about dignity here. There's not much dignity when people die. We all die pretty similarly. I guess some people are quieter about it than others, but for most, there's usually the screaming for their mother, followed by shitting and pissing themselves. It's practically unavoidable.

What's avoidable, however, is how long they do it and how ugly things get. So, if you don't think you can pull this off, I recommend against being a soldier. Because you're not just going to be responsible for your own life. You're going to be responsible for your friends. And when they can't push themselves over the edge, when the hardest time comes, you better step up.

Because you need to understand that you might very well be that friend. You might very well be lying on the ground with both arms blown off, no Biomancers nearby, enemies closing in, and in the absence of victory, well, you can only take the consolation prize.

You feel uncomfortable reading this? Good. It's not supposed to be comfortable. It's supposed to be a burden. You feel that way, you hold that knife, and you do the last thing you can to make things right.

-Memoirs of a Master-Tier Warmage

"Why?" Shiv asked, frowning. "What kind of grudge do you have against Enoch?"

Veronica scoffed, and she began to pace. "It's not a grudge, boy. It's more like a punishment. You know what Enoch did, do you not?" When Shiv didn't respond, she turned toward Cripple. "Ah, so there are some secrets you do keep for your fellow Ascendants. It's good to know that you're not a complete traitor."

The automaton Ascendant flinched beneath Veronica's cutting words, and though its Avatar took no wounds, it was still affected. Such was Veronica's power.

"Enoch split his soul," Veronica declared. "He split his soul the same way Udrael did, the same way Valor did, the same way most Necrotech Undying do. Except he did it poorly, with an incomplete understanding of the ritual. And so, I have a schizophrenic, mind-severed idiot who's desperately trying to find a special Avatar to contain his broken soul. And when we need him to maintain and bless the Republic's fortifications, no less."

With every syllable Veronica spat, the heat within the room grew. The flames within the hearth crackled and then became a roar, and the fairies scattered in every direction. Then the room grew darker, the light drained away by the Legendary Councilwoman's simmering rage. And as she breathed out, everything returned to normal. It was like the blackness never was.

"Do you know what being a Legendary Councilwoman means, dear boy? It means being a babysitter. It means that I am the caretaker to some of the most powerful people on the Integrated Earth, yet they are determined to make these mortal failures, these hubristic mistakes that are unbefitting of Master-Tier Pathbearers, let alone gods. But that is not why I'm going to punish Enoch specifically. No, I'm going to punish Enoch because he is trying to do something beyond foolish. He is trying to eliminate the other Ascendants, and he tried to eliminate me."

"He did?" Shiv blinked. "Why?"

"Because he's afraid I'll try to control him. And he's right. The Starhawk isn't the only rogue variable I need to handle. All the Ascendants have their own branching problems, and I need to contend with them all. You see, Enoch isn't trying to find just another Avatar with Rebis. He's trying to find something he can dump a sliver of his soul in to set Rebis free. That way, Rebis can develop on his own. Or rather, Rebis, now consumed by the stable portion of Enoch's soul, can return to being a poor, full person, while the rest of his consciousness, shackled by godhood, languishes."

A whirlwind of thoughts swirled through Shiv's mind, and the edges of Enoch's plans surfaced. "Wait, so if he's connected to himself, connected to his own godhood, but he won't suffer the degeneration anymore, does that mean he will be able to fully wield his power? Like, will that let him continue

growing as a Pathbearer, and maybe even survive the destruction of his divinity, in case anything happens within the Great One?"

"Exactly," Veronica said, clenching a fist. "And that cannot be allowed. The Starhawk has already trespassed the unforgivable boundary, and if Enoch follows, if any other Ascendant follows after him, then there will be no more Auroral Council. There will be no unified pantheon, and there will be no Republic."

She sighed. "No, Rebis must die. Enoch must endure his foolishness.

"You need to hold on to control," Shiv concluded.

"Exactly," Veronica agreed without any hint of shame. "I'm glad you can see this. Also, you're likely not leaving this prison without dealing with Enoch." A smirk crawled over her features. "Mainly because I assigned him to guard the core. And while the other Ascendants are busy, Enoch will likely be desperately trying to finish the binding process with Rebis."

"So, I was going to be running into him anyway," Shiv said.

"Ah, something like that," Veronica replied, waving her hand. "So then, my conditions. Are they acceptable?" She held out her sync-letter, and Shiv glared down at the booklet. Pulsing magic radiated from it. A silver locket kept the leatherbound tome closed.

Shiv's insides felt like grinding stones. His guts churned, and two paths appeared before him. One, to reject Veronica out of spite. To resist being bound to anyone or anything, and continue cutting his way forward. This was his idealized path. It was his highest fantasy; to be unburdened by any interest beyond

his own. But ultimately, it was just that: a fantasy. He was a Legendary Pathbearer, but he was facing enemy Legends with the backing of gods, as well as a Post-Legend that had conquered entire worlds with grand schemes beyond Shiv's current comprehension.

Worse, said world-conquering Legend was also...

Shiv refused to think about what Udraal did in detail—what he did to his father. He barely knew what his own mother looked like. And now, every time he would think of his parentage, something inside of him would recoil as if scalded by a searing brand. No. Shiv couldn't avoid the groping hands and sinking claws of the deceivers around him. He might have been damned by this fate from the moment he was born, but he would be godsdamned if he wouldn't use everything he had against them, if he would just let people treat him as an instrument.

If they were going to use him, he was going to use them as well. And he was going to learn—socially, magically, physically. He was going to learn everything he could to be the one on top, to be the user. And when he got there, he wouldn't be like any of these bastards. He wouldn't be a monster. He wouldn't be a whore, either. He would be a pillar for this world because the weakness he saw—all these atrocities—filled him with disgust.

We could be so much more, he thought to himself. We have to be much more.

The challenger smiles upon your resolve.

He ignored the notification and accepted the sync-letter. As soon as he did, he saw a softening in Veronica's eyes. A breath of relief escaped her, and she nodded at him. "You've done a wise thing."

"I've done the self-interested thing, you mean," he shot back. He glared at his so-called grandmother and barely held himself back from attacking her again. "Let's not pretend that this is a favor you're doing for me. I'm helping you keep the Ascendants degenerated—making sure they're reliant on you. You just complain about being the master of the daycare, but you know what? I think you're full of shit. I think you kind of like it."

A pause lingered between them, and Veronica just scoffed. But that scoff turned into something of a smirk toward the end. "I suppose that is not untrue. It's bad for me, but I do enjoy the power, and you will too, once you gain a measure of it. Once you find yourself capable of shaping the path of someone else's life."

"Yeah, we'll see" He doubted it. Despite how much he liked to fight, he wasn't that cruel, as much as the orcs would want him to be, anyway. "Hey, Veronica, I've got a final question. The Auroral Council. How many of them are there because they're controllable?"

Veronica's smirk became a full-blown, pearly-white grin. "Oh, that's a good question. The answer? Practically everyone, aside from Anthony. The Ascendants, they don't care so much anymore. They want the same thing I do when selecting new Avatars and Council members."

"Controllable people," he ventured.

"Exactly. However, their notion of controllable is very different from mine. They want someone powerful, in accordance with their skills. Someone that can contain their divine mana, and someone they can use to the utmost efficiency. For Daughter, this is easy. For Enoch, far harder. Me? Ultimately, I need people who aren't good at politics. All of them qualify right now, which is why they're eminently replaceable. All of them, aside from Anthony. But he hasn't been a problem in a while."

"Anthony," he said, remembering the old man that had stabbed him. "Yeah, the wrinkled guy with a knife who gave my soul a flu. What's his deal?"

Veronica frowned for a moment. "I won't tell you," she said. Shiv's patience started to crack, and the Councilwoman scoffed. "Because Anthony's dear to me, and I don't want to see him dead at your hands at any point."

"So, you do care about people," he growled under his breath.

"Of course, I thought you figured this out earlier. Remember my flaw, boy? I get attached. I'm still human to some extent, and that's an ugly thing when you're powerful," Veronica grimaced. "Anthony De Diego was more of a father to me than my own ever was. And though I have broken him, though he is old and has given up on being anything more than just a pawn instead of a player, I don't want him dead. You understand? If you come for him, I will inflict unspeakable things on you. This is one of my red lines. I make this known. Don't trespass on it."

As she finished those words, he felt as if he was being squeezed in the grip of a giant's hand. His breath hitched for a while as he tried to push back using the Shapeless Tides. It barely brought him any comfort.

"I will do what makes sense to me," he said, not promising her anything.

They shared a mutual glare, but then Veronica softened first. "Fine, I'll make sure it's not in your interest to hurt him. It shouldn't be hard."

Part of Shiv thought he should be offended at her words, but overall, he didn't care. He was numb in so many ways right now from all the revelations she'd battered him with.

"You said he's old," Shiv said, remembering something that had confused him for a while now. "Aren't you old? I know Valor is old. What makes Anthony so different?"

For a moment, Veronica didn't say anything. Then her features scrunched up as she thought of a good way to explain. "I'm ageless. Valor is ageless. Most of us are ageless. That's because we look forward to the future. We're always planning. We're always projecting towards tomorrow. Even if you don't suffer from biological decay, you can get old. And that comes with a backward perspective."

"So what, like, he's fixated on things that happened before, rather than things happening right now or tomorrow?"

The Councilwoman nodded. "And be very wary of that. Once you become old, you can't become young again so easily. The past is stone. It can be eroded through means of memory manipulation and historical revisionism, but it is still stone." She walked to her table and slammed a knuckle into it. The etchings upon its surface flashed once more. "Someone always remembers. And right now, this moment will be remembered. Alright, I'm done with my words. You best be gone and finish this ridiculous little escape you have planned." She looked over her shoulder and narrowed her eyes at him. "Don't tell Young Lord Arrow about our association."

"Yeah, I'm gonna have to say no," Shiv sneered. "I'm hiding enough shit from him as it is. If we're going to be working together—"

"We're not working together," Veronica cut him off. "We're going to try to use each other. You're young enough and foolish enough to think that you might be able to get an edge on me. And I'm experienced enough to know that I will slit your throat like a lamb when you try. And you will try, again and again and again, until you are good enough that I can't treat you like a lamb anymore. And then everything changes, and we negotiate a new arrangement or one of us dominates the other."

"Speaking from experience now, are we?" Shiv asked.

"Yes. Learned from Anthony. He wasn't always old." Veronica's expression turned wistful. "Oh, and when you run into Enoch, understand that he can use the very architecture against you. He builds incredible structures. His mastery of spaces and geometries is bordering on the absurd, Non-Euclidean." Shiv was about to open his mouth in confusion, but then he remembered Uva's skill, and he closed his mouth. Veronica noticed his expression, and a curious look passed over her. "Ask your friend about what Non-Euclidean means. He will understand better than you do. You don't have Dimensionality. Rather sad, because it's such an important and useful skill. I recommend you develop it as soon as possible. Either way, despite his incredible skill, Enoch is especially vulnerable. He, too, is old."

"So how does that help me?" Shiv asked.

"Oh, it helps you because you're going to ask him a very simple question, and that usually puts him in a bit of a fugue state." Veronica spun on her heel. "When you encounter Enoch and his newest Avatar, simply ask him about Aina Huna and how he lost it to the Stormlords of the Pacific. Do it again and again. It will break him. It's pathetic, but also slightly amusing. So much power, yet so many poor decisions. An entire island chain given to a race that barely has any sapience."

She shook her head. "Godhood. What a poisonous pill of power."

When she said nothing more, he felt an insatiable urge to flee, to leave the room. He realized she had been suppressing the dread aura emanating from this chamber all that time, and now it was back in full force. She was sending him away. "You know something, Veronica? If I ever turn out like you, I'm going to let my vitality spill out of my body, and I'm going to let it keep flowing until there's nothing left of me. I might be Deathless now, but being dead might be better than whatever you've turned out to be. And whatever the fuck Udraal is."

She craned her neck slightly and rolled her eyes. "Yes, yes, spit your pointless youthful rage. It will go away in time. You'll learn to deal with everything else as well. It's just the way life is. Now. We're done here. Begone. And be quick with your escape."

With that, they were finished. Their relationship had been ugly since the beginning, and now it was closer and yet more sour than ever. Shiv clenched the sync-letter tightly and wondered just how big a mistake he had made.

He walked out of the room, and something clawed itself up. It started in his stomach, and spikes of pain began to move towards his throat. Shiv doubled his pace, fleeing out from the cracked stone doors and turning along the hall. As soon as he left Veronica's, he nearly doubled over. Every bit of his self-control had been devoted to stopping himself from throwing up earlier, from the disgust that came with knowing about Udrael, about his mother and his father, about so many truths.

"Fuck," Shiv almost whimpered. He used the wall to keep himself standing. As he tried to force another step, he found his leg shaking. Tumbling sprays of bile seared the edges of his throat. Everything inside him begged for him to let it all out, to express his nausea in some way. But for whatever reason, he couldn't. He couldn't just puke. He couldn't admit weakness so close to Veronica.

The doors were still open. She had to be listening. She had to be waiting.

And then a hard but gentle hand landed on his back. He turned to see Cripple's Avatar looming over him. Its optics flickered, and though the automaton's features were nothing like a human's, Shiv could practically taste the sympathy radiating from it.

"I didn't know," Cripple said. "I am sorry. To learn of your parentage in such a way, to discover the terrible truths that you were faced with... I didn't know. I didn't intend for this."

He stepped away from its touch. He didn't need it. He didn't need its comfort. Cripple was a broken thing. It couldn't help Shiv any more than he could help himself.

"It's fine," Shiv lied, forcing the bile back down. It would sink into his stomach. It would burn there. It would be a permanent mark of disgust. But he would deal with it. He would live with it. He would accept it. What more was another scar?

"It's fine. I got other things to deal with. I'm going to... I'm going to meet up with Adam."

"What will you tell him?" Cripple asked.

"I'm going to tell him that we have a way in. That I know what to expect."

"And nothing about Veronica?"

"I don't know!" Shiv growled roughly. "We're dealing with enough shit already. I don't need him troubled by this right now."

"And you?" Cripple continued to press. "Aren't you troubled?"

"No. I'm really, really pissed off and trying not to throw up because fucking—Udraal—FUCK! FUCK! FUCK!" Shiv suddenly screamed and slammed a fist into the wall, blowing a chunk open in the architecture. As the dust cleared, he saw the Orichalcum hull beyond the soft and supple wood. "Fuck," Shiv whispered. He didn't know if he was going to go Berserk or have a psychological breakdown. He decided to do neither. He decided to keep putting one foot in front of the other. "I'm going to leave now. You still want to help? Be there. Send your Avatar. Right now, I need to... I need to..."

