

Deathless 196

Chapter 196 (I) Morsel [I]

Attention, Capital citizens. An unexpected disaster has occurred at the Yellowstone Rubix Well. Please seek immediate shelter and prepare arms. Repeat, please return to your house or nearby shelter and prepare arms.

Wait for the alarms to subside before emerging. This is not a drill. Find shelter. Seek the protection of a member of the Prismatic Guard if shelter is unavailable, and you are incapable of combat. Prepare for active combat if you are martially capable.

Defend your family. Defend your homeland. The light endures. The Ascendants will deliver us to salvation.

May our faith never waver.

-Emergency Notification Dispatched by Auroral Council

As all was bathed in light, Shiv felt himself get carried across by waves of pressure. To where he was cast, he didn't know. He tried to fight it using his Shapeless Tides, but though his skill was Legendary, the power arrayed against him was overwhelming. He might have been a leviathan, but a leviathan was still smaller than the sea itself. Shiv struggled on, however, because he was Shiv, and struggling was what he did. He didn't know how to be any other way.

Inertial Overdrive 167 > 170

Vitaemancy 114 > 116

Pillar of Orichalcum 249 > 255

Sticks and Stones 52 > 56

Plaguefueled 76 > 79

A few seconds drew on, and suddenly the pressure began to fade. A thud followed, and a sudden impact greeted Shiv's body. His splaying Vitae spread out, and he found himself lying upon a cold, hard surface. Yet the ground beneath him felt uneven, cracked, fractured, disjointed. The air was hot, and growing hotter with every second. For a moment, he wondered if the mana core hadn't been completely destroyed, but when his soul remained unseared, he knew he was somewhere else entirely.

Just then, the last of the brightness vanished, and he took in his surroundings. True to his tactile senses, the ground was fractured. Fissures ran across a large and mangled room. It was partially collapsed along the left side, seeming as if a landslide of orichalcum had plowed its way into the inside of another orichalcum chamber.

Shiv remembered how Dimensionality and spatial magic shouldn't be able to hurt someone directly. But this looked pretty harmful, and there was no telling what that divine mana did to the Rubix Well either.

The slope melded into the ceiling, and the left side of the room was partially subsumed by another structure—one that resembled some kind of large statue or turret of some kind. It was too engulfed by

red-gold metal for Shiv to be sure. To his right was a set of halls designed by a schizophrenic. Shiv could only describe it that way because he saw how the hallways were interconnected. There were walkways leading straight, and then they bent diagonally. Then there were other walkways pointing down from the ceiling at an angle, lodged into the former pathways Shiv saw. It looked like someone ripped and drove a mess of different hallways together, creating a sort of tangled mess.

And within one such passage came flickers of light. Usually, it remained dark, but now and again, something would flash. As Shiv focused his Farsight, he realized it was the yellow eyes of an orc. And not just any orc.

Mortar!

The big automata-clad brute was fused into the wall, and the Deathless could hear a pitched whine escape him. "Is someone bloody out there? I'm stuck! I'm stuck and I can't get out! If you're there, can you come out and kill me? Or set me free? Either's fine."

The orc's voice was so choked and weak that a breeze would have masked it. Shiv crawled closer, and it was then that he remembered he had been slain at the end of that last engagement. There were notifications before him that he hadn't regarded, and one in particular caught his attention over all his new Skill levels.

Equipment Obtained: [The Last Morsel]

Tier: Legendary

Condition: Perfect

Composition: Narrativium; Orichalcum

Enchantments >Mince the Unminceable; Cook the Uncookable; Bash the Unbashable; Indestructible;
Binding

The Last Morsel, Shiv muttered to himself. But as he looked down, clutched within a tangle of Vitae was a new weapon, a new weapon that had consumed his stolen dagger. He was utterly surprised by its design, mainly because it looked completely ridiculous. The Last Morsel was a merger between a knife and a frying pan. At its center was a round rim, yet a ring of bladed edges jutted free from the pan itself, extending a few centimeters to serve as a slashing instrument.

A contrast between the blade and the pan itself followed. The body of the pan curved inward, and it was the kind of black that drank light itself from the air. That was no exaggeration. It was a darkness that radiated, a darkness that consumed, a darkness that desired to be fed. And where the room grew hotter by the second, coldness radiated from the pan, as if it led to a bitter expanse out in the void.

The blades framing the pan were orichalcum-edged, with... narrativium lining their cores. Veins of darkness crept into the red-gold, and at the very head of the pan was a jutting spear tip. The entire thing was the size of Shiv's head, and though it seemed unwieldy and looked garish, it was practically a feather in his grasp.

As he held onto it, everything around him came aglow with pristine light. The Chef Unwavering triggered and never stopped triggering. As Shiv clutched the pan tighter, the skill only grew, and it seemed to regard everything as a cooking ingredient. The walls, the air, the darkness, the light, himself. Everything.

Yet, whatever he focused on for long came alight with a black grid. The grid called out to Shiv, and the pan rattled—its bladed edges flared bright.

What the hells? A rush of anxiety pulsed through him thereafter as he realized Adam and all the others were missing. Shit, I need to get moving. Get Mortar out first.

The core's detonation must have caused some kind of dimensional collapse. Mix that in with the divine mana, and Shiv had a guess as to why the cube he was in was so messed up.

He had no idea how to find Adam or anyone else, but if Mortar was here, maybe they hadn't been displaced too far either. And ultimately, if he couldn't find them, perhaps he could make enough noise that they could find him. That carried a risk, however. The Ascendants would also come looking, but right now, he wasn't going to leave Adam in this place.

The Deathless moved, and as he did, he absorbed vitality from the world itself. The fabric of reality tore, and through it came tumbling distortions and anomalies that spewed all manner of unstable mana into the already destroyed chamber. Without anywhere else to go, and unwilling to rip open the walls before he explored, his most obvious exit was to continue down the hall and make his way toward the trapped orc.

By the time he reached him, he had resurrected, and there was a magical rupture in the room behind him. Lashing bolts of flame-infused lightning lit the Orichalcum behind him on fire. In seconds, the walls and floors were burning as if they were wood, rather than a nigh-impenetrable alloy.

The temperature climbed even faster after that, but it was a heat Shiv could bear. It was a natural heat, not a magical one. As he felt the weight of his new weapon in his hand, the orc wheezed at him once more. "Insul? That you?" Mortar squinted. "Get me out of this bloody place. Or... Just stab me with that..." The orc blinked. "Is that a pan?"

Shiv looked down at the trapped orc. "Is your body melted into the wall, or are you just trapped there?" Shiv asked.

"Don't know," the orc said. "Just get me out! Get me out! Please?"

Shiv began harnessing overflow tides. Orichalcum was a hard metal to breach, so this might take a bit of struggle. But there was a risk that when he tore the walls open, he might utterly crush the orc as well. As much as Shiv wanted to boast about his control, guiding his many overflow tides and applying enough force was still something of a delicate operation, and he wouldn't describe himself as delicate at all.

Just then, however, the walls before him flickered again, glowing ever brighter with The Chef Unwavering guiding his instincts. Something told him that he needed to cut the walls. Something told him that they would part before him if only he followed the black grid. Black grids, Shiv thought to himself. Why does the grid's color match the absolute darkness radiating from my pan?

Shiv looked down at his new Legendary weapon and also at the corresponding grid forming in front of him. It seemed to want him to cut a tight square around the automaton. After a moment's hesitation, he followed along with it. As he cut, he felt the Mince the Unminceable enchantment activate.

For the first time, he tested his new weapon on orichalcum, and it parted before his touch butter. There was no exaggeration; it was genuinely like butter. The red-gold metal offered no resistance as it simply slipped apart. The darkness at the center of his pan grew ever more intense, and the edges of the blades flared bright, as if they had been left over a naked flame for hours.

As Shiv finished cutting the square out of the wall, his Deepest Edge caused his strokes to go all the way through, and a second later, pooling sludge erupted free from the gaps. It struck Shiv's body in a spray of

brilliant color, and as it hissed against his badly wounded Voidmantid armor, he realized it was magma gnawing at him.

"Magma," Shiv muttered, and his mind caught up to why a second later. "Ah, hells, the volcano's flooding in."

"Hurts," the orc moaned. "Feels like my arsehole's being cooked from the inside out."

"It probably is. Alright. Let's see what I can do." Shiv pulled the carved chunk of orichalcum out of the wall. As soon as it slipped free, he saw a rush of molten rock come barreling toward him. Shiv put his overflow tides to good use. He seized the walls and began to twist with his vectors. The orichalcum groaned under the pressure, and Shiv hissed with strain as a wave of magma slammed into his chest. He triggered his Pillar of Orichalcum to resist the climbing heat, and the struggle continued for about five seconds.

With a final exertion of force, Shiv managed to twist the remaining orichalcum into a nub that stymied the flow from the outside.

The ground was bubbling with orange-hot liquid, and from the room Shiv entered crawled a creeping flame unleashed by the rupture. It wouldn't be long until everything was consumed by fire. But before then, Shiv had someone to free. As he carved more of the Orichalcum block holding the orc in place, the center of the pan groaned as it began to inhale, genuinely inhale. It was like there was a monster on the other end trying to suck something across. Shiv's heart did a backflip when the loud whistle of air filled the hall, and a rush of wind began plunging inward to the epicenter of his new weapon.

He stopped what he was doing and studied it for a moment, and after a beat of apprehension, he reached down and picked up a slice of orichalcum he had carved free.

"You want this?" Shiv asked. The pan wasn't exactly intelligent, not like Uva's shield was. However, it intermittently breathed in and calmed, and that was as much of a signal as anything, Shiv guessed. He awkwardly fed a piece of Orichalcum into its depths, and to his surprise, the entire thing vanished into the black. Though the krichalcum was a large sheet, it began to curve and bend, as if falling somewhere distant, down a long well, before vanishing. Just then, the pan began to growl.

Shiv's second enchantment activated, and the room around him pulsed with new color. Gone were the black etchings marring the walls. Instead, now the darkness was focused on the magma at his feet, or rather, the fires growing closer behind him.

The Deathless blinked. You want me to put fire inside here? The edges of the pan came alight. Alright, you want me to cut fire? They grew even brighter.

Shiv followed his instincts, and absurd though it seemed, he sliced a piece of magma apart. It broke free, turning into a gelatinous, thick, cube-like substance. The change was so sudden and jarring that the Deathless took a step back.

"What are you doing, Insul? What's happening!" the orc groaned. "I'm facing the wrong way—I can't bloody see you. Also, there's a fire coming for us, so maybe hurry."

Shiv ignored Mortar for now, observing what he had just done with his knife. As he picked up the gelatinous cube of magma, it was still hot but was easy to hold. Furthermore, it was perfectly sliced. "Mince the Unminceable indeed," Shiv said. He picked it up and dropped it into the center of his pan, and once more it rumbled with delight.

Suddenly, a black lid slammed hard down upon the rim of the frying pan out of nowhere. Shiv nearly jumped out of his skin when it happened. A notification appeared before his eyes, and a countdown followed.

Cooking in Progress: 5 Seconds

Cooking? What the hells are you cooking? He got his answer about four seconds later, when the lid vanished into a puff of black smoke, and a new meal manifested before him. The Deathless was utterly speechless, and for the first time, he was genuinely touched. The system had gifted him something for closing the mana core, and this something was designed to charm his heart in every single way.

System, you absolute...

"Shiv!" Mortar cried. "Shiv, I'm gonna shit myself if you don't get me out of here soon!"

Shiv, meanwhile, beheld the Last Morsel's work for the first time. It wasn't a mess; it was a wonder. The orichalcum had been turned into glistening strips of red gold, and a pleasant aroma, hot, humid, but ultimately delectable, burrowed its way into Shiv's very nose. His appetite sang while his mind twisted and tumbled. It shouldn't be edible; this was made from a scoop of magma and strips of metal. Despite this, the texture looked so inviting.

"Ah, what the hells." Shiv reached down into the pan and pulled out his new meal. As he did, the pan suddenly got lighter, returning to being as if a feather again. Shiv hesitated for a beat before biting down. His teeth sank clean through the new meal. It didn't feel like a piece of meat, nor did it feel like any kind of vegetable Shiv had chewed before. The closest thing in texture was a piece of fried dough. It gummed around the corners of Shiv's mouth as his teeth pressed down. Then, it melted upon his tongue, unleashing tumbling streams of heavy flavor down the back of his throat.

The only way he could describe this meal was that it was juicy, and as he imbibed more of it, his body began to change. At once, his skin turned red-gold as his physiology grew even more like orichalcum. A moment later, however, his insides came aglow with a semblance to magma as well.

Cook the Uncookable Activated

Orichalcum Resistance Obtained

Heat Absorption Obtained

Rather than simply being able to ignore it, the rising temperature flowed into him for a moment, and he drew power from it. He was like a conduit for the flames, for the magma, and all the roaring blazes outside were wrenched over into him as if he were magnetic. Yet, just as quickly as the effect triggered, it faded.

As Shiv felt the magical transmutation die down, he heard his heart thundering in his ears, felt his breath coming faster and faster. "Broken Felling Moon, that's a hell of a kick!"

Chapter 196 (II) Morsel [I]

Shiv shook off the rush of adrenaline and returned to freeing Mortar. With every stroke of his blade, he chipped more of the orc's body free. As he did, he winced as he saw just how badly wounded his orc was.

Mortar had high Toughness, but high Toughness didn't do much when most of your inner organs were compressed in a space too small for you. Shiv's mana-hydra swelled around the badly mangled orc, and

it took a while for him to crystallize all the injuries. At present, his ribs were residing where his kidney should be, and his heart was among the few biological processes within his body that still functioned. That was the entire reason why Mortar was still alive. His lungs had popped, his stomach was leaking acid over into his intestines. It was a general nightmare, but Shiv managed to heal the orc.

As he did, though, Mortar's body came alight with that glistening glow as well. He, too, was considered an ingredient, and just then a blackened grid slid over him as Shiv's focus lingered on the orc for too long.

"Why are you looking at me like that, Insul?" Mortar gasped. "You seem hungry. And what's that you're holding?" Mortar squinted. His piss-yellow eyes turned to glinting beads, and then they suddenly widened as the orc choked. "Are you seriously holding some kind of bladed frying pan? You used that to cut me out of the wall?"

"Yeah, I'm having a hard time accepting it myself," Shiv said. "Listen, did you see the others?"

"What do you mean, did I see the others? You popped the core. I was busy getting my guts kicked out by some bastard I couldn't even react to. Half the other orcs died immediately without getting to enjoy the fight. And now I'm here. I woke up halfway embedded in the walls."