"I understand," Cripple said. "Go. There is nothing stopping you. I will deploy another of mine. I will find you using the reactor core Adam has." But as the words finished, they both lingered for a while, and Shiv let out a hiss. He turned away. "Shiv... I..." Cripple said no more than those two words before the Deathless flung himself back towards his temporal anchor.

In the next moment, he snapped into place within the Forest of Alloy.

Before Shiv could emerge from the Category One Dimension, a low, rumbling laugh filled his mind. When the Challenger's mirth faded, Shiv felt himself on the verge of a violence—with nothing to vent his anger on.

"They're pretty pathetic, aren't they, Bruiser?"

The Deathless was in no mood to speak with the Challenger. He hadn't processed the madness that was Udraal being his "mother" and the Ascendants...

"Not here to mock you. I'm just here to tell you that I chose right with you."

Shiv paused. "What?"

"You're a good Insul. A proper Pathbearer. And maybe someday you'll make a proper god. Not like them. They'll never be proper anything. Because they're not even themselves anymore. You understand why I hate them now, don't you?"

"Yeah." Shiv laughed scornfully. "I don't see the point of having all that power if I'm not the one wielding it. And my mom... The fuck was she thinking?"

"Probably that she was special. That her arrangement would see her finally be made truly spectacular. That Udraal couldn't steal her body or wouldn't just use her as a puppet. That she was too strong. Or too important in the grand scheme of things. And when Valor's son decided to hollow her soul out, it was just too late. Foolishness. Desperation. Delusion. Want. But ultimately, the mistake she made mirrors that of the Ascendants."

Shiv gritted his teeth and, for once, found himself entirely in accord with the orc god. "Yeah. Power is earned.

"

"Or taken. Power given or borrowed from another is never yours. Remember that. And remember to own everything you do. No excuses, Bruiser. I am a monster. I am the Challenger. I was not made this way. I choose this. Every day, I choose this. Just like you choose to be who you are. You can change. But make it your own choice. That, more than anything, is yours. It doesn't matter who you were spawned from or why. The future matters. The future is yours. Paint your character there."

“Really? You reached across the veil to give me a pep-talk?” Shiv said. His sarcasm was lacking, and his suspicion was high.

“Yes,” the Challenger said without a hint of mockery.

Shiv nearly choked. “No shit?”

“Shiv. Bruiser. I like hurting people. I like screams and dominance. But I am not beyond other things. Never mistake me for an Ascendant. I am a whole person. I have many flavors. And right now, you need someone to tell you that you are more than who birthed you.”

“Huh,” Shiv muttered. “I... Thanks, Challenger.”

“Thank me by following your Path to the conclusion. We have a rendezvous in your future, don’t we? You can’t stop here if that’s the case.”

And wasn’t that the truth? “Yeah, yeah. I’m still coming for you, Challenger. But... You know... Thanks.”

“Go. Shed some blood. Carve some fear into those false gods. Let my orcs have some fun. Amuse me. That’s all I ask.”

And as the Challenger’s presence faded from Shiv’s mind, he wasted no more time. The Deathless moved, bursting free from his cape, prepared to face anything on the other end. As soon as he came

out, however, he found himself in a new prison. The valley here looked different. Massive furrows lined the walls. Kilometers of Orichalcum were missing, leaving huge gaps that exposed the mithral supports behind. As he turned, he found several orcs cheering on his arrival.

He found the orcs, Gone, Candles, Five, Adam, and Can Hu, standing at the ready. Their weapons were low, but their eyes were pointed high.

Looming over them, dangling from the ceiling, was the most peculiarly dressed hydra Shiv had ever seen. The twelve-headed beast was large, each of its necks around twenty meters long. A descending pillar hung down from the far-above ceiling, growing longer with every passing second, like an inverted pedestal that the hydra sat upon.

Its body was also decorated in strange—Shiv's mind spun as he realized those weren't decorations. Those were Pathbearers. Those were people. Wardens kicked and wailed, fused into the hydra's scales. And where the wardens weren't, the spaces were occupied by hexagonal plates of Orichalcum as well. Limbs and screaming heads stuck out from the Hydra's body where the Orichalcum grids weren't.

A large cape of flowing silk mixed with luxurious carpets and curtains swayed around the hydra's massive back, flowing as if some kind of stylish half-cape. But it was the Hydra's many heads that caught Shiv's true attention, for it had fashioned crowns for itself—crowns shaped from gold, silver, and even copper, and studded with gems. Dozens upon dozens of necklaces of different styles hung from its neck, and its claws were bedecked with rings.

The hydra had taste. Expensive taste.

"Oh, and who is this?" the hydra, the one Cripple had called Solzimort earlier, called out to Shiv. Every single one of his heads spoke in tandem, as if there was no separation between them, and his tone was light and inquisitive. "Is this one of your friends?"

Adam turned, noticing Shiv for the first time. He lingered on Shiv's face for a second, and his eyes filled with concern. Shiv gave him a nod, trying to signal that he was fine, but Adam Arrow's Awareness was peerless in Shiv's view. Even if his Psychology skill wasn't that high, he could read Shiv's facial muscles. He could tell how tense Shiv was.

The Deathless really didn't want to deal with this right now. "Later," Shiv whispered, and that made Adam turn away. Adam was reliable, but he wasn't going to let this go. They were going to face it at some point, but they weren't going to do it right now. Right now, they had a hydra to recruit.

"Solzimort," Shiv said. "Hi. I'm Shiv. I'm..."

And just then, the notification appeared. The cursed notification that made him the enemy of practically everyone in Integrated Earth. The hydra noticed then, and Shiv prepared himself for a fight.

The hydra's many mouths opened wide, and his heads reared back. Shiv clenched his fist. Adam shaped an arrow. Gone prepared to move.

And then, the hydra—Solzimort—let out a loud sigh. "Oh, ohhh, you're the Deathless. We're so sorry." Of all the things the hydra could have said, this wasn't one that Shiv had anticipated. "You must have had a very hard life. Now the System's trying to get everyone to hurt you. The System is so mean. That's okay, it's mean to us too. That's why we're in this prison, even though we don't deserve it."

Shiv stared at a few of the struggling wardens, who shrieked with terror. "Please," one of them begged. "Please. Oh, God, I can feel it... I can feel it moving underneath my body. My legs are gone, but I can feel

it. It's attached to my legs. Ah, ah, ah!" The warden's wailing cry pierced through the air and briefly silenced Solzimort's words.

"Uh-huh," Shiv said dryly. "Yeah, I'm sure you're perfectly moral."

Solzimort turned one of his massive heads to stare at the struggling warden. As he drew close, the warden began to sob. Shiv used his Farsight and saw that the warden was a rather young-looking man. Fat tears rolled down his cheeks, and he flinched away from the hydra's breath. He should have expected the hydra to bite down on the warden, to put an end to his screaming. But once more, Solzimort surprised him. "There, there, little warden," he said with a pacifying tone. "We didn't mean to scare you. We're actually trying to preserve all of you. Don't worry. We'll keep you safe in our scales."

"Preserve?" Adam's voice jumped an octave. His eyes darted between all the wardens trapped within Solzimort's body. "Solzimort, you do understand that people need to breathe, no?"

"Ah, no! A common misconception. People don't need to breathe; they need oxygen inside their brains. And we're feeding them oxygen. They're just suffocating for no reason because their body hasn't adapted yet." The hydra's many heads laughed as one. "Anyhow, that's why they're fused inside of us. We're keeping them safe from harm. We're wrapped our skin in Orichalcum, and we've additionally increased our density by ten times. Now, ultimately, no one can hurt us."

Solzimort laughed again, and this time, all the wardens began laughing with him, clearly compelled by the hydra's power.

Shiv blinked and felt a strange pulse of Dynamancy radiating out from Solzimort. Then he saw translucent trails of mana connecting each of the hydra's crowns with the wardens. He had some kind of strange Psychomancy skill. Moreover, the aura he radiated into the air was infused with Magical Resistance as well.

Just what the hells am I looking at here? Shiv thought to himself.

"Actually, we think you should all get inside us too," Solzimort offered. "We're gonna try to get out of this prison, and all of you are really, really small. That's no good. It's better to be big inside this prison. That's why we got a bigger cage compared to most people. Still not big enough for us, but it was more space. And when they stopped making us super sleepy, we immediately started swimming through the walls and getting away."

"That's actually what we wanted to talk with you about," Adam said. Solzimort's heads snapped to attention. In an instant, they all curved over the group, and once more, Shiv had to hold himself back from attacking. It wasn't his fault that the hydra's necks looked like snakes rearing back to strike.

"Oh, you're going to help us escape?" Solzimort's heads crashed together, and his many crowns and necklaces made a clamoring noise that sounded like a legion's worth of armored Pathbearers tumbling down a flight of stairs. "That's great. How are we going to do this, though?"

Chapter 193 (II) Euthanasia [I]

"It might be a little bit more complicated than you think, Solzimort," Adam said. "This place isn't just made out of cages. There are other defenses keeping this place boxed in as well. There's a massive sphere around this entire place. It's a time loop. If you hit it, it will revert you back in time."

"Oh yeah, the golden thing." Solzimort's many heads lowered, and a whimpering noise came from the Legendary Hydra. "We didn't like that. We were sent back to our cage, but because no one made us sleepy anymore, we just got out again. We were wondering how to get through that thing."

"Well, the way we get through is by shutting down the mana core," Adam elaborated.

"Mana core?" Solzimort echoed, all his heads tilting at the same time. "This place has a mana core?"

"I see this Hydra neither possesses Legendary-Tier intelligence, nor is it particularly informed," Kura commented off by the side.

"No, but it is Legendarily good at absorbing matter into its body, which includes us," Whisper responded so quickly that Kura did a double-take.

Nearby, Candles began to shiver. The flames around his body flickered and curved towards Solzimort. To Shiv's surprise, Whisper leaned over to hiss at the burning Pathbearer. "Control yourself, my sweet lunatic. If you try to burn the Hydra, we won't be able to enact greater acts of mayhem."

"But there's so much Hydra, and it can burn for so long. They heal..." Candles shuddered like a drug sniffer after a hit.

Whisper held up a hand placatingly. "Do you know what else burns for a long time? An Ascendant and countless Heroic-Tier wardens. And sweet things taste sweeter if you starve yourself for a while."

The blazing Pathbearer twitched.

"Hey," Shiv whispered to the orc. Whisper frowned. "Yeah, that feeling you have right now? That's what it feels like to be me dealing with you orcs."

Whisper's frown grew even deeper. "We're not that bad."

"The fuck you aren't. You're worse. You know better and do it anyway."

"So if we turn off this mana core, we can get all the way through, huh?" Solzimort asked. He sounded a bit simple, but something about the Hydra didn't sit right with Shiv.

"Yes," Adam said. "But we're going to need your help to reach the mana core. Now, you want everyone to get free, right? You want to get out of this prison? Well, there's no way out until we get close, and if we want to get close, there are a bunch of special cages there. Cages you might be able to swim through."

Solzimort took a moment to think about what the Gate Lord was saying, and then he started nodding vigorously with all his heads. "We got it! So, you want us to fuse you into our body?"

"What? No," Adam said, then caught himself before he betrayed just how worried that made him. "I don't need you to fuse with us. I just need you to carry us through the cubes surrounding the mana core."

"But fusing you into us is the simplest way to do things."

"Solzimort," Adam said gently. "Maybe I don't want to be fused. Have you considered that?"

Solzimort's lizard-like features fell into twelve frowns. "But even if you don't want to, it's not very safe."

Adam opened his mouth, but he didn't have an immediate idea how to continue the conversation. The Gate Lord's agitation grew with every bit of dialogue exchanged.

Shiv walked beside him and wrapped a hand around his shoulder. "Maybe let me take over. I think I might be better at this."

The Gate Lord sneered. "Yes, you would know how to persuade another insane monster, wouldn't you?"

Shiv gritted his teeth and patted Adam on the shoulder twice more. "Haha, eat shit."

The Gate Lord visibly held back a snort.

"Solzimort," Shiv said, stepping past Adam, "I know that you mean to be nice and protective. From how you see things, you're trying to protect everyone, right? Everyone smaller than you." He spoke following the instincts provided to him by Psycho-Cartography.

Solzimort nodded vigorously again. "Yeah, because often the small people also have small brains, so you can't really trust them to protect themselves."

"Not like we can trust you, right?" Shiv said, agreeing with Solzimort solely to lead the Hydra on.

The twelve faces of the Legendary Pathbearer all grinned. "Right! Why, you're a lot brighter than your friend there. Probably because you're bigger."

"Oh my felling gods," Adam practically snarled. He turned his eyes to the ground and placed his hands on his hips, the frustration radiating from him palpable. Shiv grinned openly. Sometimes, revenge came fast.

"Yeah, probably. Anyway, Solzimort, I'm not disagreeing with you, but we need to be apart from you to turn off the mana core. You know why?"

Solzimort paused. "No, not really. Why? Is it because you have a special skill?"

"Exactly! I have a special skill. And that special skill doesn't work if we're fused. It's not that we don't want to be fused with you, it's just that it's dangerous for you, and you won't be able to protect us if you're affected by one of our skills too."

"Oh," Solzimort said. The Hydra practically sounded depressed with that revelation. "We got it. So we can only carry you, and we have to let you go for you to make the core go to sleep?"

"Yeah," Shiv said. "That about sums it up. Listen, Solzimort, we'd be really, really thankful if you could do this for us. This way, we can all escape as well. Sometimes we have to do things we don't like to protect the little people." Shiv reached out and patted Adam on the back of the head.

The Gate Lord shrugged him off and kicked him in the shin.

"Yeah," Solzimort said, and Shiv felt a sympathetic bond form between them. Going from fighting for his social sanity against Veronica to talking with a particularly simple Hydra was a relaxing whiplash. "Okay, so I think I can fit some of you between my teeth."

"Between his teeth, he says." Kura's voice grew even drier than usual.

"I'm not sure about the inside of your mouth thing, Solzimort," Adam said.

"Well, don't worry." Shiv looked around, taking in his little army. "You guys don't need to be inside his mouth. I'll go inside his mouth. The rest of you can hide in my cape."

"Far more preferable," Five commented.

"Yay!" Solzimort cheered, but then all of the Hydra's heads turned on each other. "But which one of us will get to hold them?"

"Us!" All the Hydra's heads declared at the same time. A pause followed. Then they all started growling at each other. "It's gotta be our mouth!"