"Alright, I guess that was too much to hope for," Shiv said. He reached down and pulled Mortar to his feet, who wobbled a bit, seeming unused to standing on legs of flesh and blood. Shiv had restored him to his normal bodily composition, not including the robotic legs. The orc grunted and, thanks to Shiv's healing, found himself still among the living. Mortar sniffled, and he regarded Shiv's armor. "Is that thing still alive?"

"What, my Voidmantid?" Shiv examined the conditions of his armor and scowled. It was badly wounded, but still functional.

"I think you should be able to track the others using their pheromones, Insul."

"You sure they're going to be nearby?" Shiv asked.

"Probably. It makes sense, right? We've been displaced into the same area. I would say it'd just be luck, but considering how messy that blast was, and those waves of pressure, I think most of us got carried an equivalent distance. Which probably includes the Avatars."

And that made Shiv's insides tighten. He clenched his new weapon tighter. And snorted. The idea of smashing a frying pan over Daughter's head was ridiculous—but he loved it.

Shiv nodded and focused on Adam's scent. He hadn't used his armor's Awareness enchantments nearly enough, but right now was as good of a time as any. The Gate Lord had a faint taste of spring about him, and right now, in this place, spring was easy to trace. Shiv closed his eyes and gave the entirety of his concentration over to his awareness. "Come on," he muttered to himself. "Come on, be somewhere nearby."

Once more, the System answered his prayers.

A crisp, minty flavor glided up into his nose, and at the same time, he felt a tremoring vibration rush through the ground. It repeated too often to be a one-off. It felt like someone was running somewhere or pounding against the floor, and Shiv followed the taste. It was a good thing his armor allowed him to sense pheromones; otherwise, he would have found himself lost in the strange tangle of winding hallways.

He used the smell as a compass, and after turning left, right, and dropping through a vertically placed hallway, he found himself squeezing out from a narrow crevice that used to be the top side of a door that was now sunken into the ground.

Once he was through to the other side, he looked around to take in a new chamber. This one was far smaller than the one he'd regained coherence in. It was an office, from the looks of things. However, a fourth of it had been compressed by a mess of staircases. They jutted from the walls like ribs sticking out of skin, and hanging from them were a few other orcs. Shiv winced.

These orcs weren't so lucky. Some of the steps had been driven through their skulls. For a while, Shiv wondered if Dimensionality did that to them, but then he noticed how the blood spray was splattered only on one side of the wall. Someone had impaled them upon the stairs from the left side

There were still enemies about. Ascendants. Avatars. "Mortar," Shiv muttered under his breath. "Keep your eyes wide."

He looked around, trying to find a doorway, and that minty taste bade him to look up. Shiv blinked and found another room conjoined to this one. And as he spent a moment longer observing it, he realized he was staring up into a massive prison cube, intersected with another. It seemed to be a cross shape, and inside Shiv saw hundreds of small shadows falling from on high.

The first of them landed with a brutal thud, and Shiv realized what was causing the vibrations earlier. Some of the wardens had been displaced poorly, and now they were bouncing off the Orichalcum walls, slamming down from heights that weren't there before. With how tough most wardens were, Shiv suspected they'd survive, but from all the groaning he could hear, a few of them were definitely injured.

"Uh, Insul. Got a bit of a problem." Mortar's voice came from under the crevice. Shiv paused, and then he grunted in understanding. He might have been able to squeeze underneath the frame, but Mortar was the size of a small shed, even without his mechanical parts. Shiv was prepared to use his Legendary strength, but then paused. Once more, he focused on the doorframe, and a black grid appeared. "Alright, Morsel, let's see you do your thing." He slashed. The wall came apart in a burst of diced bits. It rained down, and Shiv caught it in the center of his pan. But that wasn't enough to start the cooking. It needed a fire. It always needed a fire. He summoned a burst of Pyromancy atop his palm, and he grinned as it glistened like an ingredient and then was lined with a cutting grid right after.

Shiv left the orichalcum inside the base of the pan for now. Mortar staggered on through, and he regarded Shiv's new weapon with less humor and a great deal more apprehension. "That thing looks like a child threw it together, but by the Challenger, does it cut deep."

"It cooks as well," Shiv said. "Managed to make something edible out of the orichalcum and a piece of magma I diced up earlier." The Orc just stared. "I'm not joking, that actually happened. Turned my flesh into orichalcum and made me able to drain all the fire from the air. I think it just... feeds me the properties of whatever I eat for a while."

The orc hummed. "You know what? I think I wanna try a bite later."

"Yeah, later." Shiv pointed up. "I think I got a guess where some of our friends could be, but they might not be alone."

"Oh, we got another fight on our hands, do we?" Mortar chuckled. "Well, after you, Insul."

Shiv seized the orc with his left hand and launched both of them up through the entrance leading into the prison cubes.

As they climbed, Shiv saw a small mess of wardens strewn across the ground. Many of them were clutching their limbs; a few were tending to others. Theirs was a mixed lot. Some of them were armored in adamantine plate, while others were logistical Pathbearers, dressed only in uniforms, and some weren't even properly dressed at all, only clad in undergarments. Some of them pointed at him as he went up, and Shiv paused briefly in the air.

He looked at the wardens around him, and he saw several lift their weapons.

"I can just blast them right now," Mortar said. "Just say so. Please say so."

Shiv didn't see a need. "Listen!" the Deathless called out. "I broke the mana core to this prison. Right now, magma's flowing in. You can stay here and wait for the Ascendants to recover you. I'm leaving. If you take a shot at me or throw a spell at me, I'll come down, rip your arms off, and then I'll feed them to you. You don't do that, I'll be on my way, and that'll be that."

Crushing silence followed, and Shiv watched the wardens closely. A few of them twitched, uncertain what to do, while others looked to specific members among their party. A well-built elven woman bearing a pointed spear glared up at Shiv. "You've made a terrible mistake, prisoner. You—"

And then Shiv's World Quest triggered. Whatever she had to say next died in her throat as a choked gasp, and a series of fear chains flowed out from them, fueling Shiv with new power.

"Yeah," Shiv deadpanned. "Look, I'm gonna ignore the whole 'you can't escape, the Ascendants will hunt you down' speech. I don't give a shit what they're going to do. I'm leaving. Now, you stay here, you mend your wounded, and you keep your heads down. It's your best shot at living, so please don't make me take your lives from you. I'm tired. I just wanna get out. Also, I don't want your blood on my new pan." Shiv spun his weapon and glared.

When the elven woman reluctantly pressed her lips together and the other wardens did nothing, Shiv looked down at the orc and nodded. "Alright, up some more."

Mortar let out a deep sigh. "But I wanted to obliterate a few of them."

"And I appreciate your sacrifice, Mortar."

As Shiv said that, he felt Sticks and Stones Skill trigger as the orc's body briefly turned transparent like glass. Huh. Wonder why that happened.

He flew another four hundred meters higher into the air and made for the edge where another valley intersected this one. The taste of Adam grew ever more intense, and just as he rounded the corner, he almost slammed headfirst into the Gate Lord.

Adam had to dodge out of the way with his vector wings, and a rasping breath escaped from him before a look of relief washed over his face. "Shiv, good hells. What did you do back there?"

"Collapsed the core," Shiv said as he came to a stop. "Just didn't expect it to shit us out across different places. You got any idea where we are?"

"At the bottom of the supervolcano," Adam replied. His eyes were flashing bright, and Shiv realized he was using a Seer of Horizons to figure out their general location. "The cubes are currently tumbling through the magma, and that's not all. A set of wards has been placed around this area. I can feel them

pressing against me. If we try to teleport, we'll be pinpointed immediately. We'll be dragged into specialized anchors. The Ascendants are down here somewhere as well. I managed to avoid Daughter earlier, but not sure where the others ended up."

Shiv looked behind him and saw Can Hu being carried by Kura and Whisper. The Penitent was missing most of its lower body again, and its right arm was gone as well.

"Can Hu, you alright?" Shiv called out.

"Minor damage sustained compared to some of my past missions," Can Hu said. "I will recover. And my Toughness will return to where it once was when I reconstruct myself."

There were about a dozen other orcs with the group, and Tequila had Candles strapped to his back as well. The Pyromancer was unconscious, and Shiv winced as he caught sight of Candles's skin for the first time. His flesh was normally transparent amidst his flaming halo, only becoming translucent enough to make out some outlines in rare instances. Now, with his flame out, he appeared downright ghastly. The pyromaniac was charred. His body looked like raw gristle. Shiv could see blackened tissue and exposed muscle shining free around lengths of pale bone. The Deathless dipped his mana hydra into the disfigured Pathbearer and realized he was still alive. Worse yet, he realized that the state of his body wasn't actually an injury, but probably a natural result of his Skill Evolution, as he couldn't fix it with his Biomancy.

What the hells? Shiv thought.

Then there was the final member of Adam's group.

A few steps behind them was the Educator. Her black robes and the red sash tightening them around her waist fluttered, and that tome rattled behind her, bound to her by a series of chains like a backpack. Shiv was surprised to see it, since she'd left the one he'd set on fire for Valor to take, and it was still in their possession.

She looked at Shiv with a sneer drawn across her features and a mocking glint in her dark eyes. As before, her facial features appeared young and near-immaculate despite her shoulder-length hair graying, making her look like she could be anywhere between her twenties and her forties by Pathless standards.

Just behind her, the prison valley came to an abrupt end as a massive wall of orichalcum cut it off. It seemed like the exterior of another cage had been placed along the path, completely blocking the path.

Adam turned, and he shot her a weary look as he let out a sigh. "She's with Udraal," the Gate Lord said, suspicion lingering clearly in his voice. "Decided to slip in and help us out when the Ascendants jumped. Apparently, she's how Udraal managed to get into the prison in the first place. She knows a back door. A way out."

"Great," Shiv grunted. "But we're not using that. We go with her, and we might all end up stuck between the pages of some book."

Shiv landed on the ground and slowly walked toward the Educator. Adam flanked him, and soon, the orcs parted to give them space in case a new battle was to unfold. And to Shiv's delight, as he focused on her, she glittered with Chef Unwavering, and she was parted into blackened grids as well.

She was of average height for an ordinary woman, so she had to crane her neck when he came to a stop a few steps in front of her. "Deathless," she greeted him, unimpressed. "It's been some time. I see

you..." Her voice trailed off as she noticed what he had in his hand. "What is that monstrosity you're holding?"

And just then, Adam noticed it too. "Shiv, where did you find a... Is that a frying pan?"

Shiv held his new weapon high with pride. "Yeah, and it's a bit more than that too. Actually, I think it's our way to slip out directly." Shiv turned his gaze on a nearby shadow, and to his rising glee, it was separated into a grid as well. He could cut shadows! "How do you feel about taking a dip in lava while perfectly hidden from the Ascendants, Adam?"

"Not particularly enthused. Especially because it's not magical lava here. I suspect it won't be good for my skin."

"Well, what if I tell you I got a way to make you immune to the heat? And to wrap you in blackness so no one knows where you are?"

The Gate Lord paused. "How?"

Shiv smirked and leaned down to slice into his own shadow. "With a bite. Let's see if this cut actually gives me anything. And what I can cook up with a slice of darkness."

Adam just stared as the Deathless started chuckling. "Shiv... are you alright? Did you—did you have a stroke?"

Chapter 197 (I) Morsel [II]

The System has a plan, and it is one of statistically maximized chaos. Never is this plan more evident than when someone gets an equipment reward from a successful Quest. To put things plainly, the System remembers everything that you do, but more than your successes, it remembers your failures, it remembers your limitations, and it plays with them.

I recall the first time I gained a piece of Heroic-Tier equipment. It was relatively early on in my life, not long after I murdered my mother. I had collapsed a mana core in a gate that had enslaved me. While the gate came apart, the magic that powered it filled my hand, and when I emerged on the other side, I found myself bestowed an invisible blade that shredded mana and caused bodies to combust violently with every cut.

It bestowed this upon me because my offensive capabilities were limited, and also because the threat I faced after escaping from the gate prison was beyond the reach of my skills.

But that is the thing about equipment. It makes you more of who you were, and it makes you more than who you were. We craft tools to build upon our shortcomings, and the System does the same for us. And after you're past that precipice, it will throw you at something else until you fail again. And if you somehow find a way to survive, it will remember that, and it will give you another reward to extend the time you spend at war. For if you cannot war, your death looms.

Know this: every time your hand is filled with the weight of a weapon, it is a promise from the System that it must be used.

There are no free gifts granted. Feel the weight. Swing the blade. Steal more time.

-Valor Thann

With pan in hand, anything Shiv fixated on for more than a few seconds turned solid. His own shadow became a paper-thin material. It was like he was using a blade to carve pieces free from seaweed. The edges of the shadow parted and were lit by glinting colors of red and gold, the same colors that edged the rim of Shiv's Last Morsel. As he plucked the pieces of shadow up, he showed them to Adam, and the thin slices shivered between his fingers.

The Gate Lord blinked. "Did you just slice a bit of your own shadow off?"

Shiv looked down and saw that the rest of his shadow was still there. Whatever he cut, it didn't seem to take from anything permanently, or at least not noticeably.

"Yup," Shiv said. The grin on his face only grew wider. He didn't fully grasp the implications of his new weapon, but so far it was proving to be something spectacular.

"How is it doing that?" Adam asked, his bafflement growing with every passing second. The orcs had grown close again, encircling Shiv as they realized a fight wasn't about to happen, but something else was transpiring.

The Deathless stuck the slices of shadow into the center of his pan, and once more, the blackness radiated with hunger. The air whistled, it drew in breaths, and Shiv knew what it was looking for this time. He summoned flames in his hand and slowly dismembered the very tip of the dancing mote. It fell free like a scoop of wasabi. The fiery substance was still crackling, but it was ultimately solidified. Shiv pinched it between his fingers and flicked it into the pan as well.

Just then, a lid slammed down. Adam and the orcs were unprepared, as was the Educator. All of them flinched back. Some of them went for their weapons, and the Educator whipped out her brush. Yet Shiv

remained impassive. His eyes narrowed underneath his shredded helmet, and he watched and waited, wondering what was about to emerge from his new weapon.

Five seconds passed, and the lid dissipated in a spray of flaking color. From the inside, Shiv plucked out a new meal. The texture was black and grainy. If he had to describe it, it would be as if wrapping lentils or beans in a layer of seaweed. The grains that composed the meal were so fine that it was practically powder, not even sand. Slowly, Shiv gripped a few of the grains and retracted his helmet. He put them in his mouth and chewed.

Adam's jaw dropped open wide. "Shiv, I'm not sure if..."

Cook the Uncookable Activated

Orichalcum Resistance Obtained

Shadowshape Obtained

The Deathless gained several benefits. The first was that his body flared with the colors of orichalcum; he'd sliced a piece from the doorframe earlier, and the durability enhancement came upon him once more. Aside from that, however, his body turned black and then grew intangible. The dimensions of his form flattened. All sense of weight faded from him as he became a twin to his own shadow—a splash of darkness gliding across the world. Shiv brushed through Adam without ever coming in contact with his friend. He was like a moving shade cast by something high above.

While he was in this state, he learned various things. The first was that whatever he ate, he took on the qualities of. Even though he had consumed orichalcum, the shadow's weak qualities took precedence. It

meant that his durability didn't matter so much, since he was a thing of ambulatory darkness. After about ten seconds, the effect came to an end. The shadows lifted from Shiv's shoulders, and he became himself once more.

Looking at the people around him, he began to chuckle. "Alright, so I can cut that too. I think I'll do a little bit more experimenting. But right now, I think we have a way to get out into the magma without being harmed, and a way to go unnoticed. Darkness doesn't make any sound. Yeah... this'll be good for our stealth."

Shiv's mind spun. There was practically no limit to what he could cook with this pan if he could slice bits of darkness away. It could also affect mana. So, what did that mean? I could cut Chronomancy, Shiv realized. I could cook a bunch of things together.

"I... This is bullshit," Adam whispered.

"Alright, alright, wait." Shiv erupted into a flurry of motion. No one spoke during this fey period. Adam just stared on, utterly speechless. The Educator narrowed her eyes at Shiv's new weapon, and her haughtiness was replaced by a building hint of wariness.

In that time, Shiv cut a great many things. He carved more pieces of shadow away from every patch of darkness he could find, and as he stuffed more things into his pan, it grew heavier and heavier. Then he activated his temporal shell and began peeling slices from that as well. For the first time, he felt the effects of the cuts; it reduced how much time he could sustain while in the Strider state, but that was fine. He was going to make a grand meal for everyone.

He carved away all of his Chronomantic field and filled the pan with it as well. Then, he began channeling a stream of fire into it. As he did, he looked around. "Mortar! I need your Pyromancy. Pour some heat into this."

The large orc obliged. A ball of flame erupted free from the cannon still on his back, and it splashed into Shiv's frying pan as well. After that, the lid formed, slammed shut, and this time Shiv saw a new timer start ticking down. With the sheer amount of ingredients he'd filled the frying pan with, he wasn't surprised the countdown was much longer.

Cooking in Progress: 3 Minutes

The Chef Unwavering 63 > 64

Three minutes, Shiv thought to himself. When it took four seconds to cook something, I had about ten seconds to enjoy the effects of the meal. Maybe the conversion rate will remain the same if the time is longer as well. Only one way to find out.

As he waited, Shiv examined his frying pan. It glowed ever brighter with every piece of ingredient he placed inside of it, and ever heavier as well. He wondered if that was the Bash the Unbashable skill. He guessed that after a certain point, should he fill the pan with so much stuff, it might be as heavy as a small mountain, and he could use that to crack the head of almost any adversary.

Shiv also wondered if he could potentially cook a piece of a Hydra. If he could do that, then maybe he would gain an instantaneous regeneration capability. Or, better yet, a fragment of the Tarrasque's crystalline shell. The possibilities were... Well, they were literally limitless. Anything was an ingredient with this thing in his hand. Anything.

But right now, he was doing things in the crudest way possible. He didn't have a full cooking station. This thing was an all-in-one frying pan, but there were far more ways to prepare a meal, and so Shiv began to consider how he could rely on his The Chef Unwavering skill even more.

Just then, the lid burst apart, and Shiv's eyes widened as his pan expanded in size. Previously, it was the width of his head. Now, it swelled to the girth of his torso, with the meal fully prepared. The darkness radiating from the pan grew more intense as well, and so long as it remained filled with the food, the weight and intensity remained.

Cook the Uncookable Activated

Once more, Shiv reached inside. Instead of it being a powdery substance, it was like a mess of meatballs. Shiv shoved one in his mouth, and then another. Soon, he burst into blackened steam, and he remained in that state for a near-minute after. However, since the pan was bound to his soul, it went with him into that shadowy state, and he couldn't feed the others his newly finished meal. The currents of the present glided around Shiv and kept him rooted to the passage of time, and rippling waves of Chronology bled off him.

Orichalcum Resistance Obtained

Shadowshape Obtained

Temporal Stabilization Obtained

As the minute ended, and he re-emerged, Shiv held out the pan to everyone else.

"Alright, I got a new plan. It's called 'we cook magma and darkness and time itself and then swim out of this place without the Avatars or Ascendants ever getting close to us.'"

For a long beat, Adam continued staring at Shiv, his eyes darting between his friend and the impossible frying pan he'd gained from collapsing the mana core. A whistling sigh escaped from Adam. "There's just one problem with that, Shiv. As astonishing and utterly strange as your new pan is, how are we going to feed that to Can Hu?"

Shiv's mouth fell open. He wanted to come up with a response, but he winced as he realized that was a limitation. Bots usually didn't savor food the same way people did, but Can Hu wasn't any ordinary bot. It had a tasting apparatus, but Shiv wasn't sure if that would register in the eyes of the System as having consumed the food. Slowly, Shiv walked over to Can Hu, observing his friend's damaged body.

"Hey, you alright, Penitent?" Shiv said softly.

Can Hu lifted its head. One of its optics was cracked, but the other came alight with a vibrant green glow. "I remain half-barreled, Shiv. What is this? What are you—" And then Can Hu trailed off as well, startled by the sudden appearance of a pan in its face. "Is that a cooking utensil?"

"Dip your tasting apparatus into one of these here shadow orichalcum meatballs. I want to see if it takes effect for you."

The Penitent stiffened, but rather than interrogating Shiv about why or for what reason it had to serve as a taste tester, it did as he requested. An extending rod shot out from the underside of Can Hu's

machine skull, and it pierced Shiv's meal. In an instant, Can Hu burst into flickering motes of shadow, and the Deathless pumped a fist high up into the air. "It works! Yes! If someone can taste it, it works!"

While Can Hu remained black mist, it splashed down onto the ground, unable to remain in contact with the two Pathbearers holding it up. In an instant, a stampede of orcs surrounded Shiv, and they all leaned in close, leering at the food.

"I think I want to go next," one of them mumbled.

Tequila narrowed his eyes at the pan. "Does it take alcohol as well? What might that do?"

Though these were good questions, Shiv looked between their massive bodies and saw the Educator frowning at them. A burst of intuition took hold of his mind, and the Deathless just sneered as he guessed why she was so displeased. "Hey Educator, I'm sorry that I ruined your plan."

"Plan?" she repeated, a hint of annoyance lingering on the edge of her voice.

"Yeah," Shiv continued pressing. He slipped between the orcs and came to stand face to face with his old enemy, though a significant vertical gulf separated them. "I'm pretty sure you would have planned to paint us into a book or something, and taken us out that way."

The twitch in the corner of her lip told him he was right. "Don't be absurd," she lied nakedly. "I know you would have never taken that arrangement."

"Yeah, you know a lot of things, don't you?" Shiv muttered. "A lot about the Ascendants and a lot about Udraal, but maybe not enough about me. How are your burns, by the way?"

Though she tried not to show it, Shiv could tell she really, really didn't like him. A small piece of her nose also turned to glass as Sticks and Stones did its work. "They healed. A lesser Pathbearer might find soul wounds debilitating, but a proper power has means of resolving such things."

"Oh, that's good. I'm real proud of you." He held up his pan. "If you don't have your own way out of this prison, I have a bit of charity for you."

Her lip twisted in absolute disgust, but she didn't reject his offer outright. "Udraal told me you were obstinate."

At the mention of his maker's name, the burning joy inside Shiv sputtered as if someone had poured a glass of fetid swamp water over it, and his expression came to mirror that of the Educator. "Udraal doesn't know me very well. And just to be clear, you intervening doesn't change anything. I got my eye on you, Educator. You keep your distance, and whatever you do, you state it plainly and openly. If I don't know what you're doing, Adam's got an arrow, and I've got means of ripping you apart. You keep that brush pointed away from us, and I'll keep using this pan for cooking instead of burying it inside your skull."

The Educator rolled her eyes. "Oh, don't be daft, boy. If I was going to hurt you, I would have already painted the rest of them away. No, right now, my duty is to see us all freed from this prison. And now that the annoying part is done, we begin our grand escape. And no, I do not require your cooking for myself. There is a more effective option."

"And what's that?" Shiv asked, weary.

Suddenly, she swung her tome around. Adam drew his arm back and readied a Veilpiercer. Shiv dashed forward and prepared for a fight, holding his pan high and prepared to bring it down on the Educator's face. But just then, the chains binding her tome snapped open, and ringing shrapnel filled the air. They began to orbit around the Educator rather than striking anyone nearby, and from the flipping pages, Shiv caught sight of a familiar figure: a Hydra, with many crowns adorning its many heads. It was struggling, writhing on the paper, and with a flourish of her brush, Solzimort was set free, crashing into reality with a spray of vibrant inks, taking up most of the hallway they were in.

"Oh, oh man!" Solzimort gasped. The Hydra's many heads gagged and writhed on the ground, pointing in different directions, spasming as if someone blessed with dry land after nearly drowning in the deep. "Too cramped! Too cramped! Couldn't absorb the material, too cramped..."

Shiv shot the Educator a glare. She gave him an indifferent look. "What? If you feed this to him, he will turn to darkness, and the rest of us can be fused with his body. That is far more efficient than feeding everyone."

Shiv pressed his lips together. She was right. But also, simply painting Solzimort into one of her pages was an ugly sign. Whatever he could say about the Educator, he could never trust her, not as long as she was so casual in her acts of imprisonment, and if even a Legendary Hydra that the Auroral Council itself wasn't capable of containing without sedation was helpless once captured in her book, he didn't give himself or any of his friends high chances.

"Hey," Shiv said, patting one of Solzimort's heads. "You're fine. You're fine now. Not letting her put you back in."

The Hydra slowly calmed, looking around and taking in the orcs. "We should be off soon," the Educator noted. "Gather the magma and other ingredients you need. Feed the Hydra after it absorbs you. After that, there is a place in the capital we must go to. It will lead us out of the city—and toward our shared destination."

"Our shared destination?" Adam said. "What makes you think we're going anywhere with you?"

"Because I can spare you the attention of the Ascendants." The Educator scoffed. She turned to look at Shiv, and he saw a pulsing glow, a divine incandescence radiating from her tome. "They do not recall who I am. They cannot find you so long as I am in your vicinity. Their all-seeing gazes will not be so all-seeing. But I suspect they will also be distracted by other matters."

Chapter 197 (II) Morsel [II]

She made the other matters known by flipping through her tome again. On the pages, he saw Rebis, still clad in Adam's Legendary-Tier armor, clutching the Gate Lord's arrow, armed with his gauntlet, and even with the scepter water wand left beside his body.

The mutilated prisoner was lying face down on the ground, and through the gaps in Adam's helmet, Shiv grimaced internally as he saw just how badly he had wounded Enoch's special Avatar. Part of Rebis's face had been completely caved in. It was a brutal wound, exposing gaps of inner tissue fused with wiring and silicone rods.

On the page right beside Rebis was another prisoner Shiv recognized: Threshold. Another one of Udaral's so-called experiments. His half-sibling, so to speak. Their body glistened at the center of the page, and even upon paper, he could see the mana seeping out from the portal that constituted Threshold's form. Just like Rebis, the power bound to Threshold remained evident, but they were helpless within the tome.

"See, you're just going around and collecting people for Udraal," Shiv muttered. "It's a hell of a thing going from a god to someone doing errands for an Abyssal Lord."

"Errands?" the Educator deadpanned, raising a thin eyebrow. "Is that what you think this is? No, this is simply gathering valuable resources permitted by an unexpected occurrence. Now, if we are to leave, and if I am to ensure the success of our mutually-interested endeavor, I suggest that you begin cooking again and feed our associate here his due course. That shall be your errand, I suppose."

A loud whimper came from Solzimort, and as the large Hydra shuddered, Adam comforted him. "There, there," Adam said with a sigh, glaring at the Educator. "You're all right now. We'll make sure you don't go back into the mean woman's book."

"I won't. I won't. It's really, really tight," Solzimort moaned. "Why? Why'd you do that? I was just trying to be friendly, and then you whipped your brush out and painted me."

"That's because she's a bastard, just like all the other Ascendants," Adam answered.

"Not so much like the other Ascendants," the Educator said under her breath. "After all, some of us know there are only a few ways to escape degeneration, and some of us succeed more than others. And right now, you should feel privileged to be in my presence. How else do you think you have avoided the notice of the Avatars for so long? They would have found you immediately after the blast without me. Especially with how one of them is so desperate to reclaim their delicate vessel."

And that was a veiled insult directed at Enoch. Shiv shook his head and proceeded to the task. They were another step closer to completing this escape, but they were also a step deeper into treacherous territory.

Yet, despite the Educator's presence, Shiv still had a final trick up his sleeve, for within his cape was Radio, Cripple's reserve Avatar. For all the posturing the Educator was doing right now, she didn't know

about Radio or Shiv's deal with Veronica. If the Educator wished to do anything untoward, she would find herself facing a bit more than she bargained for.

But invoking the Ascendants was an ugly choice for everyone involved. He felt like he was currently at the bottom of a valley, but both cliffs above him were caving in and pressing against each other. He needed to move carefully, or the slightest misstep could cause one side to grow entirely imbalanced and bury him in a crushing avalanche.

Shiv prepared a new meal, this time incorporating bits of shadow, harvested chunks of magma, and a heavy dose of Chronomancy as well. As the meal finished cooking after a few minutes, he held it out in front of Solzimort, and the entire pan swelled to the size of a small shack. The Hydra's twelve heads circled around the pan, and Solzimort sniffled. "It doesn't smell too bad, but I don't think I've ever seen someone cook magma before. Won't it burn me?"

"Didn't burn me earlier. You're pretty big, so I don't think it'll hurt you."

"Are you sure?" Solzimort asked. By this point, Shiv had a feeling that this Hydra had generalized anxiety problems.

Psycho-Cartography: There's also something wrong with him, and I don't mean the anxiety. He's a Legend, and Legends usually have to be extraordinary. Right now, this Hydra seems childlike. I can't think of a way he could have possibly lived long enough to get to his level of power. Keep an eye on him as well. He might be another one of Cripple's agents. The Ascendant isn't the deceptive type, but after so long spent among a pack of wolves, even a sheepdog would revert to their baser nature.

Shiv made eye contact with Five then, and noticed how the wolf-man was staring at the Hydra suspiciously as well. Both of them shared a slight nod. More allies; more questions.