Psycho-Cartography: Holy shit, are you fucking kidding me right now? Shiv, whatever you say, don't say: Doesn't matter. This clearly matters a lot to this thing. Also, is he seriously using the Royal "We"?

The Deathless felt the first tickles of annoyance dance upon his nerves, but he pushed them aside. He covered his eyes as if he were humoring a child and pointed randomly at one of the heads. "There. That one."

"Why that one?" Solzimort asked, sounding confused.

"Because I chose it at random. It wouldn't be fair to the other heads if I picked a favorite, would it? It would hurt your feelings."

The Hydra shuffled uncomfortably. "That is true. Apologies, little guy."

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"That's fine. Anyway, that head. I'll ride there. Great, good talk. Everyone, in my cape. Five, Can Hu! Stick around for a while. I got something to say." The Penitent and the Raven lingered, and Adam stayed as well.

When Shiv shot his friend a look, Adam just shrugged. "I'm not going in without my Penitent."

"Right," Shiv said. When he turned around, he found most of Solzimort's heads leering from about 5 meters away, extending all the way down from the inverted pillar he sat upon. "Solzimort," Shiv muttered, "can you give us some space?"

"Okay." Solzimort pulled his twelve twenty-meter-long necks back by a meter.

Psycho-Cartography: Just treat the Hydra like patience training. Or focus your anger and fuel some of your skills.

Uh-huh, Shiv replied to his skill internally. I'll be sure to lie to myself. "Okay, Five, Can Hu—something you two need to know. Enoch is integrating himself into Rebis. But he's more than just an Avatar. He's like a separate body the Ascended can use. He's splitting part of his soul into Rebis, and I need you to jack into his processors or whatever when the battle starts if you can."

Can Hu's glowing optics narrowed, while Five simply sighed. However, it wasn't a sigh of surprise, but one of lament.

"You knew this was gonna happen?" Shiv asked the wolf-man.

"I suspected something like it might. Still, it is not ideal. Poor Rebis."

"I don't know if I'd call Rebis poor considering the shit his two halves got up to before they got fused together," Shiv said, "but it seems wrong anyway."

"I would insist on Rebis being pitiable," Five said, taking a stand for his friend. "Whoever Rebis was, well, were, he isn't anymore. They're just torturing a confused child by this point."

Shiv considered the wolf-man's argument and struggled with the discomfort that followed. It was easier to blunt the ugliness by reminding himself of what the two Pathbearers who became Rebis did beforehand. Telling yourself that someone deserved their fate was a way of coping with how ugly their fate often was. And that might be part of the problem too.

Shiv was coping with too much these days.

"Well, I'm gonna need you two to try to hijack his mind as much as you can. Rebis is going to be guarding the mana core, so get ready for a fight."

"It's not just going to be Rebis, though, is it?" Adam said, sounding slightly worried. "It's going to be an Ascendant as well."

"Yeah, Enoch. But I have something against him. I know a psychological weakness the Ascendant has. Or some shit like that."

Adam blinked. "How did you figure that out?"

"Veronica. She told me a few things."

"Yes, speaking of, how did that meeting go?" Shiv didn't respond immediately, and Adam read something behind his friend's eyes. "Shiv, are you alright?"

The Deathless just grunted. He shook his head. "No. Not even a little. But we don't deal with that shit right now. I'll be fine, at least until we get out of this place. After that, there's quite a bit of stuff I need to tell you. You're not going to like a lot of it."

"I already don't." The Gate Lord bit his lip. "Listen, if you need a moment..."

"We don't have a moment, Adam," Shiv replied. "We need to move, and we need to move right now. I don't want to stay in this place any longer than I have to. Cripple will be sending an Avatar to us soon, and Veronica... First off, fuck Veronica, but also, she's going to be helping us. She wants to counter Udraal. She also wants to use Udraal to protect me somehow, like I'm some kind of investment or pawn she desperately doesn't want to lose."

Adam tried to digest Shiv's chess analogy. "Shiv, if you're a pawn she doesn't want to lose, then you're not a pawn."

"Well, whatever I am, we're in bed between two devils, and we're trying to make them fuck each other more than they fuck us."

"Is this really wise?" the Gate Lord muttered, skipping right over that analogy entirely.

"Hells no. Not even a little. But it's what we got." Shiv did his best not to think about his parentage, about Udraal. That ball of disgust was still there, boiling in the pit of his stomach.

Adam gripped Shiv by his upper shoulder. "Listen, if you need to talk about this right now, I will listen. I'm here for you." And just then, the disgust abated a bit.

"Thanks, Adam. But I think we should do this if we manage to survive whatever the hells comes next." But despite his words, Shiv just didn't want to hold it in anymore. "Look, my mom... What she did, it wasn't really her."

"What do you mean?" Adam asked, leaning back as he saw the sheer intensity on Shiv's face.

And just like that, the words started tumbling out from Shiv's mouth in a messy flood. "I mean... Fuck, Adam. Veronica told me about what Udraal was trying to do, what the Ascendants were trying to do, what all of them were trying to do. But I don't have time to explain how messed up everything is. My mom wasn't my mom by the time—You and your sister, you were... There were bigger plans for you, and like—Udraal... He hollowed out my mom's soul."

The Gate Lord's expression became horrified. "I—gods. Shiv, I'm sorry."

"I'm not done," Shiv continued. "He hollowed her out, and then he wore her body like a suit. And this was before I was conceived. Before, you know..."

As the seconds crawled on, Adam's look of confusion turned to one of utter horror. "Oh...." he whispered, his complexion turning ashen.

"Yeah," the Deathless breathed. "I, uh, I might, uh. Have two dads. Technically." The joke didn't land. Shiv grimaced as he tried not to have a complete meltdown.

An awkward moment passed between them. Five shuddered slightly and fled from the scene, diving into Shiv's cape.

Shiv realized they should have probably done this over a private Psychomancy connection, but he really couldn't bring himself to care about that right now. A long sigh came from Can Hu, meanwhile. "I'm sorry, Pathbearer. Sometimes, the world seeks to scar us before we even truly exist. We are not only the fruits of love, but the fruits of intention, the fruits of illness, the fruits of violence, the fruits of consequence."

Adam didn't say anything. Instead, he walked over and embraced Shiv tightly. The Deathless let out a breath as he wrapped his arms around Adam too. The disgust was still deep inside him. It felt like it stained his very bones, like he didn't really belong to himself anymore. But it was easier to face now. It felt a little better spitting it out. Just then, something bumped into his back, and Shiv found one of Solzimort's giant heads pressed up against him.

"Are we all hugging now?" Solzimort asked, voice low. Shiv was speechless, but then he found himself too tired to be annoyed.

"Some of us are," Shiv said.

"Can we join in?" Solzimort whispered, ignoring how he was already a part of this impromptu group hug either way.

"Yeah, sure," Shiv responded dryly. "The more, the merrier."

After they detached after a few seconds, Adam gave a report. "I have eyes on Cripple again. It's moving inside a special cube, coming right at us." Shiv saw Cripple's reactor glowing on Adam's hip. The Gate Lord fired his shot, and a few moments later, Cripple's Avatar appeared through the rift.

But it didn't come alone.

Cripple's current Avatar marched out, still missing its left arm, still eroded by entropy damage, but standing upon its right shoulder was a small, suitcase-sized automaton. It had two antennae sticking out of the top, and its body was practically a head as well. Its torso had a glass screen, and projected upon it was a simplistic face locked in a perpetual frown.

"Really?" the little automaton snarled. "I'm going with these clowns? Seriously, boss-man?"

"These are the conditions of your release," Cripple's words radiated from its present Avatar, and Shiv did a double-take.

"Wait, that's a prisoner?"

Cripple's Avatar turned a glare upon Shiv. "I'm not going to spend an actual Avatar for this matter. This is more of a reserve. More suitable for our needs."

"Alright, sure," Shiv said. He considered that for a moment and then accepted it. "Yeah, you know what? That's fine. That makes sense."

"I'm glad you could accept my pragmatism," Cripple replied.

"Do I get any say in this?" the suitcase-sized automaton complained. "That one's the Deathless. I think the big bot over there is glaring at me, pulling out my systems using... What is that, a Binaric Sovereign Skill? God, shit. I don't want to be a brain-slave. Don't! Stop it! Stop it!"

"Radio," Cripple said. The Ascendant's voice fell heavily upon the small automaton. "I will brook no defiance on this matter. The terms of your release have been made clear."

"The terms of my extended death, more like," Radio muttered. "Fine." It hopped off the larger automaton and skipped over to Shiv. It was barely up to his knees and held up a hand that was barely more than a few wires. Shiv winced as he wondered how fragile this Avatar was. "Well, I guess we're gonna be going together. You're the Deathless that everyone's trying to kill, and I'm Radio, Former Chief Secretary to City Lord Hanson of District Columbianus."

"Sounds like you had a pretty important position. How'd you end up here?"

"Yeah, so, maybe I might have stolen someone's identity to get my position," Radio began, "and then maybe I might have shifted a good amount of mithril out of my accounts to do a couple of favors for my friends."

"You flatter yourself if you think any of them consider you anything more than a piece on the board,"

Cripple spat scornfully.

"Come on, boss-man. You already got me under your shiny boot. You don't need to spit on me as well."

The moment Shiv realized he was dealing with someone corrupt rather than outright vile, he let out a breath of relief. "Hey, Radio," Shiv asked. "What's your Toughness? What's your Magical Resistance?"

Radio paused. "Um, Adept?"

"For which one?" Shiv asked, feeling his disappointment start to grow.

"Uh, yeah."

He scowled at Radio first and then turned his scowl on Cripple. "Really?"

"I promised you an Avatar. I did not have much time to prepare one. Its safety is now your concern. Should you let it be destroyed, the onus is on you, not me. Besides, it is meant to be a conduit between us, not an enduring combatant."

"But what happens to communicators?" Radio said, turning to complain at the Ascendant. "They die, boss-man."

"If you die before you serve your purpose, then I will mourn you appropriately."

"So, not at all," Shiv and Radio said at the same time. They looked at each other, and a low drone came from Cripple.

"For two seconds," it corrected.

"One of the most noble Ascendants in the Republic, everybody," Radio said with a drawn-out sigh at the end of its words. "Fine. Hey, Deathless guy, how high's your Toughness?"

"Heroic," he said flatly.

"Your Magical Resistance?"

"Legendary."

"Alright, alright, so maybe not so bad for me. You know what, things might be looking up for old Radio. Tell you what, I do have a few pretty good skills. I'm a real people person, as they say, if you catch my drift. If you need anyone to do the talking—"

"I'll still do the talking," Shiv cut the press-ganged Avatar off. "I want to make one thing clear. I feel a bit bad for you, but I don't much trust you either. I'm not going to abuse you or anything if you don't give me a reason to. Do I find you talking to someone behind my back? Well, knowing your history, I'm going to come up with a few assumptions. So don't give me a reason to pull your arms off."

Radio looked down at its twig-sized arms and vigorously nodded at Shiv. "Alright, very clear guidelines, boss-man. I'll be sure to not give you any reasons. Yes, sir."

Shiv and Adam shared a look. The Deathless extended his Psychomancy over to his friend. "Yeah, so we're probably going to want to keep an eye on this one. I'm getting a slimy taste from it. Slimier than Siggie by a godsdamned mile."

"I'd be inclined to agree," Adam said. "Well, Five is a member of Aviary, isn't he? Why aren't you so worried about him?"

"Because we already know he's probably going to betray us the very moment he gets a chance. This one, the waters are murky about who it might betray us to, or what might trigger that."

The Gate Lord grunted. "We have quite the little ensemble with us, don't we?"

"Yeah. Hells, I miss Valor. Shit, I can't believe I'm saying this, but I might even miss your dad."

A pang of exhaustion came from Adam. I do too. Let's get this done and try to find them wherever they are. "I'm tired of this place. I'm tired of being here."

"Alright, Radio," Shiv said. "Get in the cape."

"The what?" Radio leaned past Shiv and stared at his billowing cape. "Ugh, that looks pretty fancy. Dimensional, is it? What do you got in there? Special pocket? Those are pretty rare, especially stable ones." Radio made it two steps before it halted and spun around. "Hey, uh, Cripple."

"Not boss man anymore?" Cripple asked, sounding more than a little indifferent.

"Yeah, I just wanted to say that I always found you a self-righteous prick who couldn't tell the difference between its charging port and its waste disposal. Since you're selling me off to a new owner and using me as a receiver, I just want you to know that I'm not looking forward to your heavy-duty soul ramming itself into my red little systems so you can talk to the free-range male here."

Shiv squinted at Radio. "What the hells do you mean, 'free-range male'?"

"I mean, do you see the size of you? You gotta be free range. What did they even let you graze on?"

"Mouthy automata, believe it or not," Shiv grunted. "Now get in the cape before I make that statement real."

"Alright, new boss-man! And goodbye, trashbag!" Radio said to Cripple. Then it bounced off behind Shiv and, with a less-than-impressive leap, dove into the billowing sheen of Dimensionality. A second later, it cried out in alarm. "Boss-man, is there something you forgot to mention? Like, why is this cape filled with orcs?"

"What's this?" Mortar bellowed. "Insul, are you giving us a new friend?"

"Don't break him," Shiv called out. "You can do anything else, just don't break him."

"Oh, but we won't break him." Mortar laughed loudly. "It looks so adorable. Come here, little one, there's a spot for you right on my left shoulder."

"Ah, shit! Cripple! Cripple, boss-man, I'm sorry! I hate it here! This is a godsdamn vacation straight to hell! Take me back, take me back!"

Chapter 194 (I) Euthanasia [II]

"It could have worked, Veronica. You have to believe me. It could have worked. The ritual, so much of it, was going well. But, but..."

"Enough, dearest Ascendant. Instead of platitudes, how about a thought experiment. Let's imagine that you are creating a building, and one of the structural supports gives out at the end, causing the entire building to collapse. Now, the rest of the building was pristine, wonderful—a thing of artistry to behold. I ask you now, after the dust has settled and we behold a pile of rubble, would you still call that building well done? And would you have rated the building on its process of completion, rather than the final outcome?"

"..."

"Ah, silence. So you know that you're being fooled. 'It could have worked,' as you keep repeating. But you see, we don't know enough about the Ritual of the Dichotomous Soul to attempt it. Yet, you defied what your fellows agreed on, and now you suffer the consequences."

"I was close, Veronica. Towards the end, I was close. I had a perfect vessel. And the sliver of my soul was burning away. I was drawing it out of the grasp of the Great One. Look, look. I know you can feel it. I know you have the Animancy to feel it."