The bravest of Solzimort's heads dipped down and scooped up a mouthful of fist-sized beads of dark-gold with his forked tongue. Shiv hissed and held out a hand. "Wait, Solzimort, don't swallow yet. Absorb us first. We're going out with you."

And suddenly, the Hydra was smiling, his lips curled wide. "Oh, finally. Trust me, this will be safer for all of us. Goblin! Can you make me go fast again?"

Gone gave a quiet sigh. "Sure. All I'm good for, I guess."

Shiv wasn't entirely certain about that, but he was more than tired of this prison, and he would let Solzimort do any number of things to him if that meant they were going to get away. As he pressed his hand against Solzimort, he felt his flesh fuse with the Hydra's. He was dragged through the scales in an instant, but rather than being entwined with Solzimort's biology, he was simply placed in a strange pocket. It was like being glued to the Hydra's spirit somehow, rather than meshed into its body.

Shiv also discovered why all the trapped wardens were struggling earlier. It was hard to breathe inside Solzimort. The Hydra was most definitely wrong about why the wardens were kept alive. Its spirit

was keeping them nourished, keeping them sustained. And soon the space around Shiv grew cramped as more orcs filled the small pocket.

"Shiv," Adam said. The Deathless turned as much as he could and found his friend right behind him. Their heads stuck out from the corner of Solzimort's lip like skin tags, and dozens of orcs were meshed with the still-moaning mounds of trapped wardens along the rest of the Hydra's body.

At the same time, Solzimort let out a groaning sound. "Can I swallow now?" he asked through a mouth full of unchewed food.

"Yeah," Shiv said. "You can swallow now. What, Adam?"

"When you got your frying pan, was there... Was there anything else?"

Shiv paused for a moment. "Nope. I think it consumed my orichalcum dagger. But, uh, no. Just this."

The Gate Lord stared. The stare grew intense enough to burn a hole in Shiv's head. "Oh, you're feeling jealous?"

"Jealous? Jealous is not a strong enough word, Shiv. I nearly died several times over in that fight. I was practically the only reason we succeeded by the end."

"And who broke the mana core?"

"And who allowed that to be possible in the first place! I literally gave you the skills to make that possible," Adam seethed.

"And I thank you for it. Someday, I think I'm going to name the main course after you," Shiv frowned mockingly. "Or maybe, you know, a side dish seems more appropriate. Wait, no, a main course I'll call TheSide Dish. I'm generous that way. But hey, at least the Educator got you your armor back."

Adam kept glaring at him until they promptly flattened along with the rest of Solzimort's body into a veil of quivering shadows. "Oh, this is really, really weird," Solzimort said aloud. He drew his altered body back and launched himself at a nearby wall. "Welp! Out of here we go! Up into the burny-stuff!"

Shiv tried to find where the Educator was. He realized she was absent. Missing. But something told him that she probably wasn't far at all. No, he thought to himself. She managed to ambush Adam and the rest of us by jumping into his Awareness. Right now, she's probably taking a piggyback ride in either my senses or his. The Deathless's paranoia triggered. He cast his Psychomancy out to his friend.

"Hey, Adam."

"Yes, I get it. Your special boy," Adam said, with a snarl of annoyance. "No need to keep rubbing it in—"

"No, not that. We're probably carrying the Educator with us. She's in our Awareness. I'm almost sure of it."

Adam's thoughts came to a standstill. Any heat of playful anger faded as a rising dread spiked. He remembered how the Educator ambushed them back in Gate Theborn. "How long do you think she's been with us?" Adam asked.

"I don't know,"

Shiv replied. "But since she's working with Udraal, she might have hopped into us from the very beginning... Wait, no. She doesn't know about Radio. Or Veronica."

"Then it's more likely she's clinging to my Awareness," Adam said, slightly sour.

"I suspect that might be right," Shiv grunted. "So what do we do with her? Aside from killing her the first chance we get."

"Nothing yet. We observe, and we try to figure out what she can and can't do. So far, she doesn't seem as dangerous as Veronica. The Councilwoman managed to stop your soul from going off, while the Educator's tome got set on fire. But it might not be a strategy that can work twice, especially since she's had a chance to plan for us now."

"Well, worst case scenario, we bring out Radio and use Cripple against her, but I'm not exactly fond of that idea."

"Me neither," Adam said. "I'd like to leave the prison before we're forced to invoke the people trying to keep us here."

"Alright," Solzimort said, his voice naked with worry and muffled through the slurry of matter it rushed through. "So we can go out and do the burning stuff outside now, right? Right? Are you sure?"

"Yeah," Shiv said. "You'll be fine. Just keep going up and get out of the volcano. After that..."

"After that I will give the directions," the Educator's voice echoed in the air.

The Hydra shuddered. "But I don't like you..."

"We don't like her either," Shiv said. "So, maybe she might wanna explain why we're going to listen to her?"

"Because if you don't, you won't be able to reach the rest of your companions at Blackedge in time."

"In time for what?" Adam growled.

"In time for several things. To stop the Outside from claiming the town entirely. To halt the Ascendants from tracking and capturing the town to use as hostages and force you two to surrender."

Neither Shiv nor Adam said anything for a beat. "Play along for now, or force a fight as soon as we get out?" The Deathless asked Adam.

"Play along. But only for now,"

Adam said, adding heavy emphasis to his final few words. "Udraal's not going to be easy to avoid, and though I don't trust her in the slightest, I want her nearby, if only to figure out her larger strategy."

"Fine," Shiv said with a snort. "Solzimort. Go along with the bastard woman."

"Okay," Solzimort replied shakily. And with a deep shudder, he accelerated. A rush of golden lightning coursed within the darkness. Shiv couldn't see the colors, but he could feel the Chronomancy—hear

Gone vibrating somewhere. From the outside, however, they were just a splash of blackness shifting through the world.

The Hydra phased through countless walls, and they were gliding through a slurry of messy material in an instant. Shiv flinched as he saw a mess of orcs and wardens flow through him. Most of them were unmoving. The devastation of the mana core had left them trapped within the mangled architecture, and so they likely suffocated or were simply pulped and bled to death internally.

"You know, just once I'd like to walk away from a fight without mass casualties," Shiv commented.

"It's bad, but I think we're improving," Adam muttered, though there was a faint sourness to his tone as well. "It's better than what happened to Blackedge and also what happened to Theborn."

Both of them fell silent thereafter. The System demanded strife, and with strife came the loss of life. Shiv was getting very, very tired of watching so many people die.

With a final thrust of motion, the Hydra burst through the outer wall of the interconnected cubes, and then it was in a deep sea of searing light. It glided from place to place like a patch of coiling darkness, hard to notice due to the oscillating waves of crashing magma. All around them, separate pieces from the Rubix Well crashed and tumbled in the depths of the supervolcano, as if pieces spewed out from the hulls of dying ships. Dense gears and heavy chunks of cube-walls sank down while pieces of plastic and certain Pathbearers rose up in the dense slurry of magma.

Though the Pathbearers didn't seem to be burning, they struggled with every kick and paw. Magma wasn't water. Magma was like searing-hot mud—not good to swim in at all.

Comparatively, Solzimort was a mess of flattened darkness—and he darted through the magma without suffering issues from heat or viscosity, and would remain in this shadow-shaped state for a good few minutes longer. “Hey, this actually feels pretty good.”

Spell patterns flared above. Massive swells of Divination, Chronomancy, and Dimensionality rained down from a huge hexagonal mana construct that resembled some kind of interlocking gate. Shiv caught sight of it between all the drifting detritus and felt his heartbeat pick up. The Ascendants were looking for them, scouring the wrecks to secure their most valuable prisoners.

But Shiv and the others weren’t the only prisoners of interest. Massive forms surged through the depths. One seemed to be a colossal worm of some kind that unleashed a storm of telepathic power around itself. It released lashing bolts of psionic power at the magical gate and shredded pieces away from it.

Okay. Psychomancy and Magical Resistance mixed in together, Shiv realized. Wait, is that the psionic presence I encountered when I first fled into the crawlspace?

He was then distracted by a few dozen other bodies ripping past them. Prisoners of all kinds were surging through the magma, and they were coated in violet energies—traced by Divination.

“Looks like we’re not the only ones making a run for it,” Shiv said.

“No. We’re among the most subtle. But not nearly the stealthiest either.” Adam noticed a few things Shiv didn’t, and the Deathless only realized that while bound to his friend’s mind. There were distortions in the magma. Disturbances. Some prisoners had blended into the heat with Stealth-Pyromancy Skill Fusions. Others were outright invisible. “Whatever the case, the Ascendants will have their hands full soon. If I were them, I would lock the entirety of the capital down by whatever means possible and have the Prismatic Guard positioned at the top and along the sides of the supervolcano. Underground too.”

“So. No way out but through, huh?”

“Yes. But for the other prisoners. Not us.” Adam cleared his throat. “Solzimort?”

“Yeah?” the Hydra said, sounding slightly nervous.

“Go through the walls of the volcano. But stop before you pass all the way through. We’re going to wait.”

“Huh?” Solzimort asked. “For what?”

“For some other poor fool to get into a fight with the Prismatic Guard. When they do, move flat across the ground. We’re going to blend in with the shadows.”

Chapter 198 (I) Escapees

Across Integrated Earth, there are many cities that boast grand claims regarding their opulence, safety, and power. In the eastern hemisphere of the world alone, there is High Harbor, ruled by the Dragon Brokers. It operates in tandem with its sister city of Hong Kong to serve as a perfect neutral territory for neighboring powers to negotiate trade or even formally declare war. It is also the commerce hub of integrated Earth's surface nations, or so it is often proclaimed.

Then there is Kirimon, a mere two hours away from High Harbor and Hong Kong. It stands as a whimsical place, partially guarded by the Fae. Under their rule, Kirimon has endured for hundreds of years without

ever suffering any indignities upon their shores. And from them drift the pristine petals of cherry blossoms, forever in bloom.

And then there is the industrial heart of integrated Earth: Ozstraya! The Grand Furnace, the Unshackled Prison, the Forge of Forges, guarded by a union of awakened beasts and enlightened automata. For any machines that seek to escape persecution, there is only one destination, whispered as if it were utopia.

But among all of them, the title of the safest has most frequently been bestowed upon the capital of the Yellowstone Empire. For, protected by a pantheon of newly-ascended gods, and with many of its elites possessed of a special faith-based Skill that allows them to serve as the eyes and ears of their divine protectors, the rate of crime is low, and their society is flourishing.

Though criticized for being culturally old-fashioned and particularly imperialist by their direct neighbors, visitors of the Yellowstone Republic often come away wowed by the sheer stability and charm discovered within their nation's great capital.

And then there is the magnificent site of Flamecrown Castle built atop the Yellowstone Supervolcano. Though only observable from a distance for most people, should you be a Pathbearer of particular significance, arrangements can be made to bring you closer to that grand seat of power from which the Auroral Council casts their decrees.

As the Yellowstone Republic always yearns to build and expand, should you manage to sell them on a particular idea or come to a favorable arrangement, then you just might find yourself made a new member of the local nobility as a reward...

-Encyclopedia Apocalyptia: Empires and Capitals

"So, you let them escape, then?"

Veronica looked down her nose at a few of the other Avatars comprising the Auroral Council. The Waif turned away from her, too young to bear this kind of scorn, too terrified to voice any dissent. Maiden's Avatar remained silent. It was an automaton recently selected from one of the Genius's many workshops. A politician it was not, and out of its depth, it found refuge in the quiet and tried to shrink away from the scene.

Enoch was missing, but in his divine domain, he raged, and Veronica could dimly hear the aftershocks of his fury. It wasn't just the Deathless that had escaped. Udraal had sacrificed a few of his vessels while distracting the other Ascendants, but no true blow had been struck against him on this day.

Longinus was nowhere to be found as well. The Ascendant of Travels could just as likely be drinking in some tavern, escaping from his due duties, or actually trying to hunt the errant Legends down. Anthony stood beside Veronica, and for once, he wasn't trading barbs with her. Instead, a dark expression clung to his face, and darker shadows yet extended from beneath his feet.

No, if there was one person bearing the brunt of this mistake, it would be the one who had a hand in its occurrence in the first place. City Lord Stormhalt was a broken, mangled man. His armor barely clung to him, seeming more like shattered ceramic held together by stitched strings molded from black lightning. No longer wearing his helmet, Stormhalt wore his wounds with shame. His face was near-disfigured, badly burned, missing most of his hair, sporting a broken nose, a swollen ear, and countless missing teeth.

They were gathered within a particularly intertwined set of cubes. Rather than being a long cylindrical valley, a section of one had intersected with the other, and now the entire structure was cross-shaped. Here, the last known traces of the Young Lord, Adam Arrow, and their errant Deathless lingered in the air, and here, Veronica was about to make an example.

"Your ineptitude and foolishness have cost us a great deal, Stormhalt," Veronica began, but there was no heat in her words. Instead, it was purely clinical, as if she were a teacher chastising an underperforming student. On his part, Stormhalt took the lashing with dignity, and doubtless, even if she demanded his execution, the City Lord would have gone to it without any hint of fear.

But she didn't want Stormhalt dead, especially since he had many friends in the nobility. That would cause trouble for her. No, she wanted to make full use of him, the same way her grandmother made full use of the man.

"Whatever punishment you bestow, Councilwoman, I will accept. It is as you say. I should have done better. I should have been—"

"You should listen and not speak," Veronica said, her voice heavy. She didn't use her Rhetoric, but the weight of her authority was enough. Stormhalt lowered his head and gave her his undisputed attention.

"I'm not going to strip your nobility from you," Veronica began. Stormhalt's eyes widened for a moment. He was surprised. Good. "I'm not going to demand your execution. I'm not going to demand that you pay a tithe to the Republic for this egregious failure. No. There are a number of things you're going to do. First, you will listen to me now, only to me. Whatever my grandmother says, you are to ignore. Additionally, you are to sever yourself from Halsur."

City Lord Stormhalt flinched as if someone had lashed his back with a whip. He barely held himself back before he could say something. The black lightning around him trembled, and despite everything, Veronica knew that Halsur appreciated Stormhalt. The Endbreaker was a man of few words, but that hadn't always been the case. Halsur was quite talkative after a few drinks, or when Kathereine finished a song. It was only before battle that he became brooding and brutal, and the secret there wasn't to cultivate an aura of menace, but mainly because Halsur was afraid.

Veronica knew Halsur before his Ascension. He was a nobleman, a stalwart warrior, a vanguard that few could compare to, and he hated violence. He hated bloodshed. That was why he liked decisively finishing battles, and that was why he focused on cultivating Toughness and also improving his Shield Proficiency Skill until nothing could pierce through his defenses. But that wasn't Halsur anymore. Now he was a shade, an after-echo of the man that once existed.

"Instead, the position of Halsur's Avatar will be granted to another. I will select them in due time, in a proper session, with the right amount of votes." She glared at the other Avatars and knew they would bend in her direction, all of them aside from Anthony. But in this matter, they were likely aligned. They didn't need any more Stormhalts: controllable City Lords, but too weak to curtail the worst impulses of their Ascendants.

Now, what Veronica required were people that she could control over the Ascendants. There were so few of those in the Republic, but luckily for her, she already had some candidates in mind.

"Then what else am I supposed to do to atone?" Stormhalt whispered.

Impossibly, Stormhalt made Veronica laugh. Her voice echoed through the ruined prison like a bell. "You? You're not supposed to do anything, Havel. You've done enough. As I told you, we're here because of you. And if I send you after the Deathless and the Young Lord, I suspect you'll only get yourself killed or captured. No, the mana core is lost. The Rubix Well collapsed. The prisoners are spilling over into our capital and preparing to butcher our people as we speak. You have done enough."

With every word she spoke, she could see Stormhalt on the verge of tears or a violent outbreak. She stopped, then. She had wounded him. She had scarred him. And to push any more, she just might make him do something unwise, and that wasn't what she wanted. Stormhalt was still useful despite all his follies. After the darkness, there needed to be hope. And where Kathereine once fashioned him into a

functional patsy to feed her feud with Starhawk, Veronica would find a proper use for Stormhalt. But that would be in due time.

"For now, I wish for you to return to your city. Manage it well and see its gates guarded. Furthermore, I demand that you raise an army, a grand one. We are to be attacked soon from the north and south. Of this I am certain. Word will spread of our instability, and there is no time to see a new governor for your lands appointed—but you will receive a new Legend-Advisor. One of my own. Furthermore, if you are contacted by any Ascendant, you are to come to me immediately. You are no longer cleared for the Auroral Council. You are no longer fit to serve as an Avatar, and you are to ignore all messages, System-delivered or otherwise, regarding Roland, the Deathless, or anyone associated with them."

This was the hardest thing of all for Stormhalt to stomach. She could see his facial muscles trembling. His gaze had gone somewhere distant, and behind them flashed bolts of roaring electricity. Doubtless, he was thinking about striking her down, going rogue, and seeing himself redeemed. But it was a fantasy. Stormhalt knew that. Veronica knew that. If he tried, she would cut him apart with a word, and not even Halsur could save him then, mainly because Halsur would never make a move against one of his lover's kin.

"Your will above mine, Councilwoman," Stormhalt said quietly.

Veronica let out a huffing breath and moved to the next part of her charm offensive. "Despite all of this, I do understand, Stormhalt. You have shamed us. Your deception has wounded our great nation. You have destroyed a portion of our Republic. But your vendetta and your fears... They were well-founded."

The first glow of hope re-entered Stormhalt's eyes. "You... you think so?"

"I know so," Veronica said. "For before every sin, there is a motivation. There is a hope. There is a yearning to do something that is right. And that yearning has led you down a black path. Heed my

words. Serve. Serve faithfully. Serve properly. And serve in the light. Redeem yourself through loyalty, honesty, and service. And that will not come by feeding some personal urge for vengeance, but by listening, obeying, and understanding your position."

Stormhalt stopped shaking. A resolve flooded his eyes, and he now had a new goal. Of course, all of his desires would end at one final destination, and that destination was Roland Arrow. Whatever she told the City Lord, the shadow that existed within Stormhalt's heart would always be that of his greatest rival. But Veronica could control him, and now her grandmother was deprived of another tool to facilitate her foolishness.

"Don't think I don't see what you're doing," Kathereine sang within her granddaughter's mind.

"You can see all you want," Veronica said, "but I'm going to set things right. This failure is more yours than his. But be glad, grandmother. I cannot punish you. Not in the same way I can punish one of your toys."

Kathereine tutted. "Oh, so much ire, so much fire. Tell me, where were you while they were all struggling?"

"Where were you?" Veronica asked.

Neither grandmother nor granddaughter answered the other, and the cold war between the two continued.

Veronica loved her grandmother, she truly did, but the woman was a fool. Her caricature was conniving, scheming, and deceitful. She'd been made ever more dangerous by her degeneration, and Veronica knew to keep her guard up. She needed to be sharp. And she needed to get to Roland Arrow, Udraal, and the Deathless before her grandmother did.

Now one of them was secured. The Deathless was not in a cage, not exactly to Veronica's desired outcome, but he was still desperate. He was a boy flailing in the dark, and he would reach out to her sooner or later. And through him, she would get the other two. That only required preparation and patience, both things Veronica had in ample supply.

"You know, they will be trying to escape the capital soon," Kathereine said.

"I do," Veronica replied. "Which is why I told Anthony to have Harlock set up a perimeter around the city. They won't be able to breach it, not without wounding Harlock himself. And should they set Anthony's Ascendant aflame, we will know where they are."

"And that is your strategy, then? To blanket our great city in darkness. To choke trade and commerce, and to reveal to our enemies how deep our wounds are, how we have failed?"

"We?" Veronica's insides coiled with anger. "Grandmother. There is no we. There is a cascade of problems and failures that originated when three Ascendants broke from the great union. One to betray the rest. Two to slay the one. And all three are traitors to me. The Starhawk might seek to betray the Republic's power, but you and Halsur have struck a blow against our peace that might never mend."

"And what would you have me do? Wait for the Starhawk to spend all those Phylacteries he collected? Wait for him to open our throats?"

"I would have intercepted him along with the Five Faiths and seen him trapped the moment he descended. I know more than you because I watch, and I learn, and I am not compromised by my nature. You sold your soul for power, but found your character winnowed to nothingness by power. A shame. A pity. What point in being a goddess if you are wielded by yourself rather than using your power as the wielder?"

Katherineine laughed scornfully. They had been through this argument countless times, and here they were again. "But you are a mortal. And you see far less than you assume. Understand that your position is at risk as well, girl. As the enduring face of the Auroral Council, this farce will fall on your shoulders, the public will demand a lamb for the altar, and the nobility will weave their schemes."

"Let them. Let's see if they can play the game well enough. In the meantime, I will finish what you could not and secure the Deathless myself." Veronica made no mention of how she already had the boy by the throat. The fact that her grandmother said nothing revealed much. Katherineine didn't know about Veronica's meeting. She wouldn't be able to control herself otherwise.

If there was one thing to know about the Songbringer, it was that if you gave her the opportunity to demonstrate how much greater she was compared to you, she would take it, she would use it, she would maul your heart, and she would move on without a care in the world.

Veronica didn't have that bad habit. And so her hidden ace remained just that: hidden. "For now, we remain patient, but not reactive. We will hunt him, we will drive him, and sooner or later, he will go to ground. Now. Go plot and scheme your next attempt to slay the Starhawk while I will keep our Republic together."

"Tell yourself that as much as you will," Katherineine spat. "But know you would have been nowhere without me."

"If by nowhere you mean spared of every headache I have suffered, then we are in deep agreement, grandmother." Veronica sighed. She was done with her Ascendant; time to bully another.

"Daughter," she said aloud, speaking to the Waif. The young girl shook, her chubby cheeks glistening with undried tears.

"Not you," Veronica repeated. The girl shrank. "Daughter."

Suddenly, a spilling mass of tar erupted from the girl's orifices. It fused over her, and that misshapen creature that thought itself a god loomed over Veronica. "You can't call me like that. You're not my mother, you're not." The Daughter was rattled; terrified, even. She had faced the Deathless again and tried to tear into him, but the fact that she didn't kill him had left a scar on her psyche, and that made Veronica just the slightest bit more proud.

"That is fine. I apologize for imposing myself on you, Great Ascendant. Would you like me to read to you as an apology? A story of the time before the tar? Of the girl you were and the valley that loved you?"

Daughter turned away from her, and her expression adopted a girlish pout. As much as a mutilated monster could adopt such an expression. "That's okay. I forgive you this time. What... what do you need? And also—"

"Of course, I will read to you later, Daughter. And it's not what I need, it's what we all need to do," Veronica said patiently, as if she were Daughter's parent. Which she practically was, considering how absent Maiden was, always occupied by some new contraption or some new invention—ones that only she could use. "I need you to reach out to the Black Orphanages. I need you to gather your Waifs. And I need you to visit all the safe houses, nooks, crannies, and little underworld smugglers that exist within the capital."

"Are we doing another purge?" Daughter asked, clapping the flat end of her blade upon her palm. Tar splashed into the air, and Veronica ignored the foulness of the stench.

"Not a purge," Veronica said. "An ambush. Because if they wish to escape the capital, then they're going to need to find another way out. There will be no walking away from this city."

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Veronica blinked. Her breath caught in her throat. It had been years since she'd gained a level for this skill. Now, to gain a level from just this—

His favor has bled into me, she realized. And the mana threshold is changing. Already... We don't have ten years.

"Daughter," Veronica said absentmindedly, her thoughts racing. "Do hurry."

Chapter 198 (II) Escapees

It was raining heavily outside, the sky dark with clouds as Shiv, Adam, and Solzimort observed the scene patiently, beholding the magical barriers erected beyond the volcano, waiting for an opening to come.

Instead of trying to burst out from the top of the volcano, Adam wisely instructed the Hydra to squeeze itself free from its side. The Yellowstone supervolcano was immense, and even after they cleared the magma, there were still dozens of meters of stone and other matter to get through. More than that, they weren't the only ones to have this idea. Certain other Pathbearers could phase through solid matter as well. However, they didn't so much meld with it, and more than a few decided to smash their way out as well. As a result, sprays of lava shot out into the distance, and huge exit wounds were left along the insides of the volcano.

That was the first sign that something was wrong.

For the moment those Pathbearers went out, dozens were launched back in. An unceasing barrage of kinetic force blasted through the exit wounds, bombarding escaping prisoners without any hint of stopping. The weaker among the escapees came apart in sprays of viscera. The stronger prisoners were knocked back, and some were even pinned in place. As little more than a flattened shadow, Solzimort slipped out from one of the wounds, and soon, the Shiv watched as hundreds of prisoners began making a desperate play at an escape.

It was a near-hopeless play, as it turned out.

The first thing the Republic did after the collapse of the prison was to set up a perimeter. The perimeter was not manned by a few hundred or a few thousand soldiers. No, the Yellowstone Republic prided itself on its Prismatic Guard: integrated Pathbearers who fought using a variety of mutually supporting skills. And the most feared among them were the Poly-Magi. A formation of them consisted of Pathbearers who mastered multiple lores of magic, but on top of that, it had them understand each other's lores so well that they wove intermingled spells.

This meant that all Poly-Magi spells were things of incredible complexity, with varying mana types and patterns woven over each other.

They unleashed spells of Chronomancy tinged with Pyromantic energies. Other spells followed after that, and the colors that rained down on the sides of the supervolcano were myriad and prismatic. The mana tumbled forward in a tightening net made up of fibers of gold, static, and so much more.

More than a few prisoners tried to burst through the net, and rather than bursting free from the net, they were pinned there and slowly being ripped asunder. The Prismatic Guard was not taking any prisoners. They couldn't risk it, not with the capital nearby.

"Glad you told him to stop," Shiv muttered.

"It's standard protocol when trying to control a breakout," Adam said. "Captain Irons ran a drill based on this exact situation once."

"Legendary-Tiers breaking out of the capital Rubix Well?"

"Sort of. Not the capital specifically, but a Rubix Well. Much smaller in scale and... not with Legends, just normal prisoners. The strategies are the same, though. Contain. Pin. Repel."

There were other spell patterns crushing in from behind the magical netting as well. A faint wave of Dynamancy pressed down, and the ground began to groan under the pressures of increased gravity. Then there were Aeromancy, Cryomancy, and Hydromancy.

The rain falling from the churning storm above turned into piercing shards. They embedded themselves in numerous prisoners, and bolts of lightning jumped between the bodies that were struck. Every few seconds, a forking surge of electricity would lash down, punching through the other spells that lined the outside of the volcano. After that, several bodies would fall, smoking, smoldering, and utterly ruined.

Yet despite this, they were facing dozens upon dozens of True Heroes as well as Legendary prisoners, and so the battle raged on. Not contained by the claustrophobic valleys of the orichalcum prison, many prisoners unleashed their powers wantonly, causing the scale of combat to appear truly apocalyptic. Blasts stretching for kilometers bloomed without ceasing, and shapes blurred within the perimeter so fast that the sound barrier was practically howling in perpetual agony as the fighting raged on.

But attracting Shiv's attention more than any of these was the cause of the great net of mana being unable to fully close. As the vanguard of the prisoners stood a giantess of a woman. She wasn't a human, and not of any race he'd met before. Shiv noticed how blue her skin was, how bright the runic sigils lining her flesh glowed.

Her muscles rippled, and huge horns jutted free from her forehead. An eruption of coldness swelled out from around her, and the outline of a massive ice dragon loomed, howling in fury at the oncoming spells. Waves of Chronomancy, Hydromancy, Cryomancy, and more pressed against her magic, and they came to an utter halt. For as powerful as the Poly-Magi were, and though they had the numbers, the prisoners were freedom-starved and unspeakably powerful.

Before this day was over, more blood would nourish the ashen slop of the grand volcano.

The giantess called out with a mocking laugh, "Is this the great power of the Yellowstone Republic? Is this the most their legions can muster?" Her voice somehow boomed over even the unceasing thunderclaps drowning out all other noise in the vicinity, and she slammed a fist against her chest, the colossal dragon repeating the action. The air crackled and grew colder, and the ground at her feet turned to pure ice across a span of kilometers, and then it shattered down the middle. From that great fissure emerged a legion of strange, ice-shaped monsters. Motes of Dimensionality spilled out from the

crevice, and Shiv realized that he was probably looking at someone who could wield both ice and spatial magic in equal measure.

"I am Prophetess Andra Culdottier, Caller of the Dead Realms, and I have sworn an oath to regain my freedom! I have told you, you cannot keep me here, and now I, Jotun Prophetess, will bring frigid ruin to your lands! Come and fight, feeble man-things of the Republic! Come and fight, come and die!"

As the Legendary Pathbearer roared her provocations, other prisoners gathered behind her, supporting her using their own skills. Shiv saw what seemed to be humans unleashing massive walls of stone, stone that rose and became enormous humanoids that constantly drew from the soil to further increase their own size.

They slammed massive, jagged fists against the oncoming spells and pushed them back some more, their Magical Resistance used as an active bulwark against the Republic's closing net. Then there came a loud shriek, and the air combusted with crushing fire. But the fire glided over the Jotun's ice magic, never coming close to melting it. Instead, it was shaped into a wall of pointed spears, and they tore into the oncoming wards with explosive intensity.