"I do. And what I feel is a broken fragment of yourself wrenched free from your soul, leaving you disfigured, damaged, and disturbed. A Dichotomous Soul means divided into two distinct parts. But it doesn't mean severed. Those who successfully complete the ritual are still one person. They just exist in multiple places, their souls bound together. So, no, this likely wouldn't have worked for you anyway."

"You don't know that. You don't! You're just a mortal! You're just a mortal!"

"Correct. I am just a mortal, but I'm not the one trying to steal Cripple's namesake from it. Now. Be proper and let me take another look at you."

-Enoch the Builder and Veronica Chandler

With all tertiary matters settled, Cripple departed to rejoin the other active Ascendants in their hunt for Shiv's decoy and to continue providing cover for the coming raid on the mana core. Shiv took his place between Solzimort's gums and did his best to ignore how much mucus was coating his armor. The hydra hummed along happily as he reared his twelve heads back. His body turned fluid, and Shiv felt a pull from Solzimort's flesh as his Shapeless Tides resisted the new mana that allowed the hydra to fuse with other pieces of matter.

Solzimort giggled as Shiv's Shapeless Tides came ablaze with mana resistance. "Hee, you're making me pretty ticklish in there," Solzimort declared, and then it was off. It splashed through the Orichalcum and slammed hard into the mithral supports behind. One after another they shattered, and he realized the hydra couldn't absorb magically infused objects. That didn't stop him from swimming through practically everything else, however. The composition of Solzimort's body changed with every bit of matter he dove through. Shiv felt the Hydra's biological architecture transform with his own Biomancy—every time it shifted, he did too, and the effects were staggering.

Peeking out from the underside of the hydra's gums, he saw the crawlspace blurring by. Aside from actively infused mithril, nothing broke. Everything was fluid. Matter was a sea to the Hydra, and he swam freely, a fish surrounded by things that should have been impediments. "Going really, really fast today!" the hydra cheered aloud.

"We're about to get even faster," Shiv declared. "Gone!"

As the hydra continued undulating through the dense infrastructure, four clawed limbs held by its sides, Gone emerged from Shiv's cape. Her body crackled with golden lightning, and she held out her hands. "Hydra. Going to give a bit of a boost. Go fast. Don't stop. Don't get nervous."

"Okay, little goblin! I'm really thankful that—"

And just then, the lightning coursing around the goblin's body flowed outward. It spilled over into Shiv, and the world around him slowed. It wasn't like time stopping when he used his Chronomancy. No, instead he felt part of time flinging him forward. The present had been outpaced, and his speed was something else altogether. But it wasn't his speed. It was a speed born of Gone. And that speed flowed over into the Hydra as well, and in a crushing instant, he exploded forward.

This time, the matter around Solzimort scattered. It was like a projectile cleaving a clean tunnel through a crashing wave. The hydra let out a loud "Wheel!" as he zoomed through the crawlspace, bursting out from passing cubes, surprising groups of prisoners and wardens still warring with each other. As the Hydra crashed into them, he spilled through their bodies as well, phasing through their physical forms without ever being impeded.

And just as fast as the Hydra came, he was gone, like liquid lightning in motion.

"Broken godsdamn moon," Shiv managed through clattering teeth. "Hell of a skill you got there." The goblin didn't reply. She was too busy channeling her power through everyone.

As they grew even faster, the Hydra's body was enwreathed by a massive bolt of golden lightning. The world outside slowed; the world within turned smooth. It was like Shiv was gliding through a space consumed by grease. Air friction became non-existent, and even the grip of time slackened. With every second they remained in motion, the sheer amount of Chronomancy spilling out from Gone only grew.

The Deathless beheld the Legendary goblin and found himself stunned by her Skill Fusion. She wasn't just fast and always getting faster; she was displaced forward into time. They started a second ahead of everyone else, leaving only an echo of herself in the past. But with every passing moment, that single second grew by increments, and they lurched further and further ahead.

The effects flowed through Shiv as well. He didn't resist it with his Shapeless Tides; he felt his own body elongate as if it were a piece of dough. Looking behind, there was a smear of gold and blurry motion, and at the end of that messiness was another version of himself from over a second ago.

"Well, this is a Skill Fusion I might wanna go for," Shiv noted.

"Not an easy one to get," Gone shot back, "likely impossible for you."

"Why's that?" Shiv asked.

The goblin's body sparked, the golden currents surging out from her. "Because you already have the wrong Chronomantic skill. Dragon Skill. What you're probably going to get next will allow you to strike ahead into the future or steal time from someone else. I've seen that from Golden Dragons. If you want my advice, try fusing it with one of your lesser Magical Skills. Chronomancy's rare. Chronomancy Skill Fusions between two lores of magic? Even rarer."

The goblin recited this information with such overwhelming flatness that it sounded like she was bored.

"Gone," Shiv said. "Who are you?"

She turned and stared at him over her shoulder. "You're not the only one of questionable birth," she declared.

With that, she said no more.

As they burst out from another cube, Shiv found them soaring through an empty space. Peeking out from up over the Hydra's furrowed lip, Shiv saw broken, mithril supports swaying tangles of emulated mana. Ultimately, utter nothingness occupied this portion of the Nadir. It was like a massive explosion had cleanly sheared a spherical space kilometers wide in this area. But at the center was their final destination.

A massive wall of stacked cubes glistened over ten kilometers away, and layers of magical wards were projected out from its surface. She saw Dynamancy, Psychomancy, Biomancy, Chronomancy, and even more lores. Then there was the incandescent mana he knew so well by now pulsating out beyond the ward, choking the air as if a glowing mist.

"Alright," Shiv grunted to himself. He began concentrating his mind and gathering more Overflow Tides in anticipation of what was to come. "Keep going, Solzimort. We're about to hit the wall. I'm getting everyone else out!"

"Speeeeeeeed!" the hydra cheered.

"Adam," Shiv called out, and in an instant the Gate Lord appeared, and Can Hu with him. No further things needed to be said by Shiv. The azure sun hovering over Can Hu's head flared brightly, and a rush of power suffused Shiv's soul. He wasn't the only one boosted. The Hydra grew even faster, Gone outputted even more cruel electric currents, and her power was joined by Shiv's as massive striped vectors curled around the hydra's vast body.

"That looks like a pretty bright wall there, guys." Solzimort sounded worried. "Are you sure just going super fast will be enough?"

"Yeah. Probably," Shiv replied. He couldn't blame Solzimort. Even with all this, Shiv wasn't sure if they could just smash their way in. If that didn't work, he would go Non-Sequitur, slip past and try to drop the magical fields on the inside. But that was risky; it left him cut off from the others. And in turn, it would see the others immediately counterattacked by Republic forces as well. There was no way they were about to impact the set of magical wards without ringing any alarm bells.

"Don't worry, Solzimort," Shiv shouted. "It's not just you. We'll all be helping. We'll push our way through."

"It's really big," Solzimort squeaked as the massive wall of interlocking cubes protecting the mana core came closer. "I don't know about this."

"It might be bigger than us," Shiv said, "but it's probably not nearly as heavy as all of us put together. Besides, we're not punching through all the cubes. We're just about to smash through one. Just a small section of the wall. You're bigger than a small section of the wall, aren't you?"

Silver Tongue 49 > 50 (Skill Evolution Imminent)

And with that mutilated logic, the Hydra found his courage again. Every one of Solzimort's heads reared back and thrust itself forward in a burst of explosive motion. Gone gave it all she had. Shiv pumped up more of his Shapeless Tides, and a few lances of force erupted off the sides of Solzimort's body—Overflow Tides Shiv lost track of. But together, they slammed into the protective wards guarding the mana core, guarding the innermost cubes. They were a spear of time, of Magical Resistance, of Legendary strength further boosted by a sun that nourished the soul. And against them was the ambient power of the Ascendants, the overwhelming might of the mana core, and soon, every warden still stationed within.

A calamitous reaction followed. The world turned bright as trickling waves of force exploded from the epicenter of the clash. Solzimort reared back in fright, but Shiv speared more of his Shapeless Tides into the wards. They crashed again and again, like tsunamis dashing themselves upon wooden walls. Though the mana core was powerful, though the divine mana wrapping around everything like mist tried to sear Solzimort, Shiv endured in his stead with his Legendary Magical Resistance. Gone made him faster, the Hydra's body had its own Magical Resistance, and Adam brought everyone to new heights.

The Deathless strained. He reached out from Solzimort's mouth, clenching the prismatic barriers, holding them back from the cube right before them. He aimed his vectors in opposing directions and tore. His Shapeless Tides dug deep and carved furrows in the mana, but the divine magic choking the air like smog crashed down against him, lashing at him. Shiv bit back a snarl as a spike of searing pain nearly split him to the core. The vectors around him flared brightly, and they turned incandescent as well, responding to the godly attacks.

A cry of effort came from Adam as he funneled a blast of azure radiance into Shiv, straightening the Deathless's body. But the furrows lining the wards were now faded, and Solzimort was beginning to flag. "Guys, maybe this wasn't such a good idea. I don't think we can get in this way."

But before Shiv could say anything, Can Hu interjected. "Hold!" the Penitent declared, its voice crackling with authority. From its eyes poured a flood of ones and zeros. These numbers and symbols spilled through the wards and sank into the cubes themselves. A second later, Five appeared, and he too began gesturing. The many automata heads lining Five's back came to life, and they all began channeling their electricity into him. Once more, the wolf-man's head shifted, became cybernetic, and a dense beam of light flashed out from his newly installed optics.

The flashes of light spilled into the binaric streams, and Shiv wondered what the twosome was doing.

A second thereafter, he got his answer.

An entire section of the wards collapsed, and it was the section that was stopping the party the most. The Chronomantic wards vanished, and everyone tore on through.

The divine mana tugged at Shiv, and he let out a ragged cry as he found his Legendary Skill driven to its very limit to stop everyone from being barred from this final passage. At the last second, when he felt like his skills were going to rip apart inside him entirely, they plunged deep into the cube before them.

The cube flared red, gold, and then finally silver. It was a silver so bright and so dense that Shiv could feel it hardening the atmosphere itself.

But Solzimort wasn't trying to barrel his way through; Solzimort just wanted to swim. And as the Legendary Hydra kissed the orichalcum, matter became fluid, and his body shifted to become the same material that lined the outside of the cube.

Shiv felt something clash against him and realized Solzimort was trying to convert his body as well. The Deathless dropped the Shapeless Tides at the last moment; any second later, and he would have been the only thing clipped by the approaching wall. He felt his biology change once more. He was still flesh-like and cellular in some ways, but a portion of him was laced with a strange material he had little experience with.

Shiv was capable of shifting himself into a state of orichalcum, but Veronica had flashed red, gold, and silver when he'd struck her before. Whatever the skill was, it was a step above what he had now, and as Solzimort tore through to the other end, they emerged into a tight and narrow chamber staffed by dozens of wardens.

They noticed Solzimort a second too late, because then the Hydra and the others were already upon them, a second ahead in time. Shiv did a quick sweep of the room. There were several pylons here, and he could feel the magic flowing out from them. However, instead of conducting a mixed assortment of mana types, the main lore being channeled through this room was Psychomancy.

This was like a Psychomancy command center, or whatever the wardens called it, and so all the Pathbearers in this room wore focused crystal helmets meant to allow them to serve as better logistical mages. As such, they weren't wearing armor meant for battle, and ultimately a Legendary-Tier Mage—especially if they were a pure mage—was often more fragile than even a Master-Tier warrior.

Shiv blasted out from Solzimort's mouth, but by the time he crashed down upon the Psychomancers, Gone had already torn through them. The goblin was unspeakably fast. She drew all that lightning back into herself, and her claws were a blur of misting blood and violence. There were fifty or so Psychomancers holding the chamber; all fifty were then down on their arms and knees, wailing and screaming as their tendons had been severed. All of their tendons.

The Deathless adapted. Instead of attacking any of the wardens, he slammed through the Psychomantic pylons through which they were channeling their magic. He broke five of them and spared the final one at the center. Truth be told, he didn't know how the whole system for this room worked, but it was still good to keep one at least for a second. Adam and the others would survey and then sabotage as they discussed earlier."

"Orcs! Out!" Shiv called aloud. "We're in!"

A second later, the grayskins erupted free from his cape, and they swept and cleared the room with methodical efficiency. The wardens were down, and so the orcs focused on securing hostages to interrogate. Those among the orcs with Psychomancy reached out to interface with the minds of the downed wardens. Helix, however, unleashed his magic, and with a wave of overwhelming Biomancy, Shiv felt something flash within the skulls of every single warden. A second later, they had all gone stiff. The silence that followed told him they were unconscious as well. Their organs were still working, their bodies were still alive, but they were truly incapacitated now.

"Alright," Adam declared. "You know the score. Ten seconds. Grab a few commanders, leave your traps, keep it moving. Scouts on watch! Mortar?"

The large artillery-piece-carrying orc chuckled grimly as he placed a makeshift mana bomb at the center of the room. It resembled an ugly, hollowed-out egg, but seeping motes of Pyromancy leaked out from the horizontal slit lining its center.

"I got a surprise for the reinforcements coming in later," the orc said. He wrapped a large hand on the top of the mana bomb and turned. Immediately, it began to click over and over. "They're gonna need to assign some specialists to make sure this thing doesn't go boom."

Shiv's lip twitched, but he allowed the orc to play his game. The wardens were going to be taxed by the many bombs they were going to plant across these cubes, and ultimately, that was part of Adam's strategy: Force the wardens to split their logistics and resources by flooding the zone with problems.

A loud crack came from right next to Shiv, and the Deathless glared at Tequila as he lifted his foot from one of the warden's necks.

"Godsdamn it," Shiv hissed. He ripped an injury away from the warden and used the crystallized wound to swat Tequila. A burst of red spread through the chamber, and the orc was nearly launched from his feet by the force of the blow.

Despite this, Tequila remained in good cheer. "Nice swing, Insul."

"Hostages mean their coworkers have to come. Focus on binding the wardens and leaving them here. Adam," Shiv called out. "Pylon?"

"Nothing useful here!" The Gate Lord wrapped a curled limb shaped from water around the final pylon, and slowly he squeezed. The room felt drier as Adam's Hydrokinetic hand grew, and Shiv realized the Gate Lord was drawing from the moisture to empower himself.

I guess that wand really left an imprint on his soul, Shiv mused. As the final pillar burst, a spray of telepathy washed through the room, and Shiv pushed it aside using his shapeless tides.

"Ten seconds," Adam shouted. "Ten seconds, we move again. Solzimort, we're going deeper."

Chapter 194 (II) Euthanasia [II]

"Got it, little guy," the Hydra said, and by then Shiv noticed that a number of the Psychomancer wardens had been absorbed into Solzimort's body. The Deathless grunted but decided not to complain. Solzimort was a "kind" soul that wanted to be a guardian, from what Shiv could tell so far, it was just unfortunate that the Hydra's notion of kindness was practically traumatic for almost anyone else.

With the room secured and the bomb planted, they continued. Most of the orcs got back in Shiv's cape, and the designated Maestros stayed out with Shiv as they continued their chaotic operation. Solzimort moved again, and temporal lightning danced across his body. The core-raiders glided through the matter again. This time, the orcs clung to the edges of Solzimort's teeth. They were large and plenty, so one of Solzimort's mouths was stuffed full of the grayskins. Despite this, the Hydra hummed a jaunty tune as they proceeded closer to the core.

With every meter they progressed, Shiv felt a heavier pressure settle against his body, and he felt a building tension climb inside him. I need to cook. I need to get out of this hellpit and cook or I'm going to lose my felling mind.

Shiv had no idea where they were going, as the matter before them turned into a slurry of Orichalcum substance mixed with dense silver mesh. The Hydra and Adam, however, weren't so blind. Every few seconds, one of the Hydra's heads would tip down, and from his jaws, Mortar would fling out another bomb. The wardens didn't retaliate, probably weren't even sure where the Hydra was, and Shiv quickly realized the sheer difficulty of running a prison filled with Legendary prisoners. It wasn't just the sheer power a Legend had, but also the sheer variety of Skill Fusions and how strange they could get.

The Hydra's ability to swim through matter and incorporate it into his own flesh was nightmarish. It didn't matter if Shiv was stronger than the Hydra; if he made contact with Solzimort, the Hydra could absorb him in an instant if his Shapeless Tides failed. And then there was Gone. Despite Shiv's overwhelming might, Gone was someone he had to surprise if he wished to take down, because if there was one absolute advantage, it was being so fast your enemy couldn't react to you.

It didn't matter if you were stronger or tougher if you never had the initiative.

The moment they got out, it was little wonder that the Ascendants needed to personally intervene to regain control.

Shiv tried to imagine this breakout causing a flood of Legends to spill out from within the Yellowstone volcano. "Yeah," Shiv breathed. "This is gonna keep their hands full for a while."

After depositing a few more bombs, they accelerated even faster, and suddenly they were through. Shiv found himself falling, and he looked out from Solzimort's mouth to see a wide-open, brightly lit space. The chamber before them was around 800 meters in diameter, and at the core of the room was their objective. It was a massive, pulsating core that radiated with prismatic mana. It didn't glow like the sun at Gate Piety, instead resembling a fracture, a breach between worlds from which incandescence flowed.

Several bridges ran from sealed Orichalcum gates to the mana core. They were likely passes leading to the essential cubes surrounding this place. An endless mass of mithril supports like a series of crystalline needles poked through the fracture.

Ten bridges extended out from the mana core, and standing upon one of them was someone he recognized, someone he expected, and someone he didn't look forward to facing.

Using Farsight, Shiv took in Rebis. He was clad in Adam's sky-blue armor, but worse yet, he also held the Gate Lord's Spellstring and Vambrace. It seemed the Ascendants were determined to piss his friend off.

"Well, at least we don't need to go on a miserable hunt for all my equipment in the surrounding cubes," Adam muttered humorlessly.

But stepping out from behind Rebis was someone else Shiv recognized.

The Gate Lord let out a snarl. "Stormhalt."

"The hells is he doing here?" Shiv asked.

"He probably anticipated this," Adam said. "Veronica didn't warn you about him?"

"Nope," Shiv replied. "So. Either she decided to give me one last shit-sandwich surprise, or Stormhalt's being a walking sack of piss again and going rogue."

"The latter is much more likely," Adam said. He cleared his voice. "This doesn't change anything. We stick to the plan, and we make this quick. We don't need to beat the Ascendants in a straight fight. We just need to disable Rebis and have you get to the core. Once we collapse it, we should use the unfolding chaos as cover to retreat. The orcs will act as spoilers and a rear guard against the wardens or anyone else who might intrude."

“Got it,” Shiv said. “Kura. Candles. Out!” At his call, the other Legendary prisoners started emerging from his cape as well. “Orcs! Out. Secure the entrances into the core chamber and hold them.”

Solzimort slid down atop once such an entrance and allowed everyone to egress upon a bridge. As he did, a small army of orcs did as Shiv commanded. They moved along the walls and made for every entrance, while Solzimort partially sank back into the walls. “Those two look mean,” he whispered.

Shiv clenched a fist. “Yeah. They are.” He spun his Orichalcum dagger and grinned viciously. “But we’ll fix that soon enough. You know what you gotta do while we bust everyone out of this prison?”

“Yeah! Hide in the walls and floor and pull more people into my body if they try to get close to this place.” The Hydra nodded his many heads. “You can count on me!”

“Alright, Solzimort,” Shiv replied. “Do it well, and I’ll be sure to make you a happy Hydra. You ever had cooked basilisk?”

“Uhhh, no?”

“Well, you’re going to. And it’ll knock your crowns off.”

“But I like my crowns...”

"He means it will taste extremely delectable, you snake's bastard," Kura snarled, clearly tenser than the others.

"Yeah," Shiv said. And then leaned close to the elf. "And don't be a prick to him. He's risking enough to help us."

"He's risking getting put back into an enclosure if he doesn't," Kura shot back. "And Deathless—point your gaze high. We do not have long here. If we do not overcome our foes fast, the other Avatars will be summoned."

As Shiv looked up, he saw a massive grid of panels, made from mithril and lined with cascading spells. This place wasn't just a containment chamber for the core; it was also a teleportation anchor. It wouldn't be long until the other Ascendants and the entirety of the prison's defenders knew where they were. But for every second of confusion they bought, it would increase their odds of claiming the mana core, collapsing it, and finally bringing all this bullshit to an end.

The incandescent mana suffusing the vast chamber came alive with activity. It rippled and lashed at the air around the mana core, and soon both Rebis and Stormhalt were glaring at the invaders. The former's wings glowed with divine mana, and his body twitched with excess energy.

"Impudent prisoners," a low, rasping voice sounded. It had a reverberation, an echo to it, and Shiv guessed that it was Enoch talking. "You have come to free yourselves, then, to set your fetid kind upon the capital and debase my Republic. MY Republic. Mine. Forged at my hands! Shaped by my genius! MY GLORY!"

Enoch's words were laced with near madness, and it sounded like two people were talking at once. The first was slightly rational, more controlled. The latter, emotional, constantly hissing and seething. "You will not get further. I know not how you surpassed my defenses. My defenses were failed by the weakness of our wardens. They were pathetic. The wardens have done all they could. They are

worthless. And you go no further. You die here. We will flay your bones and use them to build new effigies in remembrance of this moment."

"For once, I would like to fight a god that is mostly sane," Adam said thinly.

"You know what, Adam? When I go find the Challenger and try to take his head, I'll bring you with me. How does that sound?"

"Absolutely terrible," Adam shot back. "But practically a dream compared to this. Maybe I'll go back to the gate and bother Lord Scorn again. At least he's very clear about what he wants."

"Yeah, a nasty-ass dildo rammed up into our wounds. Shit, I can't believe I miss that bastard after everything we've been through." Shiv turned. "Alright, you ready to get this shit done?"

A snort came from the Gate Lord. "I have a few choice things to say to Stormhalt, but I think I want to make it known with my arrows rather than my tongue. And I want my armor back. Alright, people. Strategy—One final time. Shiv moves to ambush; I distract and traumatize, we overwhelm and hold; Shiv takes and collapses the core. Then, we use the chaos and move to escape after securing Rebis."

"Plan's a bit hopeful," Gone said. "Few of us are probably going to die."

"Thank you, Gone." Adam sighed. "We truly needed this final dose of realism and morale-lowering. The goblin just grunted in agreement. "Alright. Signal when you're ready, Shiv."

"I'm going to say this to you once," Stormhalt suddenly interjected. A flash of darkness emerged from the City Lord, and branching sinews of lightning crawled high up into the air. Immediately, a dark tree, which harkened the arrival of Halsur the Endbreaker, blossomed out from him. And over that tree stood the looming giant, bearing his spear and his massive shield in equal measure. More stormstuff pulsated free from his body, and it crackled down the tree back into Stormhalt, and the City-Lord rose into the air, drawn aloft by cords of lightning. "You came here seeking a release, and I will give one to you. Simply surrender. Surrender, and I will see you shackled and caged mercifully. I give this to you because of my better nature. I have every right to slay all of you right now."

"Every right," Shiv snorted. "What a fucking sack of shit. Hey, Stormhalt! I was gonna say the same thing to you. Surprised Veronica let you stay around after all your fuck-ups, but I guess you're exactly the type of person to get on the Auroral Council. Easy to control, easy to abuse, no political savvy, and a chip on his shoulder the size of a small mountain. You know what, I get why you hate Roland."

Shiv laughed bitterly. "But I despise Roland properly. I got a good reason. You? Well, I'm afraid there's no cure for being a bitch, Stormhalt. It's not his fault you're completely worthless without an Ascendant. How old are you? One hundred? Fifty at least. The hells are you still doing at Master-Tier?"

Shiv felt his Silver Tongue skill teeter on the brink. It quivered inside of him, and the lightning erupting out from the City Lord grew ever more intense.

"Be silent," he snarled. "I will not take this from a mongrel bastard made so by the hand of a vile deceiver. You're barely a person, Tanner Lowe. You're little more than a thing, an experiment. And soon, when we cast your master back into the pit he came from, we will see how much your tongue wiggles and how much defiance hides in that miserable body of yours."

A genuine laugh came from Shiv this time. There was always something so amusing about talking to someone who was emotional, especially when they liked insulting you as well. If one wished to banter or trade barbs, it was best that they held their own temperament in good control. Shiv didn't think of himself as much of a bully, but if he was, he probably would have bullied Stormhalt with much glee.

And that came with an uncomfortable realization. Shit, that does make me slightly like Roland. Maybe. Did Roland ever even bully this guy, or does he seriously just have a problem with Roland being better than him? Hard to tell with all the whimpering he's doing.

"I'll tell you what, Stormhalt," Shiv shouted. "I'll keep you alive if I can, mainly because I find you pretty pathetic, and Adam needs something to vent his frustrations on. We've had a hard couple of days, but since you're here, I think this is going to be a pretty good consolation prize on top of what we'll get from shutting this mana core down."

"Enough!" Stormhalt thundered. "Lay your arms down and surrender. I give you five seconds and no more." His voice was accompanied by a rumble, and just then, Shiv gave Adam a nod. It was time for the Gate Lord to take over. Shiv went Non-Sequitur. Soon, the fight would be on, but Shiv intended to make it as messy as he possibly could for the Ascendants and their Avatars.

As he ventured across the bridge, Rebis and Stormhalt approached. The massive tree lashed and pierced several bridges, drawing them closer, and as they were wrenched free from the walls, the steel groaning and then breaking with rattling screams, the alloyed matter began to change. It began to curve and twist into strange arms.

They resembled coiled wires wrapping around each other, their tips whipping tendrils that licked at the air as if leaves of a willow tree. The wires struck the walls and cleaved a few orcs in half. Rapidly, they began to construct a frame around the chamber—a mesh that outlined the edges of the room. Slowly, a pulsating flood of divine mana began filling the space in between the frames, and a heaviness filled the atmosphere.

Shiv guessed what was happening. Enoch was likely using Stormhalt's showboating as a distraction. He was trying to build something around Shiv and the others. Too bad the builder wasn't going to get that chance. As Shiv accelerated across the bridge, he came to a halt right in front of Enoch and Stormhalt.

As he did, the expected thing happened. Stormhalt's eyes came aglow with Divination mana, and the tree he was connected to pulsed with violet energy. The Ascendant who empowered him pointed his spear down.

"Something approaches." Halsur was an Ascendant of few words, and when he spoke, the world shivered beneath his awesome baritone.

"You think a feeble ambush like this will allow you to take us by surprise?" Stormhalt spat. Rebis waved his hands, and Shiv watched as a messy spray of incandescence expanded out from the former prisoner's body. The light seemed fluid at first, but as it spilled out from the gaps in Adam's armor, Shiv saw what seemed to be a hexagonal grid that slipped past him. As the Deathless tried to move through, he found himself stained with Divination mana. He might have been able to slip out with his Non-Sequitur, but that didn't mean he was unaffected by the powers they infused the construct with.

Gives them an easy way to track me. Well, this is annoying, Shiv thought to himself, but this was also anticipated. Adam knew certain Ascendants had powerful Divination, and even his personal Divination skill could anticipate where Shiv was coming from. But him getting close was only part of the ambush.

As soon as Shiv was noticed by the Ascendants, Adam moved to the next part of their plan. "Before we begin, I just want you to know that I will do to you, Enoch, what the Storm Lords couldn't finish at the Pacific Islands."

In an instant, the wire-mesh construct being shaped by the Ascendant came undone. Noises like snapping steel cables sounded as the stolen matter harvested from the bridges fell, crashing down in a spill of unstable matter alongside the flowing spellstuff.

"What did you say?" Both of Enoch's voices were aligned, and Shiv could practically taste the Ascendant's dismay.

Adam sneered. "I said, why don't you tell me what happened at Aina Huna?"

And at that, Rebis jerked as if mortally wounded. The Ascendant cried out as well. For the first time, Shiv saw Enoch as he birthed himself free from Rebis's body.

Chapter 194 (III) Euthanasia [II] [Book 4 End]

As the mutilated prisoner clutched his head, so too did Enoch. And as Shiv beheld the latter, his stomach recoiled.

The Ascendant was even more of an abomination compared to Rebis. Instead of having one body, he had two, conjoined at the hip. Yet, though one of its bodies was massive, well-muscled, bearing an enormous hammer in its right hand and a stack of papers fluttering in its left, its head was swelling, pulsating, and there was a portion of its skull missing.

It looked like a horrific deformation, but Shiv could tell how delicate the cut was. A portion of Enoch's mind had been split, and that portion was dedicated to the other body sprouting out from its midsection.

The second body was far smaller, and it was connected by a mess of cancerous tissue. Yet, these cancers were infused with divine mana, and embedded within the cancer was the pulsating gray matter harvested from Enoch's brain. Shiv didn't know what the Ascendant did during the Ritual of the Dichotomous Soul to result in such an outcome, but to say that Enoch botched it was an understatement.