Just then, the horizon vanished in a wall of searing white. Gaps formed in Shiv's vision; it was so bright that he felt his perception flinch with every subsequent blast. A phoenix screeched ahead, but rather than being a pure phoenix, Shiv used his Farsight to see what was hiding in its core.

And there he saw another goblin, this one channeling so much fire from his body that a mirage pulsated out from around him. He laughed aloud, promising to bring fire and ruin, but then a massive arrow struck him, punching through the phoenix's fiery aura and taking him through the head. The flames died in an instant. The goblin was launched over the horizon, carried by a massive adamantine arrow far beyond Shiv's ability to follow.

An automaton roared, shouted something incoherent, and it turned into a churning tornado that stretched up to the storm clouds above. It blasted forward and crashed hard against the net as well, and soon a gap formed, one large enough for Solzimort to slip through.

"Now!" Adam said, and then the Hydra was moving once more. This was the moment they had been waiting for. They could have made a run for it earlier, torn through the magical barricades without a care in the world, but despite being a thing of shadow, Shiv and Adam noticed how staring upon the wards earlier made their Awareness rattle painfully. That meant that they were dealing with more than the typical assortment of magic. Furthermore, they didn't want to be stained with Divination mana. If they had that coating their body, then their escape would be temporary at best.

Solzimort glided along the ground, his massive presence made unknowable by the fact that he was simply a patch of black overshadowed by explosions large enough to envelop mountains, not to mention that he was further accelerated by Gone's speed. As he blasted through the battlefield faster than most Pathbearers could ever hope to perceive, the group cut past the gap in the mana net before it ever had a chance to close.

And then they were on the other side. But that didn't mean they were free from danger. Beyond the many nets coiling around the supervolcano were legions of Poly-Magi, and more were teleporting in with every passing second. Instead of standing upon an open field, Shiv saw them gathered on what seemed like huge building-sized mithril stages that had pulsing cores of Dimensionality, bringing in reinforcements by the second. There were thousands of them already, and they had the skies encircled, had massive battlelines and trenches forged by Geomancers to deny anyone trying to slip underground.

Rows of Vanguard departed from these stages, bearing their shields high, while Riders, Archers, and Scouts spilled upward, taking designated positions high above. Every few seconds, someone would fire a grand projectile. It would zip through the sky, moving so fast that Shiv struggled to keep track of it, and then it would pass through the magic clutching the supervolcano before striking the ground hard. There was never a moment when the earth wasn't shaking, when there wasn't a concussive impact slapping against an unprotected body. It looked like the Republic's own soldiers were besieging its most protected structure.

Yet despite this, none of them turned any of their attacks upon Solzimort. Adam let out a rasping breath. That was when Shiv knew they might nearly be in the clear. "They don't see us, not even the Psychomancers."

"That's because I'm keeping their attention warded," the Educator commented dryly. "They're fixated on the other prisoners, but even so, your thoughts would have been registered and your presence made known instantly were it not for me. What a boon my presence has proven to be."

"If you're fishing for a compliment, you're gonna be waiting for the rest of eternity," Shiv shot back, but the Deathless made a special note to include a slice of Psychomancy next time as well. He needed to be complete about things if he wanted to hide from the Republic.

As Solzimort continued traveling along the downward slope of the supervolcano, Shiv watched as the many war stages tumbled past them. Soon, they left the coiling storm behind them. As Shiv looked up, he found himself staring at an open sky, a sky that glistened with all the colors of twilight. They hadn't been in that prison for very long, but it felt like years had passed.

The sight made his heart sing. Freedom was a brittle thing, and freedom wasn't yours unless you could use your power to safeguard it. In that moment, Shiv knew Adam was thinking the same thing. He just knew; he didn't even need to look at his friend's face.

The Yellowstone Supervolcano was layered in so many streams of magic that its true form was practically unknowable. However, at its crown, an enormous structure rumbled as if an ancient beast awakened from slumber. At a glance, it resembled a massive dome with three spikes sticking out from it. It was forged of orichalcum at the tips of its spires, but the rest was a mixed assortment of metals. Shiv could glean adamantite, then there was glass, and then there seemed to be flowing pools of magma circulating between each of the three spires, connecting the three sections of the massive edifice with veins of lava. It hovered over the volcano like a crown, and from each of its pointed heights spewed jets of Pyromancy across the city. These expanded into complicated networks in the distance, and as Shiv followed them, he saw they were bound to distant spire tops as well.

Only the tops of those distant spires were visible, however. They were mithril-tipped and magic-conducting, but the streets and distant capital itself were enwreathed in a dense veil of impenetrable darkness. A darkness that belonged to a specific Ascendant.

“Harlock,” Shiv hissed. “We need to get out of here. It’s—”

“Perfectly safe,” the Educator said. She chuckled. “I told you before, boy. They cannot sense me when I bear this tome. It matters little that we sink into his darkness. He is blind to us. And his power is a narrow thing.” A low hum came from the Educator’s mind. “Tell me, Deathless. Have you ever seen the capital before? The seat of the Republic’s power?”

“No,” Shiv said. “And I don’t think it’s the best time to go sightseeing. We need to escape.”

“Oh, and we will. But before that, it’s best for you to get an understanding of the city’s layout. I have a feeling that will be quite important for you in the future. Now. Solzimort, was it? Stop here for a moment.”

“Huh? Why?” the Hydra asked. Shiv wanted to know the same thing.

“Because I’m going to peel away Harlock’s curtain and give our good friend a good look at the jewel of the Yellowstone Republic.”

And with that, a glowing incandescence began to seep out from the patch of shadows that comprised Solzimort's being...

Chapter 199 (I) Capital

Faith is a thing of grave importance, acolytes. Faith allows us to maintain security in our great cities. Ask yourself, what do we have that most other nations don't? Why don't we suffer the indignities of constant brutality and the miseries of meaningless mass death?

Practical faith—with emphasis on the practical.

When we call out to the Ascendants, they are listening, and they are not so far away, not like so many gods who are inscrutable and wayward. Our gods look through us. Our gods protect us. And our gods will use their powers to secure this Republic, this collective home of ours, if we will but act as vessels in surveillance and enforcement.

Faith! Faith is a skill that serves as a portal to the Ascendants. And it is from this portal and fueled by this faith that the Ascendants can reach out through us to deliver judgment on anyone who dares stand astray from the republic. Faith, practical faith, it is what guards us.

So keep the fire inside of you strong and keep your eyes open. So long as faith endures, so too will peace, and thus prosperity follows.

-First Duty of the Faithful — Inquisitorial initiation course

As the Educator's power seeped out from within Solzimort, the distant darkness faded, growing from an impenetrable black to merely being a translucent veil of mist. Shiv tasted the divination and

empowering spell she was weaving. A dizzying array of shapes began dancing and twisting upon the surface of Solzimort, and that power lent itself to everyone within the Hydra as well.

The first thing that came to light was the soil beneath their feet, soil that Shiv hadn't paid any attention to. It ran under them like currents of ash, but it was bright and rich with nutrition. He could practically taste the vitality radiating from it, ruby red and gleeful in intensity.

The Yellowstone Supervolcano rumbled behind them, and waves of heat radiated forth, leaving faint distortions upon the air. The ceaseless clamor of combat continued, but ahead the horizon was clear. They crossed the mess of trench lines fused in the side of the mountain and slipped beyond the hovering stages forged from mithril and the countless members of the Prismatic Guard that spawned from them. Now, the path before them loomed with uncertain promise.

A sea of clouds drifted nearby, splashing against the sloping face of a mountain. They seemed as if the surface of a lake reflecting the sheen of a clear sky. It was then that Shiv realized how high up they were, how grand and tall the supervolcano was, and far below, from end to end, stretching on beyond the bend of the horizon, was the capital of the Yellowstone Republic.

The mithril spires he saw in the distance were connected to the massive castle crowning the apex of the supervolcano. Streams of magma bound the varied peaks that dotted the capital, but below, stripped bare of shadows, was a glorious city forged of brass, silver, and mithril.

Shiv had described Blackedge as quaint and rustic in certain ways. Its architecture was mostly transplanted from a village upon the outer edges of the town. The military installations built upon Blackedge were designed with practicality in mind. They were brutalist structures, made to endure, made to serve as soldiers of war, rather than for any manner of comfort. But ultimately, Blackedge had disarmed, as per the conditions of the treaty, and what followed was something deceptively meager.

As such, Blackedge couldn't be compared to the capital. It barely looked like a place spawned from the same civilization. The first words you would use to describe the capital were vast, grand, and made for walking. The exterior of the houses here reminded him of a beetle's carapace. They were mostly brass, radiating a burnished gleam that was nearly reflective in terms of texture. Silvered filigree outlined the frames of windows and doors, and they continued crawling forth along the exterior of the building, serving as illustrative decor. Even from afar, he could see intricate art pieces depicted by the silver; depictions of people outlined in glimmering traces upon the sides of the buildings.

And then there was the mithril as well. The Republic was rich in that magical-conducting material. It ran from the tops of buildings, connecting each to each in rigging chains. Spellstuff circulated from point to point, and Shiv realized that the mithril supports within the prison had been built similarly. The capital was a network of magic, and using his Farsight, he followed the flow of the mana, watched as it circulated from large towers forged of mithril and guarded by hovering dimensionals.

And that was another thing: the dimensionals. The skies were full of them. But these weren't any kind of dimensional Shiv knew. They were armored, clad in dense adamantine, bearing spear tips imbued with fire, ice, or some other element, holding shields that were not of solid alloy but instead resembled a complex array of ever-shifting constellations. Within their helmets burned a single cyclopean eye, and they scoured the streets below with waves of Divination.

"The Watchers are out," Adam rasped. "And now there's a lot more than I can remember seeing before."

Shiv started counting the Watchers. Each tower seemed to have about four assigned to it. But then, with how wide the capital was and how many mithril towers stood in the distance, the Deathless felt a building sense of awe and apprehension grow within him. They had a few more minutes before the shadow shape infusing Solzimort wore out, but even if the Educator could hide them from the other Ascendants, that didn't stop them from being physically observable.

They needed to find some place to hide, and that wouldn't be on the streets. Not a chance in all the hells.

As Solzimort started moving again, more of the city came into view. Compared to Weave, the Yellowstone Republic's capital was much flatter. Instead of climbing high, it was content to spread. The grand structures of Weave were bathed in the soft glow of night glass, and the structures there were connected by bridges, while people traveled through the air on summoned demons. Here, the airspace belonged to the Prismatic Guard and the so-called Watchers. The chirps of birds were their only companion, and aside from that, the sky was clear.

Upon further observation, the buildings of the capital were often stacked together, connected horizontally before ending along the edge of a street. And the streets here were wide. What counted as a thoroughfare at Blackedge was a common road here. The center of these streets was lined with rolling tiles of polished stone, their color faint and gray, as if to not reflect so much light nor carry too much heat from the glare of the sun.

Flanking the streets were stretches of rich black soil, manicured shrubbery, and constantly blooming plants, erupting in petals of myriad colors, with the palette offering something for every eye to enjoy. Every few meters, there seemed to be a grand pine, or some manner of pointed tree. His eyes fell upon a few of those grand pillars and saw birds perched upon thick branches, yet some of the birds looked different from the others. Some seemed mechanical, their eyes glowing with an automaton's gleam, their wings things of reflective metal.

"Attention citizens, the crisis is still ongoing. The Prismatic Guard is enforcing safety, but as members of this great nation, we ask you to do your part. Shelter in place, prepare to defend your homes if you can, and as always, if you catch sight of someone or something behaving suspiciously, please inform your nearest inquisitor."

The telepathic broadcast washed out from the mithral towers in spreading waves. It looked like translucent eddies dotting the surface of a lake. Even from afar, you could hear the notification repeating over and over again. Looking upon the streets once more, you would realize that there were people fleeing into every building, but some stayed. Some who wore grand arms and emitted powerful magical fields. Some dressed in the regalia of the Prismatic Guard, some who were obviously inquisitors, and some Pathbearers who just didn't seem to care.

Bursts of static blackness caught his attention then, and he looked down to see the doors of one of the mithral towers swing open. He caught sight of the building's inside and saw what looked to be pulsating spheres of Dimensionality.

"Jump towers," Adam told Shiv. "That's probably what you're looking at right now. They're shuttling the auxiliaries all across the city. Soon, the streets will be packed with soldiers. The Geomancers will be arriving first, followed by additional Jump Magi. They're going to be placing wards all over the buildings, making sure that the infrastructure suffers as little as possible should an actual battle take place."

"Why don't we have any of this cool shit at Blackedge?" Shiv muttered.

Adam gave a bitter snort. "I asked my father about that the first time I came back from the capital."

"What'd he say?"

"That anything constituting an arms build-up would be damaging for relations between the surface and the abyss. That the monsters of the Abyss would be provoked by a growing force of arms. The crisis and dilemma of escalation, he called it."

"Yeah, turns out the Republic might be full of shit," Shiv said.

"Turned out that the actual agitators were coming from within," Adam spat.

"So, uh, where should we go now?" Solzimort asked. The Hydra sounded worried, and Shiv didn't blame him. The streets were being swept by beams of Divination. There were people everywhere, and wherever they spotted a threat, one of the mithral towers could simply deploy an emergency wave of troopers to contend with the matter.

"So, what's stopping us from making a run for the border?" Shiv asked, addressing the Educator. "We're fast enough; we can clear the capital in no time at all. We don't need to stay here."

A moment of hesitation followed. Before the Educator could say anything, Shiv's Psycho-Cartography called for him to bite down on her metaphorical neck and be aggressive. "How powerful is that tome of yours anyway? I know that Harlock can't notice us right now, but there's gotta be a reason why you don't just go, 'yeah, let's leave,' if our goal is to escape."

A scoff came from the Educator, and Shiv tasted the frustration radiating from her mind. "All power has limits, and all skills can be countered by another."

"Wait," Adam cut into the conversation. "An incandescence was leaking out from you earlier." A beat followed as the Gate Lord consolidated his thoughts, and when he came to a realization, he announced it with a laugh. "Your tome's emitting divine mana. Are you melding your divinity into Harlock's? Is that how you hide yourself? By using someone else's mana as a cloak?"

The Educator hesitated once more, but this time she let slip a breath of annoyance, and now Shiv let out a bark of amused laughter. "Alright, so that's why we can't make a run for the border. The moment we break free of Harlock's darkness, he'll see us again, because there's nothing hiding where we are. Cute trick. Are you the one doing it, or is that mainly your tome?"