Little wonder why Veronica wanted him punished. Enoch was ruined. He was ruined in ways Shiv couldn't even begin to conceive of fixing, and he probably could only slot himself into Rebis because they were mutilated in such a similar way. It was then that he realized that Rebis had been deliberately ruined to give Enoch something to wear. Two ugly lives tortured out of existence for one god's fuckup, Shiv thought to himself. What a world.

"Enoch," Stormhalt called aloud. He reached down, thinking to wrap some of his dark lightning around Rebis's body, shielding him from the assumed attack. But the mutilated Pathbearer pushed him aside, slamming into Stormhalt. The City Lord was knocked back, and Rebis flared his bladed wings as he tried to wrestle himself free from the Ascendant.

"No, I'm not—Enoch. I'm not. Out of my mind. Get out. Get OUT!"

As the core chamber fell into chaos, Shiv emerged from Non-Sequitur. He delivered a descending stab into the back of the City Lord's head, and a sickening crack followed. But Stormhalt didn't go down; instead, a counter-burst of dark lightning slammed against Shiv. But rather than being overpowered this time, he grappled with it. Shiv's many Overflow Tides halted the lashing lightning unleashed by Halsur, and as a forest of black bolts crashed down on him, the others made their move.

A tidal wave of curling fire slammed down on both Rebis and Stormhalt. The City Lord, already disfigured from his many injuries sustained against the Tarrasque, burned even more, sizzling within his battered armor. He cried out in pain, and Halsur fed him more electricity to spare him from further harm. Stormhalt wrapped himself in a bundle of living lightning and soon became utterly impervious to harm.

Shiv wrenched some of the electricity aside and slashed his knife up along Stormhalt's torso at a diagonal angle. Sparks flashed. His might made the black lightning bend, and Shiv felt an explosion of satisfaction spread through his chest as he heard Halsur grunt with surprise.

Deepest Edge 66 > 67

Inertial Overdrive 161 > 162

Yet, where he expected Deepest Edge to deliver a fatal wound, the lightning splashed apart, revealing no one within. A second later, someone slammed into his side. Stormhalt erupted back into existence, carried by a bolt of piercing electricity cast by the tree looming overhead. Shiv's armor groaned and split, but it endured long enough for Shiv to shift his body and absorb the attack. He converted every bit of force Stormhalt sent his way, but Stormhalt's lightning was more than just kinetic energy. It was magic as well, a deep, lashing magic that tore at one's soul. The Deathless spent the Overflow Tides he gained from Stormhalt to blunt the man's own magic.

Stormhalt snarled as he clawed at Shiv's throat. "Did you think that this would be enough? That you could simply—"

Before Stormhalt could say anything else, Shiv shouted: "Golems!"

Deception 35 > 37

Golemancy 25 > 26

From his cape emerged two additional helpers. The first seized Stormhalt by his midsection. The other swept the City Lord's legs out from under him. The two Vitae golems Shiv had manufactured ten minutes ago joined the fray in a sudden frenzy of Chronomantic violence. Temporal shells faded from their bodies as they pinned Stormhalt in place. And just then, Shiv fell upon the City Lord as well, draining his vitality from him, and by extension, Halsur's as well.

Halsur was a hardy god. He betrayed little in the way of pain or discomfort, but as Shiv wrenched at his life force, he gave a soft gasp that became a hurricane. A literal hurricane, birthed free from the tree. Shiv felt its power slam against his body—and he heard the others cry out in surprise. He directed his Shapeless Tides against the crushing force and used it to harness more tides from the hurricane, converting what he could to overflow vectors. A pulsating blast of vitality rippled out from the very center of the chamber, and nearby, a sound came: a crashing body, announcing Enoch's and Rebis's sudden collapse.

The mutilated prisoner lay there on the ground, and Shiv caught a glimpse of what provoked him to succumb: coiling strings of ones and zeros flooded Rebis's mind, and Can Hu, along with Five, advanced upon the downed Pathbearer. Gone slammed into Rebis and began prying at his helmet. Her claws dug in underneath the gaps lining the head armor, but despite everything, she couldn't pull it free.

"It's bound!" she called out. "It's bound to his soul!"

"What?" Adam shouted, sounding surprised. "But—oh, godsdamn it, they must have done that earlier. They enchanted my armor. Bastards!"

"Think of it this way," Candles said, laughing as he continued firing magic down upon Stormhalt in focused beams from his fingertips. A wall of twisting flames shaped in the form of a dragon screamed at the hurricane crashing against them, and a pocket of stability opened in the ebony-colored storm. "They just saved you some trouble and some expenses. You got a bunch of free enchantments, whatever they are."

And with both Avatars down and Halsur's presence fading, Shiv felt a roaring sense of triumph claw through his body. They'd prevailed without even letting the Ascendants fight back. It had been a far cry since his desperate battle against Stormhalt alone during the Tarrasque's offensive. But then Shiv saw a

stray string of lightning wrap one final time around Rebis's head. And just then, as it tightened, the binaric flood was cut off, and Rebis stopped writhing.

"Get back!" Shiv called out. "He's—"

Inertial Overdrive 162 > 165

Pillar of Orichalcum 245 > 248

His death came in an instant. One moment, he was alive, draining Halsur and Stormhalt's vitality; the next, his head was rolling forward off his neck. Another attack flicked toward him. The only reason he didn't lose more of his Vitae was because of Gone. The goblin had intercepted a blow meant for him. Rebis was fast, faster than Shiv could react to, and so was Gone. A blurring clash happened around him.

The air shook, and calamitous impacts launched Shiv back. He began to cultivate his Toughness; an Orichalcum pillar erupted free from his body, climbing high into the air. With him distracted, he failed to notice how both of his Vitae golems had been beheaded as well, and how Stormhalt was free.

A lake's worth of lightning came pouring down from the black tree. The bridges in the room were torn asunder, split down the middle by lashing branches. A tip of electricity slammed into Shiv, and his Shapeless Tides responded, but they were found wanting as Halsur turned his full might on the Deathless.

Shiv felt a fourth of him crack away. He just lost a good portion of his lifeforce, and by the time he managed to cultivate enough Overflow Tides to hold the rest of the lightning back, he was already wrapped tight by the lightning flowing free from Stormhalt's hands.

"Did you think that would be enough?!" Stormhalt roared. The man was near-incoherent, his words were partially slurred, yet the Ascendant was there, asserting his will against Shiv. Furthermore, the mana core came alive as well, and that searing heat that lashed at Shiv before when they were trying to breach the first cube returned. And it wasn't just Shiv that cried out. Adam, Candles, Gone—they were all affected. It was a fire that torched their very souls, and Candles, for one, hated it. His shrieks reached new heights, and his flames ceased flowing.

Shiv could feel its source—the heat originating from the center of the room. If they didn't collapse the core soon, it might just see them all fried from the inside out.

Shiv used Non-Sequitur again, and this time he unlatched from his sprawling mass of Vitae, ejecting a portion of himself. He came close to the edge of death, close like so many times before. It was like he was hanging off a precipice, and the winds of a cold blizzard licked him deep, carving chunks out of his very bones.

Non-Sequitur 103 > 104

But Shiv was free now, and Stormhalt wasn't expecting him. He wrapped himself around the City Lord, and he began to drain. Stormhalt screamed, surprised by the sudden lurch of agony tearing through him. Life force flowed back into Shiv, and due to Non-Sequitur allowing him to exist seemingly in two places at once, Stormhalt never knew what hit him.

He tried slashing and crushing "Shiv"; he only destroyed the decoy the Deathless left behind. Shiv went back to being purely outside of context, and confusion gripped Stormhalt. That didn't stop Shiv from resurrecting, bursting free from his Vitae in a splash of red and white. As he did so, he hooked his left arm around the City-Lord's abdomen, and he spiked the man through the bridge they stood upon.

Pieces of shrapnel flew into the air, and Stormhalt was launched downward. A blast of tides spiked him down to the bottom of the chamber in an instant. Stormhalt struck the ground with such force that the bottom of the room went off like a mana bomb. Lightning cleaved down from the storm-tree still hovering far above Stormhalt, erupting forth in a dozen whips that came for Shiv. But he was whole again, and that meant he could cast himself back in time without tearing his soul in half. So Shiv did. He blinked out of existence and reappeared right next to where Rebis and Gone were, right next to the mana core, now no longer hidden by Stormhalt's lightning tree.

Strider of the Unbending Path 158 > 159

However, rather than being able to go for the mana core, Shiv faced a dilemma. Gone was on the ground, parts of her claws snapped off, and with her stomach underneath Rebis's boot. And all around them, the room was being reshaped. Every bit of matter here was curling, turning denser. A strange maze was rushing toward them, falling as if a distant tide collapsing inward. And Shiv knew he didn't have much time at all before they were all at the mercy of the Builder's architectural powers.

"Break!" Rebis screeched, and Enoch's voice echoed within his new Avatar's. But Shiv could hear the pain lingering under Rebis's breath. "Breaking! Everything's breaking!" He wasn't talking just about Gone. The goblin gurgled as blood began seeping out from her mouth. Adam was nowhere to be seen. Everyone else was missing. And then there was Shiv, the mana core, and a simple choice to make.

Both, Shiv decided. He was going to choose both. He launched himself at the mana core and then imprinted a temporal echo of his being upon the massive source of mana as he reached into it with his Vitae. Through the searing pain, he drove the tip of his being into the inner depths of the core and brushed the first skill he could find. The moment he did, the moment he left a Chronomantic anchor, he reverted in time and reappeared next to Rebis.

He wrapped his arm around the mutilated prisoner and tore Rebis off Gone's body. As Rebis tried to rip himself out of Shiv's grasp, the Deathless held on hard, refusing to let go. Rebis slashed at him with his wings. Shiv winced as cuts opened along his body—his Orichalcum barely doing much to stop Rebis's slashing aura. He resolved the matter by flexing his body hard and ripping one of Rebis's wings clean off.

It lacked armor; Shiv had a Legendary Physicality Skill; Rebis needed more Toughness. The equation came down to an inevitable conclusion as the poor, melded prisoner screamed, and Shiv winced in pity. "Sorry! Didn't want this."

"This is not your vessel!" Enoch cried again. "I will show you—"

Shiv saw the mesh framework wrapped around the chamber beginning to quiver and change once more. No. Not finding out why they call him the Builder. He drove Rebis into the burning mana core and pressed him against the massive cracks. Rebis struggled. Shiv coiled an arm around his enemy's neck and struck at Enoch once more. "Doesn't matter what you do to me right now," Shiv said, holding Rebis tight, pressing more Shapeless Tides around his former companion. "Nothing you do right now will make you right. You were broken before, and you were broken because you were always a fool. Aina Huna. Failure. That's what they should have called you. Not Builder."

"Be quiet! Be QUIET!" both of Enoch's heads cried aloud, and Rebis turned, clawing at Shiv. He felt a portion of his upper arm get ripped away. Even with his Pillar of Orichalcum climbing fast, Rebis cut deep and true. Shiv responded by discharging his sheath right then and there. An explosion enveloped the center of the room, and the Deathless felt Rebis rattle and bounce in his grip. He kept going with his taunts. "Because you were broken before then. In Aina Huna. The Stormlords deserve your divinity more than you do!"

"No! No!" Rebis tried to fly up. He got a meter up into the air before Shiv yanked him back and tore his other wing off. Blood sprayed through the air, and before Rebis could try anything else, Shiv dropped a plunging elbow on his armored head. An echoing impact sounded through the room, and Shiv continued delivering blow after blow while he spat word after word. "You were broken because you failed the ritual. You were broken because you were a fool. Everything you did, every bit of power you have, and still you failed!"

"No!" Enoch howled. "I am not broken! I am not—"

With a final punch, a skill within Shiv advanced. And when he next spat a phrase, another thing changed inside of him, and something changed within Rebis as well. "The broken thing wasn't the ritual. It wasn't your action. It was always you. Unlike you, I don't need to steal power from a god. I'll find my way there on my own."

Silver Tongue 50 > 52 (Skill Evolution Reached)

Striking Proficiency 50 > 51 (Skill Evolution Reached)

Skill Fusion: Cutting Barbs (Adept) - Hammerhand (Adept) > Sticks and Stones (Master)

Sticks and Stones > 52

Something peculiar happened to Enoch. The Ascendant's ethereal body came alight and remained that way. It glistened, and there was a patch of glass that emitted a ray of brightness, a ray that called to Shiv's punches. Rebis suffered the same fate. His chest was glistening, and underneath that Legendary armor, Shiv felt a calling, an unspeakable urge to drive his knuckles through that weakness. And so he listened to it. While Rebis clutched at his head, Shiv gritted his teeth and drew in a quiet breath. "Sorry, Rebis. I would have tried to save you if I could."

Rebis went still, and then, in a moment of strange clarity, gave a choked sigh. "Was never any way out. Never asked to be made. End it. Just give me..."

Shiv drove a blow directly into Rebis's chest. Adam's Legendary-Tier armor proved its worth. It rang like a gong, and Shiv's punch barely even rattled the plating. However, he felt something behind the armor crack and break. At the same time, a portion of Enoch fractured as well. Shiv's punch was hyper-accelerated as it moved within the brilliant patch emitted by the glistening vulnerability, and when it struck, it was like bursting through glass rather than hammering against High-Tier flesh.

"Look at you now," Shiv said, speaking to Enoch rather than Rebis. "Even now, despite all you have, after all the power you stole, you're still pathetic. You're still just going to lose. Just like always."

As Enoch heard him, another section of his being turned to glass as well, and Shiv targeted this new vulnerability. Part of Rebis's face became brittle, and Shiv struck it. The moment his elbow landed, it zipped forward in a sudden rush of amplified force, and a cataclysmic snap echoed through the chamber.

Part of Rebis's skull caved in, and the Avatar went down, going limp. There was no time to celebrate. Shiv turned his attention to the mana core and—

A chain of lightning exploded out from his gut. He felt the lightning hook inside him as Stormhalt tried to pull him back. As Shiv gasped and wrestled with a god's power, he cast his Vitae forth into the mana core and began to engineer its collapse. His soul was practically boiling out of his body, and Shiv didn't think he could take much more.

Another two impacts slammed against his person. Shiv felt his pillar crack—but endure. He felt more Overflow Tides flood him, and he heard Stormhalt snarling some stupid nonsense or another as he tried to pull Shiv away from the core.

Shiv gritted his teeth and pushed forward. I need to—

Suddenly, just as Shiv was dragged off balance by Stormhalt, Rebis drew in a ragged breath and turned, driving a clawed hand straight at Shiv's temple—

Only for Enoch to howl in pain once more as his soul itself was lit ablaze.

A new color exploded into existence. Azure blue spilled down from above the mana core. A flaring beam of power rushed into Shiv, and the Deathless looked up to behold both Can Hu and Adam slip back into the fray. The Penitent's body was shredded in so many places that only its torso remained intact. Through the gaps, Shiv saw Adam, his body a raging current of crashing water, but his face still human—and contorted by strain. Shiv had lost sight of them at the start of the battle, but it looked like they'd barely made it through.

Stormhalt's lightning slackened as well. The City Lord cried out in misery as Adam drew closer. But as he did, the Gate Lord's Righteous Dawn began to crack. Shiv's eyes widened. "Adam! No! Stop! Your skill—"

Adam's sun flared even brighter—grew even larger.

And when it shattered apart, the core chamber went from a realm of burning incandescent to the perfect blue of an endless sky.

Chapter 195 (I) Shatter [Book 5 Beginning]

I don't understand why so many people curse the System. If you have any knowledge of history at all, you would have noticed that the world, and all of existence for that matter, was cruel and indifferent long before the System's arrival. Yes, it demands that we strive, fight, and shed our blood ceaselessly, but at least it cares for us. At least it has its eye upon us, and at least it favors those of us who are willing to be daring.

That is why it gives us such wonderful presents. Tell me, have you ever known the light of closing a gate, Hero-Ranger? You should. If you survive this interrogation at my hand, you should find a gate and end its life. Quell the mana core sustaining it, and see what the System bestows upon you.

You see this instrument at my hip? This is Sorrowfang. This is the reason why you surrendered to me, why you and your men were all taken, peacefully overcome by a depressive malaise. Sorrowfang is infused with the highest sadness. It is not a blade that strikes the flesh, but one that carves betrayal into the heart.

Indeed. I had to crush a wonderful little community to gain this blade. For within the Chernobyl Exclusion Gate was a small oasis, a place of calm resting at the eye of chaos and calamity. And the tears that were shed upon the day of my arrival were things worthy of legend.

I could tell you how their delightful pine trees were decorated with such blinking lights. I could tell you about the soft snow falling constantly within the gate. I can tell you about the children that were spared and the slaves that made them. But above all, I can tell you how the gate felt when I crushed it. It had weakened, you see, and it didn't want to die. But I could take its life, and so I did, and the System allowed it.

You see, when you collapse a High-Tier core, its magic is released back into the world that spawned its existence. But a sliver—a significant sliver—is given unto you, for the System remembers your deeds. And it understands what you've taken from the core, and from the narrative of its destruction comes a gift. A gift that is sweet and proper, a gift filled with poignance and meaning, because it was a gift you forged narratively with your own hands.

So, experience my gift once more, little Ranger, and feel the sadness. Feel it, and, once you survive, if you survive, seek a core of your own. It's really an experience you won't forget. Just like this is one that will scar you eternally.

-The Culturist, Legendary Orc War Maestro, to Hero-Ranger Arathan

As Adam's sun shattered, the entire chamber was swallowed by an azure sky. It was sky on a perfect summer day, the purest blue, an endless ocean that spilled into Shiv's very soul like a smooth liquor. His insides came afire, but rather than burning, he was strengthened. Something was melting into him, being forged upon the foundations of his soul. He felt harder within than ever before, and heavier too.

As the faintest blue began to fade, he saw a shadow there, hovering just above the mana core. Drifting atop the fissures was Adam. His vector wings flared wide, Can Hu's broken shell still clasping him. But as the Penitent drank in Adam's new power as well, it was slowly coming back together, bits of machinery regenerating at a speed visible to the naked eye. Yet the most striking thing of all was the broken sun hovering above Adam's head. Bit by bit, the exterior of the Righteous Dawn cracked away, dissolving like the shell of a rotten egg.

But within wasn't nothingness.

Within was a pure white ring serving as a gateway to a realm of endless blue.

From that realm, the world was painted. And from that realm, Shiv caught sight of something sublime. It was hard to describe what he saw visually, but he knew, deep in his bones, by intuition alone, he was peering into Adam's very soul. At once, the sky blue that painted the chamber collapsed back inward, imploding within that ring before it was launched out in a lancing beam directly into Shiv's body.

The Deathless felt his power surge to new heights, but his power didn't grow alone. Where the Righteous Dawn Ascends increased his skills and made his soul regenerate, now a new notification appeared in his eyes, and it was followed by so many others.

Skill Gained: Veilpiercer

Skill Replaced: Veilpiercer > Vectors of the Eternal Ascent

Skill Replaced: Vectors of the Eternal Ascent > Phoenix Riposte

Shiv was speechless. These were Adam's skills, and they were connecting themselves to his body.

The Deathless took a step back, and Rebis, trying to break free, tore himself loose from Shiv's grip. Yet the blows he had inflicted upon the mutilated prisoner had delivered their brutal toll. Enoch cried for his Avatar to fight, but part of Rebis's head was caved in underneath that armor. Rebis managed a step, vanishing in a burst of acceleration. But that was all he managed. A few meters away, he collapsed once more, equilibrium lost, body broken.

The mutilated prisoner failed to rise once more.

Shiv didn't know where Five or the others were, but he didn't have time. Another flare of pain came from within his stomach, and he looked down, gritting his teeth as he saw how tightly the bolt of black lightning was hooked within his gut. He wrapped his hands around the cutting electricity. His Shapeless Tides crashed against the god's might, and Halsur let out a thunderous roar.

Another three bolts struck Shiv. At the same time, Adam began firing arrow after arrow, his hydrokinetic limbs loosing massive Veilpiercers, Can Hu firing in tandem, using the cannons it had left to pelt the

adversary with alloyed pellets. Shiv couldn't see what Stormhalt was doing, but he could hear the impacts. The air crackled as black lightning parried dimensional arrows and hyper-accelerated projectiles.

But just as Stormhalt's electricity struck Shiv, the Deathless's orichalcum resisted the damage. The tips of the bolts burrowed through his skin but strained against the resistance a centimeter in. A few slight holes opened along Shiv's back, but as soon as they did, his body burst into flame, and for the first time, Shiv experienced what it was to have Adam's Skill Evolution. He was a phoenix in flight, flames screaming forth from his body, and there was a pressure inside of him that he needed to bestow upon someone else.

Pillar of Orichalcum 238 > 239

He turned. Stormhalt's lightning was no longer harpooned through his midsection. He slammed body-first into the City Lord and found himself bouncing off from a cocoon of dark voltage. Stormhalt's body was entirely wrapped in bands of rippling lightning. Shiv's blow inflicted no harm on the man himself, but even so, some of the pressure was alleviated.

Shiv twisted, switching angles as he slammed into Stormhalt twice more. The City Lord tried to strike him down while he was still a phoenix, but Shiv reverted time. His injuries faded altogether, and he blinked back six seconds ago. Just then, he saw Stormhalt ripping through the place where he'd just stood, his lightning unleashing a thunderclap in the air. It struck nothing but fading embers.

Another Veilpiercer slammed the side of Stormhalt's head, but a massive explosion of lightning erupted from his body, expanding in a forest of impending doom.

Skill Replaced: Phoenix Riposte > Commander's Foresight

Just then, Shiv felt another skill activate within his soul, a skill he'd experienced before alongside Adam. The change happened as Adam blasted Shiv with radiance again and triggered the moment the Deathless yearned to have a second to think. Everything halted, and an intense heat began to simmer within the core of Shiv's skull.

Commander's Foresight had nothing to do with Chronomancy. It was simply a matter of hyper-accelerating one's cognition. Shiv could feel that, especially thanks to his Biomancy. His brain activity was moving at a pace outright deleterious to an ordinary Pathbearer, let alone a Pathless. If either he or Adam still had their prior Tier of Toughness, both of them likely would have suffered a series of violent aneurysms and promptly died. Less trouble for Shiv, a much greater risk for Adam.

The Gate Lord was lucky that he'd managed to evolve his Toughness first.

As time remained still, Shiv looked on at Stormhalt, studied how many bolts of lightning were spreading out from him, and knew that no one was touching the mana core until the City Lord was dealt with. But handling Stormhalt was proving to be a harder matter than Rebis, especially since he didn't have a massive psychological wound to exploit.

But maybe he did. Stormhalt was fragile when it came to Roland. His insecurity was naked and evident. And with Shiv's new Skill Fusion, he might just be able to render Stormhalt brittle within that cocoon as well. But that required an opening, a period of time for him to lob insults at Stormhalt. And right now, in the thick of the chaos, nothing Shiv said would likely be heard anyway.

I need another angle, the Deathless thought to himself. There were things he could do to Stormhalt. The first among which was to move the man. He was near-indestructible when wreathed by the Endbreaker's lightning, but he wasn't immovable. The Tarrasque had swatted him around, and Shiv managed to fling him through the bridge earlier. Stormhalt himself wasn't very strong at all, merely a Master-Tier in Physicality, and he could be surprised.

Alright, so I can go Non-Sequitur and ambush him that way, Shiv thought. And then he winced, his scheming briefly interrupted by a massive flare of pain crawling through his skull. He couldn't sustain this for very long without someone else sharing part of the burden. For the umpteenth time, he found himself missing Uva.

Frankly, she could have made this prison breakout so much easier, but I also really wouldn't have wanted her to be here. I doubt the Outside's any better, but the Starhawk, Valor, Roland, they're all with her. She's also calculating enough to not do anything stupid, and I think she has better odds of staying safe in the Outside than in the Republic's basement. Wait. Outside...

Shiv's mind spun, and a new plot began to unfold. They didn't need to beat Stormhalt; they just needed to eject him from this room. Shiv might be able to make a Veilpiercer if Adam bestowed the skill on him, even though the Deathless technically didn't know how that process worked. What he needed was for Adam to fire a shot leading out from this chamber, and then Shiv could drag Stormhalt across the dimensional pathway. All they needed was a moment of surprise.

On the other side, Shiv could eject himself from the scene using Non-Sequitur. Adam could fire an arrow tipped with Necromancy to utterly obliterate whatever was on the other end. And that might just be able to delay Stormhalt long enough for them to finish breaking the core.

Shiv tried to get a handle on where Adam was, but with all the unfolding chaos around him, he couldn't find the Gate Lord at all. If only there was a way for him to—

And then he felt his perception detach from his body. For the first time, Shiv saw himself from a third-person perspective and flinched internally.

His body was practically flayed apart in several places. He could see the red-gold gleam of bone shining beneath the bubbling dark red of flowing blood. His Voidmantid armor was spewing mucus-like ichor from several deep wounds. Shiv barely felt any of those injuries. He thought he hadn't been hurt at all ten seconds ago. It seemed that he was wrong. It also seemed that he was so used to pain by this point; anything less than an utterly agonizing injury went beneath his notice in the heat of battle.

Yet, while he was staring down at himself, he saw something over his shoulder. There was a faint glow of Dimensionality spilling through between the gaps of Stormhalt's lightning. The City Lord was trying to engulf the entirety of the chamber, and when he did, there wouldn't be much room left to flee. Worse yet, Shiv didn't know if that Dimensionality was from one of Adam's arrows or if it was the chamber itself activating, preparing to teleport reinforcements in.

There was no time. They needed to get out, and they needed to get out now. But even with a general plan, Shiv still needed to solve the dilemma of how he was going to get close enough to Stormhalt to lay a hand on him. The Deathless wasn't familiar enough with Adam's skills to—

I'm an idiot, Shiv realized. He'd stolen a pair of boots and a new dagger from the wardens for a reason. His knife had a Pyromancy-Dimensionality Beamcast Enchantment that allowed him to teleport, and his Nightwalkers boots allowed him to sink down into the darkness, even to revert to the last patch of darkness he'd been in.

With those final few pieces clicking into shape, Shiv deactivated Commander's Foresight.

The room exploded into motion, and black lightning came to cleave Shiv in twain—Too late. He plunged down into his own shadow, felt his body immersed in a puddle of darkness, and he moved forward, swimming through patches of black as he got closer to Stormhalt.

It was hard to see, hard to tell where everything was in the dark, but Shiv had a good guess based on how far away the City Lord was, and just how fast he could move. A second later, the Deathless exploded out from the black. He slammed shoulder-first into Stormhalt. The Shapeless Tides coiling around his body made the lightning unleashed by the City Lord bend over with a grunt, unprepared for the sudden blow.

Shiv wasn't done.

As whips of lightning curved back in on them, trying to slice through Shiv's protections, he brandished his knife and slashed upward. Deepest Edge flowed through Stormhalt, and this time, he shed blood.

Shiv heard the parting of flesh from within the armored cocoon. Stormhalt gurgled. Shiv pointed his blade behind the man's head and channeled his beam portal. A stream of Pyromancy crashed against the coiling trunk of lightning. Shiv felt himself get ejected across just as the electricity gripping him in place collapsed. One of the strands slipped between his ribs and ground upon his bones. The sensation was disquieting. Shiv felt a series of tremors pass through his body, but then he was gone, materializing right behind Stormhalt again.

Shiv battered the City Lord with his mana hydras, stunning the man briefly just as his Adam-bestowed skills changed once more.

Skill Replaced: Commander's Foresight > Veilpiercer

And in that moment, he executed the rest of his plan. Shiv reached out for his Dimensionality and frowned as a Veilpiercer formed within his hands. His senses were going haywire; he was getting strange feelings from all around. It was like the world was pressing its weight on him, like space itself was a fabric he could pull on.

Once more, Dimensionality made itself known to Shiv, but he realized that the same problems holding his Biomancy back applied to this lore of magic as well. It didn't matter that he had a Master-Tier Dimensionality skill; he didn't know how to use it.

"Shit," he muttered. He activated Commander's Foresight again, and this time a deeper spike of pain immediately drilled through his head. Yeah, that's gonna get pretty distracting fast, Shiv thought to himself. He'd probably not waited enough for it to recover. He surveyed the scene again, but did a double-take as he realized there was a dimensional pathway opening to his left. A Veilpiercer was bursting out from the rift, and there was only one other person in the room who could do that.

Oh, there you are.

With Adam's general location known, the next part would be to meet up with him and have the Gate Lord deliver the shot. But until he arrived, Shiv needed to hold Stormhalt at bay for a little while longer.

Oh, I'm gonna enjoy doing that.

The Deathless launched himself forward. His tides roared with kinetic energy. He slammed into Stormhalt like a falling meteor greeting an unbreaking fortress. The room rumbled from the impact, but Shiv kept his blows controlled. The air didn't catch fire; it didn't ionize into plasma. Shiv channeled every bit of his strength directly into Stormhalt's body. And though the black lightning parried his blows and kept the man within from harm, Stormhalt was still launched back, and Shiv went with him.