"Whatever the case," the Educator said, her voice thick with suppressed anger as she ignored both Shiv and Adam, "we need to move further into the capital. There is more than one way to escape the city, and powerful though my wayward gods might be, they are not nearly as omniscient and omnipotent as they wish they were."

"Same goes for you, I suppose," Shiv said, directing a final taunt her way.

"Hydra," the Educator snapped. She was effectively done speaking to Shiv and now dispatched orders directly to Solzimort. "Seek out the first of the Mithral towers, the one closest to us. I will direct you using other landmarks once we get there."

But Solzimort didn't move. Instead, he waited for Shiv or Adam to offer their own confirmation.

"So, what do you think?" Adam asked Shiv as the Deathless formed a telepathic link between them

"What do I think? I think that being full of shit and half-witted competence is practically a requirement if one wants to be an Ascendant these days."

"Seems to be the case, doesn't it?"

"So, go along with her?"

"Yeah. I want to see what else we can embarrass her with, and figure out just what she has planned to get us out of this place. If it all goes to hell, we can break from her and go for the border ourselves. She doesn't know about Radio, and I intend to keep it that way."

Once more, they were in motion. Solzimort jetted toward the horizon as if a bolt of lightning cast through the air. Yet, though he moved fast, he made no noise, for he was a thing of shadow, as were all beings melded into his scales. Gone's speed made them agile beyond measure, and in a moment they were in the city, slipping past another layer of wards, gliding by risen battlements and by dutiful watchers and Pathbearers alike.

They were in the thick of the city then, and the colors Shiv once beheld from a distance revealed themselves as Solzimort emerged along the thoroughfare. He crept close to the walls, using other shadows to hide himself, and between that and his speed, they went utterly unnoticed, even as the lockdown tightened around the city. As they drew close to the jump tower, he couldn't help but be enchanted by the surrounding sights.

Plants in bloom glistened as if they had a film of dew sculpted across every petal, along every branch. To call the view scenic was an injustice; things felt cinematic here. There was a dynamic artistry to everything in motion, and despite the horrors he'd experienced in the prison, the thoroughfares of the capital, at least on the surface, seemed like something found in the pages of an idyllic story.

Furthermore, Harlock's darkness thinned in the city itself, and it left most of the streets unburdened by that crushing haze. It was left to the Watchers and guards to serve as observers here.

Once more the warning broadcast repeated itself, and this close, Shiv felt every Psychomantic message hammering against the outer walls of his soul. Some of the utopianism died within him. Though the streets looked pretty and the horticulture was well maintained, it was that pervasive sense of intrusion that reminded him where he was. The Ascendants were watching. The Republic was always on guard, but its blades were pointed within and without, its soldiers meant to face adversaries coming from the outside while also delivering another brand of justice to those who knew too much within.

"Okay, I'm here," Solzimort declared. A grand square was situated just before the front gates of the jump tower. The soft pitter-patter of spring water served as an uncannily comforting ambiance alongside the incessant messages being broadcast. Gorgeous fountains served as the centerpiece of this place.

They were comprised of three rings, and the jets of water sprayed into the air were timed perfectly and painted something of a strange, hydromantic spell. Everything around the fountain was glistening bright, and the moisture in the air seemed to undulate, cleansing everyone nearby. A few Prismatic Guards walked down the street, and as they did, Shiv pointed his Farsight upon them and saw bits of grime and dirt scrubbed free from their bodies.

Farsight 72 > 73

"It gets rather humid and hot here during the summers," Adam commented, "and so some of the fountains have cleansing enchantments worked into them."

"How much investiture does it take?" Shiv asked. "Because this looks expensive to keep up."

"The Republic is quite wealthy." Adam sighed. "How wealthy? I am not sure. Too much has been hidden from me. But from what I have gleaned—the prison and how large the capital truly is when gazed from the side of the volcano—I dare say that the Ascendants can more than afford this, even if it is just a mechanism of vanity."

"Alright, so where do I go next?" Solzimort asked. They were nested right beside one of the jump tower's doors, using another shadow to mask their own presence.

"We wait for a moment," the Educator whispered. "Maiden's hidden eyes were upon us a moment ago."

"You're talking about the mechanical birds in the air?" Adam asked. "Gods... I had to assemble a few of those in the Academy. Part of my engineering course. Are you telling me that I was making surveillance agents for the Ascendants this entire time?"

"What did you think they were, Lord Arrow?" The Educator laughed softly. "The Ascendants do very little without reason, and even less for the vanity of pleasure alone." The alloyed birds fluttered past them. But still they didn't move. "Wait. Just a few seconds longer now. They will do another pass. After that, we will have a window of about a minute to move once more. For now, patience."

Chapter 199 (II) Capital

The Hydra's form was massive, but the gates to the Jump Tower were grand, running thirty meters high into the air. Their exterior was layered in intricate decorations of silver, and it depicted a man in a triangular cap with a feather jutting out from the side, riding upon a mess of snakes. In his right arm was a grand lance, the kind a rider might use when jousting. A smirk adorned the man's face, and faint motes of incandescence leaked from the silver.

"Ah, Longinus," the Educator commented. A snarl of disgust followed thereafter. "If there was an ever more unworthy Ascendant, I wouldn't know where to find one. I would spit upon thee if I could, Longinus." She hummed. "Now, Solzimort. Do you see the large fist looming over those houses to our left?"

It took a while for Shiv to find what she was talking about. 200 meters away, he saw a row of three-story-tall buildings, each of them lined with brass on the outside, framed in silver, and ridden with mithril chains along their sides. They looked expensive, and from within came a heavy pressure, doubtless a Portomancy spell at work. Perhaps something to expand the space within.

But that wasn't what the Educator was talking about. Sticking just above those houses was the tip of a massive fist, shaped like a column of slats of metal put together. It was a fist that Shiv had seen before, had been struck with before. It was a statue made in the image of Cripple's fist, an imposing sight indeed.

"Okay," Solzimort said, "go to the big fist."

They arrived in a blink. They slid around the corner of the Jump Tower and then dashed across the street just as an Observer passed by, finishing its Divination sweep, and Shiv found himself in a different section of the city. Where the bulk of the houses near the supervolcano were static estates that seemed quaint but well maintained, there were clusters of buildings here, packed tight together, with many small-celled rooms lining the walls and countless windows dotting their sides, making them seem as if brass-carved beehives. More mechanical birds lingered from mithril chains connecting each of these cluster residences, and the streets below were packed tight with people.

Most of them weren't of the Prismatic Guard, yet all of them bore various assortments of arms and armor. They stood there, at the ready, gazing upon the explosions blooming atop Yellowstone supervolcano and the castle hovering just over its peak. Nearby, a congregation of automata knelt before the massive fist occupying the intersection of two clashing thoroughfares.

Shiv guessed the automata were acolytes of Cripple, judging from their missing left arms and the way they casually flagellated themselves using whips that sprouted whiskers of razor wire. The backs of their chassis were marred with deep cuts, and a single priest stood above the others, holding its right fist high in prayer.

"O strongest martyr of the Ascendants, martyr of the Republic, heed us now, speak to us now. If there is a time of need, if you demand it, we will give our lives for home, for Earth, for the Grand Program!"

"Grand Program?" Shiv muttered.

"It's what certain automata call the System," Adam explained. "But it's relatively archaic. None of the models made in the last generation refer to it as such."

"And such a tragedy that is," the Educator hummed. "The System grants power, but the System is blind. It was made by something like us, I suspect."

That made Shiv frown internally. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about how human machines are becoming. Yes, the automata were made in our image, of course, but they weren't exactly like us. They didn't develop like us. They didn't have to build and sculpt their descendants specifically like they do now. They didn't decay along a fixed lifespan. No, that is a human thing; first and foremost, an organic thing. And for the automata to suffer this, that means that they are slowly being molded into something they're not. Not consciously, not spiritually, not even physically."

A humorless scoff escaped her. "The Legacy Empire deludes itself into thinking it can deny the System its due, but if there is one thing I can agree with those anti-magi about, it is that we have lost much before the System's power. So much of us has been sheared away."

There was a note of genuine sorrow in the Educator's voice, because of course there would be. She was a sort of historian, judging by the way she spoke about things, by what she had recorded in her tome. She might lie to us and be in league with Udrael, but part of her still yearns for truth, something that

isn't masked by propaganda or the elements of age, Shiv realized. That might be an angle to get more information from her. Gotta keep an eye out for artifacts or pieces from history. Wait, doesn't Can Hu count as that?

Psycho-Cartography: Yes. Perhaps it's best that we have it speak to her when we get a chance. But should we have to fight her, we have an angle to weaken her now. After all, she is less than even a relic. She is forgotten. And she can be made into glass by Sticks and Stones because of it.

"Between the houses on our right, do you see it, the alleyway?" the Educator asked the Hydra, unaware of Shiv's musings.

Solzimort shifted subtly. The shadow constituting his scales returned beneath a cart. He was blended with the cart's shade, but a tip of his toe still stuck out, and that provoked one of the nearby Pathbearers to turn and narrow his eyes.

"Solzimort, hold," Adam hissed. The Hydra went still. The Pathbearer stared at Solzimort's shadow for a few moments longer and then looked up. A flag was flapping high above. It bore the Republic's emblem: thirteen mithril spires—one partially eroded—planted atop the apex of a fissuring volcano.

The Pathbearer let out a breath and ran a hand across his face. "Really need to stop knocking back those jugs of absinthe..."

As he turned away, Solzimort moved as Adam gave his confirmation of their safety. Solzimort cut between the two residential clusters that the Educator spoke of, and there, behind in the alley, they found a round staircase leading down. Sounds echoed up the stairs, and Shiv knew there were people far below. Yet, he couldn't quite see them and was beginning to get an apprehensive feeling about what he was looking at. "What, are we going to hide in someone's basement now? What is this place?"

"Don't be absurd, boy. It's far more than just a basement, and there are secrets in the Republic grander than you can imagine. Routes and benefactors unknown to even the Ascendants."

"Educator," Adam said, his voice thin with exhaustion, "if we go down there and I find a Raven waiting for us, I'm going to beat you to death with the bastard's helmet."

"I do not deal with those I cannot control or do not understand," the Educator replied with a breath of haughtiness. "New Albion will do all they can to seize you from me. This, I know. But by what means? This, I do not know. There is no arrangement with me, for ignorance leaves me disarmed—and I refuse to be disarmed. Now. Hydra. Into the depths."

Psycho-Cartography: Risk aversion. We can bluff her. Keep track of that.

Psycho-Cartography 90 > 91

Solzimort was large, but that mattered little when one could phase through matter. He glided through the stones and stairs, and upon reaching the bottom, Shiv saw the walls lined with barrels and taps. Glowing droplets of magically charged alcohol dripped from brass liquor dispensers, and Shiv saw groups of goblins filling large mugs before returning to a stretch of tables.

There, at the far end of the room, was a massive sign that read "No elves, humans, bots, or dogs allowed."

“Charming place,” Shiv said sardonically. “Is there an Ascendant of racism? Is that what we’re relying on to keep us from being discovered?”

“Not quite. But the Pathbearer we will have to use to smuggle you into the Prismatic Guard is known for having more than a few peculiarities.”

“What?” Adam said. “What in the Broken Moon do you mean by ‘smuggle us into the Prismatic Guard’?”

“I mean that it is the only reliable way in and out of the city now. The Ascendants will keep the capital locked and warded, and the only ones that will be allowed to flow freely will be their soldiers. The only ones with access to the Jump Towers going in and out of the city will be the Guard. The solution, then, is quite simple, isn’t it?”

“I...” the Gate Lord struggled to find the words. “Are we about to meet some underground Biomancer?”

“Oh, no, dear boy. The flesh is not the only thing that needs to change. We need your skill statuses and very souls to be masked as well. That way, you will be able to come and go in the future—and it will be essential for us to secure that measure of freedom at the very least. Now. Hydra. As you will.”

A moment passed. Solzimort did nothing.

“Hydra? Return to your original form.”

“Uhhh,” Solzimort mumbled. “Dunno how.”

“He’s probably going to have to wait it out,” Shiv said. “Effect of the meal’s probably going to run for ten minutes. After that, he’ll go back to being normal. We’re going to have to wait.”

The Educator huffed. “Weaknesses, limitations, and counters. It applies to every—”

“Custiel!” A voice bellowed from up the stairs. Heavy footsteps came hammering down, and the Educator fell silent. “Custiel!” Came another ragged cry. The man’s words were slurred and furious, and when he came into view, Shiv felt his insides pinch as he saw a heavily-armored Pathbearer wearing the regalia of the Prismatic Guard.

“Well, Educator, I think we’re going to need a second place to go, because this one’s compromised.”

“Custiel! You bastard! Come out! It didn’t work. The enchantment didn’t work!” The rainbow-plated Pathbearer stomped into the goblin speakeasy, and most of them groaned and spat at the ground as he approached.

“Hey, asshole,” a blue-eyed goblin sitting on a high chair by the entrance and holding a cigar between her pointed teeth said as she gestured at the sign. “You got a Legendary Illiteracy Skill or something?”

“No. I got a non-functional set of armor, and now the rest of the guard is looking for me. As fucking such, your boss owes me a stack of mithril.”

“Oh, does he, now?” she sneered. “What're you gonna do? Report him to the guard?” The other goblins in the room roared with laughter. But it quickly died down as the armored Pathbearer reached up. Hands went to daggers and shaped quick spells.

But rather than clutching the halberd and shield hanging from his back, the armored Pathbearer removed his helmet and tossed it aside. Shiv saw a smear of blood on the back of the helmet—along with bits of skull tissue. It looked like the armored Pathbearer had used it to smash someone's face in at some point. “Not the guard. But I can go to the Dragon Brokers. And I can see your Neath protections revoked. So. You tell him to come out. You tell him to do the job right, or I need my mithril back.”

The Pathbearer's eyes were wild and bloodshot hazel. He had a mess of stubble covering his face, and it looked like he had grains of sand dotting his head. His cheekbones were high, and his chin was practically a square wedge. If Shiv tried to imagine a generic Vanguard, this would be the face that appeared in the depths of his mind. But while the Deathless took in the man's features without much reaction, Adam's breath hitched.

“C-captain Irons?” he choked out, voice high with disbelief.

“Irons?” Shiv said. “Your old Tac-Strat instructor at the Academy?”

“Yes,” Adam breathed. “What in the felling hells is he doing here?”

“A most excellent question,” the Educator said. “Unanticipated as well. Hydra. Shift to the corners. We observe.”

The twenty or so goblins scattered across the room shot each other looks. After all the bloodshed Shiv had gone through, he was battle-hardened enough to tell how dangerous someone was at a glance. These goblins weren't. They lacked armor, their mana fields were those of Low Adepts at best, and their knives didn't look like combat-dedicated designs. More than that, they were scared. Shiv could read the fear in their body language and in the twitching movements of their eyes.