Leviathan of the Shapeless Tides 501 > 502

The Deathless ignored the many veins of electricity tearing through his torso, mangling his organs, coiling around him. In about one second, he would be reverted across time. For now, he wanted Stormhalt out of position. And so he hooked a hand underneath Stormhalt's left armpit and spiked both of them down. They burst through another section of the bridge, and they fell like an arrow descending into a canyon of chaos. The panels lining the wall and floor beneath them were burning, the spell patterns flowing along their surface shredded and spewing magic into the air.

The searing heat staining the divine mana was upon Shiv once more, but through bloodied teeth, he gave a rasping laugh. "You know, it didn't take Roland more than a second to kill me. And here you are, with the power of a god, and still pathetic."

Shiv felt Stormhalt flinch. More than that, a portion of his chest glistened. His brittleness glowed so bright that it shone through the electric cocoon that shrouded him. He tore at Shiv from within, but before the Deathless could be wrenched apart, he launched himself back a full three seconds.

He materialized right next to the Gate Lord and the Penitent. Can Hu was still sparking. Most of its lower body was little more than a skeletal framework; wires swayed and spat sparks from the many holes left in its torso. Adam didn't look so good either. There was blood seeping out from his hydrokinetic body, but he was there.

They were alive, and they were going to bring this fight to an end.

Chapter 195 (II) Shatter

The Deathless projected his Psychomancy into Adam's mind just in time for a massive burst of Dimensionality to crash down on both of them. He felt the pulling pressure draw them upward. There was an enormous portal forming, a pocket that was trying to swallow them. Shiv denied the pocket. His Shapeless Tides gave him the power to say no. And just as Adam and Can Hu rose, he reached out and held them still. He poured his vectors into his companions and pinned them in place. And with that, Adam activated Commander's Foresight, and once more, their minds were joined.

"Rebis is down," Shiv said, "but Stormhalt can't be hurt so long as he's wrapped inside Halsur's lightning. But I got an idea,"

Adam sighed. "Shiv, no, I'm not going to blow you up inside this chamber. Come up with something else. There are other people in this room, and I don't think Can Hu will survive a soul explosion. It's pretty badly damaged right now."

"What? No, I don't want you to blow me up here. I need you to fire an arrow and create a route for me out of here. I'm going to tackle Stormhalt and drag him across. After that, I go Non-Sequitur, and you fire on my decoy body. Then you blow him up."

Adam thought about that for a second. "Color me impressed, that's actually somewhat of a plan. It might be able to work. But are you sure you can wrestle with him for that long?"

"Well, what's the worst that's going to happen? He's kills me halfway?" Shiv chuckled.

Adam, however, had his apprehension. "There are a lot of moving parts to this, Shiv. You need to be able to keep him grappled. We need to move him across. And in the meantime, we need to hope that no other Ascendants are teleported into this room. And judging by the sheer amount of pressure that's tugging at us..."

The Deathless grimaced internally. "You think that's another Avatar coming?"

"I'm almost certain that's another Avatar. We are out of time, Shiv. We either break this mana core in the next couple of seconds, or we're going to be overwhelmed."

Something hardened inside Shiv. "That's not going to happen. We're getting out of this place. I don't care what I have to do. Wait, Adam, earlier—"

"My Unique Skill evolved," Adam said hastily. "Into The Shattered Star Unites. Do you know what it does?"

Surprise overtook Shiv. "You don't?"

"No, I'm just channeling my power into you. I have no idea what it does beyond the same thing as the Righteous Dawn Prevails."

"I'm getting some of your skills. Adam, I managed to activate Commander's Foresight earlier. The skill keeps changing, though. Wait, if you can focus on giving me a specific skill, can you make it the one with your vector wings? My Toughness skill was still active earlier, but I had yours as well."

"You're getting my skills?" Adam asked, his voice climbing a pitch in disbelief. "That's why it felt like part of me was slipping out from my body." A feeling of awe emanated from Adam, and it was quickly replaced by a growl of near-playful frustration. "And why is it that my Unique Skill is devoted to making you even more of a monster?"

"Well I don't know, Adam. Sometimes hunters like to feed their hawks with all kinds of cool steroid-like elixirs. Maybe the System noticed that you're my ass-rubber."

"Never call me that. Also, absolutely no hunter has fed their hawk steroids," Adam deadpanned.

"You don't know that."

"I'm absolutely certain of that, Shiv. If a hawk were fed steroids, it would... It's stupid, Shiv. It's just stupid."

"Well, I maybe not for this hawk."

"You're not a... You know what? Fine, let's go with that analogy. I'll try to give you steroids, and you do things quickly. I'll open up another dimensional pathway, and we'll see if you can dump Stormhalt across somehow. We need to find Gone, Candles, and Kura. I lost track of them earlier."

"Gone might be down," Shiv said. "Last I saw her, Rebis was trying to squash her under his foot. Rebis is down too. I caved his skull. Not sure if he's dead, though."

"How did you manage to do that? He's wearing my armor!"

"New Skill Evolution."

Adam groaned. "Don't tell me. Actually, you know what? Tell me. I'm going to take out my frustration on Stormhalt."

"Yeah, so I combined Silver Tongue with my Striking Proficiency. Got me a Sticks and Stones Skill."

"How in the hells does that work?"

"I call people names, I hurt their feelings, and they get easier to break. Makes me hit them harder too."

"Of course it does. Alright. Desperate final struggle on three?"

"Yeah, desperate final struggle on three."

Adam breathed out. Shiv breathed out. And they spoke together. "Three."

Commander's Foresight ended, and the Azure Sphere exploded over Adam's head once more. This time, Shiv felt a new skill slam into him, but it wasn't the one he needed. However, that skill changed several times, jumping from Adam's Toughness skill, to his Veilpiercer, to his Awareness, and then finally, his Reflexes. Vector wings flared out from Shiv's back, and his Inertial Overdrive roared as it was exponentially boosted by the Gate Lord's power.

Inertial Overdrive 165 > 167

Shiv tore on ahead. The world around him slowed by a magnitude, and every string of lightning cleaving through the air went from near-imperceptible to merely being worryingly quick. Shiv dove and tumbled through two slashing bolts, channeled a beam of fire from his blade, and watched it splash off Stormhalt's shoulder. As soon as he teleported, he reverted himself back a second across time. Stormhalt sent an eruption of electricity out from his right shoulder. He managed to strike nothing.

Strider of the Unbending Path 158 > 160

Dodge 31 > 32

Shiv picked Stormhalt up again, wrenching the City Lord free from the air, and just then a Veilpiercer exploded up from between Shiv's legs. It missed his sensitive section by the width of a hair and slammed into Stormhalt's right leg. The dimensional arrow ricocheted off, but beneath Shiv was a pathway.

The Deathless grinned.

Stormhalt tried to react, but a flood of Overflow Tides surged into Shiv's right foot, and he pitched the City Lord downward before stomping down with a spike of force. He felt something inside Stormhalt break upon impact. It was the brittle spot he'd left there earlier. Stormhalt gagged as Shiv tossed him like he was little more than a ball.

He zipped down in a blink, though the black lightning spreading free from him still tried to grasp Shiv. Shiv went Non-Sequitur, avoiding the worst of the blows, but his decoy body was utterly shredded. He

started losing vitality at an alarming rate, but he wasn't far from the mana core. Once more, he flung himself before the massive breach, and he poured his Vitae into it.

The moment he did, a lance of pain flashed across his neck. Blood flowed freely, and he felt the length of a cold blade lodged tight in his trachea. His Pillar of Orichalcum had stopped him from getting fully beheaded, but embedded halfway in his throat was a length of metal that hissed and pumped loads of taint through Shiv's veins. Immediately, a fever started overtaking him. His Plaguefueled steel went into overdrive, and a deformed hand clasped him by the skull.

He was lifted off the floor by the enormous and nightmarish form of Daughter. She emerged from seemingly nowhere and hissed a foul breath in his face. "You hurt me earlier. Hurt me!"

Shiv gagged on his blood. Her body was wreathed in black tar, and he could still see the wound he'd left on her misshapen skull. Within the rippling currents of foul fluid gushing along her torso, Shiv caught sight of the current woman that Daughter was using as a vessel. This one didn't appear psychotic. This one was distinctly terrified. Shiv could see her face, pale and white, blue eyes wide, with tears running down her face.

Shiv's stomach turned. He reached up and gripped Daughter's arm, the mana core all but forgotten. With every heartbeat, he generated new tides, but though he pushed hard against Daughter's power, she was an Ascendant. It was all he could do to stop her from driving the blade all the way through and finishing him off.

A part of Shiv snarled for him to swing his blade up, to cut Daughter down, even if it meant sacrificing his own life. But there was a girl inside the Ascendant, and this one was all too human. Shiv didn't know if he had the will to.

A bloody blade erupted from Daughter's heart. The nightmarish Ascendant screeched, and the girl it used as a vessel gasped. A golden blade pushed the girl free from the spilling mess that was Daughter, and Shiv felt his heart skip a beat as he looked into her eyes. Hovering behind the girl was one of Kura's golden shadows. It seemed more cracked than usual, but at least the elven Chronomancer was still in the fight.

"Go! Collapse the core! I'll cover you!" Kura declared through her shadow. Just then, another blur of motion came from Shiv's right, but a bolt of golden lightning slammed into the oncoming attack.

Gone slashed at Anthony, but the old man was surprisingly fast. He shifted back into the shadows, and Shiv found a curtain of blackness falling upon them.

No more time. He launched his Vitae free once more, and a rush of red and white mana poured into the wound within the nexus that was the mana core. He groped blindly, trying to find as many skills as he could to corrupt. Ignoring the mortal wound lining his neck, Shiv sank his power deep within the core.

And instead of tearing, he focused. He remembered what Udraal showed him earlier. He just needed—

Something slammed into his right leg, and it ceased to be. Then came a massive blast that shattered his pillar entirely and rendered everything beneath his hip little more than a spray of gore. Shiv found himself tumbling forward. It didn't even hurt. He was simply broken, numb. He wasn't sure what had hit him, only that it had utterly destroyed his lower body.

Even so, Shiv continued pulling at the mana core. A resounding crash of steel on steel echoed behind him, and even more golden shadows formed over his body. Just then, a dead orc splashed down ahead of Shiv. Half of its face remained; the other half was a bloody mesh, caved in by repeated blows. The orc's chest rose and fell a final time as its fingers slackened. Through it all, it never stopped smiling.

The skinned monster never stopped smiling. Something about that inspired Shiv, made him keep going. He remembered Udraal's lesson. He had to switch lores between different skills. He needed to add pieces from himself as well. But right now, he wasn't just himself. There was Adam as well. Shiv froze time. It didn't buy him much more room for his sabotage, but it did delay the Ascendants.

Their Avatars weren't all immune to Shiv's Strider of the Unbending Path, and that forced the Ascendants themselves to use other means to get to him, other means that were being stymied by his many allies.

Another strike came from above. A flash of Animancy hissed down in an impending blow. Shiv felt the shiver in the air. He'd been in enough battles to guess what was about to happen. He prepared for death. It never came. Gone crashed down ahead of him, her clawed fingers tearing into Anthony's arm. The old man gritted his teeth, wrenched his arm free, and got atop the goblin. He brought his knife down. Gone grabbed his wrists. Gone was fast. Gone was faster than even time itself. But Gone wasn't very strong.

She was losing the fight, and fast. Shiv made eye contact with her. Once more, the ugly choice from earlier returned. The core or the life of one of his companions. There wasn't time to think. There wasn't time to deliberate. And ultimately, there wasn't a real choice at all. If he tried to help Gone, they were all going to die here.

Just as the old man's knife began sinking into Gone's chest and a panicked gasp escaped her, a burning figure slammed down on him out of nowhere, and Anthony bit back a snarl as Candles gave him a branding hug, his hands wrapped around the Avatar's neck. Both of Candles's legs were missing. Flames were spewing free in molten sprays from the many wounds lining the pyromaniac's lower body, and what seemed like burning intestines were swinging out from it. Despite all this, Candles sounded like he was in high spirits as he cackled. "Hey, gramps, you look like you could use a light."

Shiv turned his attention away just as Candles wrenched the Avatar away from Gone amidst a blast of fire and enveloped them both in a sphere of scathing radiance. Shiv's Vitae spread, jumping from one skill within the core to another, and as time went on, he began to inject more of himself inside. At some point, he died. He barely noticed. He kept working. Even as something else hit him, ripping away half his vitality, he kept working.

Here was freedom. Right on the precipice! He was so close, so—

"DEATHLESS!" Stormhalt cried aloud. Everything seemed to stop. Everything went black, and through the veil of unpierceable darkness, the City Lord plunged down toward Shiv. Within his hand was an ethereal spear of stygian lightning bestowed upon by Halsur, poised to strike Shiv down once and for all.

Shiv was going to die. He didn't have enough time. He didn't. He would —

Two blurring motions washed over him. The first seemed like a scrawl, a stroke of charcoal dragged across paper. Stormhalt's divine spear froze entirely, locked on the border marked by the etching. The second was the swing of a brush, a brush that absolutely disintegrated the spear. A burst of countless colors spilled out through the air, and the lightning recoiled for the first time. Shiv heard Halsur scream.

A figure Shiv loomed over Shiv.

She looked just as she did back within Gate Theborn; the flowing black robe, the beautiful features, the tome chained to her back. "Well? Why all this hesitation? See it done, Deathless!" the Educator said, not hiding the scorn in her voice at all.

"I didn't come here and expose myself on Udrael's behalf just to have you make it all for naught."

Shiv's mind reeled, but he pushed past it. He connected another skill, injected another bit of himself, and soon the mana core began to shudder, began to groan. Adam appeared beside him, and he had a Veilpiercer drawn, aimed at the Educator. “You—”

“Me,” The Educator scoffed. She casually intercepted a shot launched by Adam just as Shiv inserted another portion of his own legend into the core.

Several things shattered at once.

The first was the dimensional arrow.

The second was the border the Educator had sketched as Halsur's lightning tore it wide open.

And the third was the mana core itself.

The fractured shape of the core thundered, groaned, and then burst apart as a flood of overwhelming incandescence rushed out into the chamber. It was accompanied by Chronomancy, Dynamancy, Pyromancy, and more... so much more.

Shiv turned. Shiv tried to reach out for Adam—but everything around him faded in a blast of light. But as an agonizing heat clawed its way to Shiv's very core, something else latched onto him. It was the weight of a deed well done. It was the bestowal of one of the System's gifts.

Category 20 Gate Closed

Equipment Gained: [Generating Legendary Weapon]