Comparatively, Irons was angry, but he didn't regard the goblins as threats at all. "Bring him out," he repeated, voice hard. "Don't keep me waiting. I don't want to hurt any of you, but the same rules that apply to me apply to you. I won't kill you. I will take your hands. I will ruin your establishment. And you will live to lose this little patch of sanctuary. Neither of us wants that. Just make this easy for all of us and bring him out. Please. The life of one of my students depends on it."

Chapter 200 (I) Neath [I]

Neath is shorthand for beneath; it is also the name attributed to the greater criminal underworld of Integrated Earth. Though there are cutthroats, thieves, smugglers, and more within every major nation or empire, the true underbelly of crime is organized and governed by the Dragon Brokers, an enigmatic group of Pathbearers who have existed since time immemorial.

Under their management, the desperate and powerless have another option rather than participating in the games of polite society. Also, practically anything can be bought in the Neath, provided one has the mithril or the capability to exchange favor for favor. And that is the ultimate currency which fuels the Neath: favors owed by powerful individuals.

For at some point, you will need someone to help you, and very often you will need that help to go against the very society you were born in, or to exact retribution on someone far beyond your station. After that, one of your skills will be ritualistically bound, and soon, even if you don't understand it, you will be inducted into a new world—a world of shadows, deception, crime, and unending debt.

For once you sink below the surface, you will either learn to breathe in the fetid waters of the Neath, or you will drown, and your body will never be found. Remember this: Everything has a consequence. Everything has a cost. What are you willing to pay?

-What Lurks Below: An Exposé on the Hidden World of Organized Crime (Banned by Republic authorities for unlawful slander and fearmongering)

Seconds passed, and no one in the cellar said anything. The cigar-chewing goblin sighed and slammed two clawed hands upon her knees. She wore dusty overalls, and a hard hat hung lopsided on her head. He guessed she was a builder of some kind. Construction by the look of it. So why was she down here, and why was she serving the role of a goon?

"Listen," she said. "You sound honest, you sound desperate, and you sound absolutely stupid for invoking the Dragon Brokers. You know they don't much like that, right? Other people invoking their power to get something? It's not how business is done down here." The goblin had a faint sneer on her face, but she was mostly projecting a front of strength rather than actually being a thing of courage.

"It's exactly how business is done down here," Irons said without any hesitation. "I needed their help because I was going to do something that I otherwise couldn't. It's as you said. I was desperate, and this is stupid. But I'll do desperate and stupid if it means preserving a life. So, again: Custiel. I need to see him. And I need to find a way back into Flamecrown Castle."

The moment he said that, the goblins in the room slammed their little hands over their ears. Some of them mumbled, one started loudly singing "Lalalala", and the others rolled their eyes.

"Don't say that shit out loud, man," the cigar-chewing goblin groaned. "None of us need to know that. Now we're gonna all have to go visit a Psychomancer and get that cut out of our minds." She mumbled under her breath as she got to her feet.

She tore across the room, but rather than approach Captain Irons, she ran to the back, where several massive barrels loomed. She crawled up to the first two rows, and by the time she got to the third, she reached higher and turned one of the taps above her. In an instant, a spray of foaming amber crashed down on her head like a waterfall. Shiv was confused as to why she did that, but then the waterfall wrapped around her. The alcohol came alive with Hydrokinetic mana. A moment later, the goblin was gone, drained into the narrow nozzle of the liquor dispenser.

"Oh, that is clever," Adam said, "but that also requires a very specific Skill Evolution."

"Specific skills, indeed," the Educator added. "Specific skills that we will need to make use of. That's where we're going as well, across that nozzle, to see this Custiel."

Shiv grunted in surprise. "Wait, you don't know who we're going to see?"

"I knew the location. I have contacts in the Neath, but individual names and specific Pathbearers? No. And often you have to surrender this knowledge afterward."

"Surrender how?" Shiv asked.

"Psychokinetically," the Educator explained.

That didn't sit well with the Deathless. He was willing to give up a lot of things, but his memories? No. And letting someone else reach into his mind? He was done with that. He'd faced enough threats to know how treacherous it was to let someone influence your consciousness.

"Yet, this Captain Irons of yours still seems to remember the expert that offered this service," the Educator hummed. Shiv guessed she was observing the Vanguard staring all the goblins down. "If I am to guess, he came to get the same thing we're about to. Shell identities, false semblances to fool anyone trying to Analyze him. And I also suspect I know why his last shell failed."

Shiv thought about that for a moment, and he cast his Psychomancy into Adam specifically. "False souls, shell identities. Sounds a little bit like something I used to have."

"Yes. Your mask. Still broken, is it?"

"Haven't had the chance to fix it. Too busy doing hard time in jail."

"Right. But if we could get it to work again, Can Hu could potentially rebuild it."

"Can it do that without your Unique mana core? And do we have the time to do that while most of the capital is on a manhunt for our asses?"

Adam sighed. "Good point. Besides, even if we manage to fix that mask, it will only hide one of us. And probably not you."

"You mean probably not me," Shiv said.

"Oh, come now, Shiv. We both know how well your undercover attempts go."

"Hey, listen, the last time was complete bullshit. I would have done great undercover if 812 hadn't stabbed me in the ass the moment I got in. Hells, before I got in. That felling shit was waiting to screw me over from the start."

"Excuses, excuses," the Gate Lord tutted.

"To hells with you, Arrow. You know I'm right."

"So, out of curiosity, I just want to ask," another goblin said to Irons, "you don't need to tell me too much about what you were doing, but, you know, how'd shit go wrong? And how'd you make it out after? It looks like you bashed someone with that helmet of yours."

Irons's hazel eyes snapped to the goblin in an explosive instant. The speed at which he turned his gaze told Shiv the man likely had at least Master-Tier Reflexes. The rest of him was harder to gauge. He wore heavyset armor, so Shiv assumed him to be a Master in Physicality at least. But he couldn't detect any obvious magic from the man. That didn't mean that Irons didn't have any, but if he did, it was either a particularly subtle Skill Evolution or one of the few lores Shiv didn't have access to, like Aeromancy or Geomancy.

"My shell failed," Irons said. "It managed to get me pretty deep into the castle, but broke near the end. I need a new one. And quick."

The goblin he was speaking to looked troubled. This one wasn't dressed like the one that went seeking Custiel. Rather, he wore a blazer with fine slacks and leather shoes. Most goblins didn't wear shoes; their clawed appendages made it hard, but this one seemed to make a special attempt at being dressed

properly. Furthermore, he also had a pair of spectacles and a gray beret placed atop his head. From the sluggishness of his motion, this goblin wasn't a warrior at all. Sub-Adept in terms of Reflexes. Maybe an accountant or something logistical, Shiv guessed.

"Custiel's shells never fail," the goblin declared. A few of the others nodded along, but Shiv read something on their faces, something left unsaid.

"They did for me," Irons insisted. He wasn't emotional when he justified himself, but there was a heat in his voice, and Shiv guessed that Captain Irons was a man who held himself to a strict rigor, governed himself by way of practice, discipline, and martial honor. But the last part meant that he wasn't far from violence either.

"Did you run into any of the Ascendants?" the well-dressed goblin asked.

Irons didn't answer immediately. Another of the goblins let out a huffing breath. This one wore an apron, and its front side was stained with blood. Butcher, Shiv guessed. "Yeah, if you run into a divine entity, it's gonna break. Custiel's a Legend, but, you know, Legends ain't really gods, friend. You gotta be a little bit more careful when you're running under the noses of the biggest of the big."

"Biggest of the big," the Educator echoed scornfully. "As if we are anything more than up-jumped children. This power is not even ours."

That caught Shiv's interest. "Maia," he said, invoking the Educator's real name, as he'd learned from Cripple. He felt a brief spike of alarm come from her, and it was followed by a wave of abrasive fury.

"Never call me that."

"Maia," Shiv said again, partly because he felt like being an asshole, but ultimately because the Educator couldn't really do anything to him, not without Udrael getting mad, and not without betraying their position. "If you hate being an Ascendant so much, why did you bother taking on the power in the first place?"

"Because I wanted to survive. Because I was young. Because I was foolish. Because I was easily goaded, just like I'm easily goaded right now. Because the System is determined to force me into these miserable circumstances, in which I have to work with fools and killers." As she finished her diatribe, the rage inside her simmered down. "Because I didn't know the cost. I couldn't have known. And now I feel it fully. And I experience taunts from the world, even when they're not directed at me."

Just then, the goblin that had left through the tap returned. A spray of foam filled the space beneath the dispenser, and she came striding free, stepping out from the brightly fizzling alcohol as if it were nothing more than a membrane. "Alright, man-ape. Custiel's feeling generous. Actually, Custiel's got a few questions for you too. You're clear to go across, but uh, don't cause any trouble. You ain't the only guest in right now, and I don't think you wanna piss off that other hard customer, lest you want two new holes in your neck." The goblin laughed nastily.

Irons's eyes narrowed. "You do business with the Boodspawn here too?"

"What do you think this is? We're in the Neath, dipshit. We do business with whoever pays. With whoever's stupid or desperate. You think only humans can be stupid or desperate?"

Though his displeasure and wariness were evident, Irons didn't have a better choice. He walked past the goblins, but never once did he take his eye off them. He crossed along the corner of the room so they couldn't ambush him from two sides. Shiv hadn't studied strategy or tactics, but he'd been in enough battles now to pick up a few things instinctively. This man was a warrior, a warrior of the body and a warrior of the mind. And now, he was a warrior in a place he shouldn't be, doing something Shiv didn't

understand. Being about three times the size of a goblin, he didn't need to climb up on the dispensers to turn the tap. As soon as he touched it, the spray redirected itself, and the golden liquid swallowed him in an instant. A second later, he was drained up through the nozzle into the barrel and went wherever the hard-hat-wearing goblin did earlier.

"Okay, following him's going to be a bit of a mess," Shiv said. He could faintly follow the Hydromancy at play here. The spell extended out and wrapped around Irons's body, but it immediately converted him to liquor a moment after. Then he was gliding through the pipes, and Shiv had no idea where he was anymore.

"I can't follow him either," Adam said.

"Not even with your Seer of Horizons?" Shiv asked, surprised.

Adam clicked his tongue. "There's a very clever mechanism in one of those pipes. It's a Portomancy spell. The liquor is getting redirected to somewhere else entirely. In fact, I think whoever's moving Irons is the one casting through that portal in the first place."

"Lot of effort to smuggle someone across. Feels like something you'd only read about in a cheap spy thriller," Gone commented. The Legendary goblin let out a quiet breath, and the darkness that comprised Solzimort shivered in response. "We can try talking with them in a moment. Solzimort, drop me in the corner of the room. I'll incapacitate them, see if I can secure an invite for the rest of us."

"That's an option," Shiv said, "but there's a problem with that. That liquor has to come out and wrap around you, and it seems that one of these goblins has to inform whoever's on the other side before they use their Hydromancy to transport anyone. Could end pretty badly for us if they think we're trying to ambush them or something. They might just dump us out on the street through some spigot or something. Then we'll have the Prismatic Guard and the Ascendants back on our asses again. We're

really not that far from the volcano. Anything happens and we go loud, then we're gonna be running for our lives."

"It's getting worse outside as well," Adam said. "I took a peek at the streetsides above us. There are more Prismatic Guard patrolling than I ever remembered seeing in all my years here. I also saw the magical netting surrounding the Yellowstone Supervolcano ruptured in several places."

"So, what, there are Legendary-Tier fugitives on the loose in the capital?" Shiv asked.

"I hope not," Adam said softly. "I hope they were intercepted by the Wardens or the Ascendants."

"You hope not?" Gone said thinly.

"Yes, I do. Listen, I don't mean it that way, Gone. We wouldn't have made it out without you or Solzimort or Candles or a great many people. But do you really trust them? I barely know you. Thus far, I'm quite pleased with you as a companion due to your capabilities and your character. But how many other prisoners could you say the same about? How many other prisoners would you trust with your life? With the lives of random citizens?"

When Gone didn't say anything, Shiv knew she saw Adam's point. Furthermore, he thought back to her request, for a member of their escape party was the exact kind of prisoner Adam was worried about. Kura had murdered an entire family, down to the youngest. And doubtless she was listening, but she didn't say anything either.

"It's bad enough that we have to work with a Forgotten Ascendant," Adam scoffed. "And no, Educator, you're not getting any apologies from me. Again, we're putting up with you, and you're putting up with

us. Nothing more than that. I'd also like for you to explain more of your thinking to the rest of us, instead of just pointing us around. We can provide a great deal of valuable input, you know? I, too, have deep knowledge of the city, and have lived here for a great many years. Perhaps not in this district specifically, but I know a good portion of the mid-ring, and I've toured all the grandest gates of the capital. I dare say I know a few secrets here that are even beyond you." A few moments passed. "Educator?"

No reply came. For a second, Shiv wondered if she was simply fixated on something else, or if she was too annoyed to continue trading jabs with the rest of them. But something told him that she wasn't here at all. There was an odd feeling of absence.

"She's focused on her own plans, and earlier she was pretty interested in Captain Irons," Shiv suddenly said. "Adam, I don't think she's inside your Awareness anymore. I think she took a leap into Irons."

The Gate Lord realized a moment thereafter. "Oh, godsdamn her! What's she trying to do? Did she just leave us?"

"I don't think so," Shiv said. He considered Irons and how he was drawn across the tap once more. "I think she's solving our problem for us right now. We can only be transported from the other side, right? She'll probably incapacitate everyone there before forcing whatever Hydromancer they have to do what she asks."

"We won't need to deal with any of these goblins," Adam concluded. "We'll be able to go across directly."

Just as they reached that realization, the tap that the goblin and Irons both turned began to groan as its nozzle burst apart in a spray of ringing fragments. A rush of liquor splashed down on the ground, and the foaming fluid created a steady waterfall. The goblins jerked back in startlement. Several tumbled out

from their chairs; others knocked their own drinks over. Shiv, however, noticed how the waterfall of alcohol didn't puddle on the ground. It continued streaming hard against the floor, but it didn't spread. It was as if it were a pillar holding in place, or a stable portal.

Chapter 200 (II) Neath [I]

"What the hells was that?" the hard-hat-wearing goblin hissed. She stared at the spraying liquor and narrowed her eyes. "Damn it, did that oversized ape break the tap? Come on!" She bounced over to where the tap was, but as she did, Solzimort let out a soft gasp.

"Uh, uh, guys, I think, I think I feel the dark peeling away from me." And true to his word, the effects of the meal were fading. Solzimort shrank down, sinking into the stonework below the cellar, keeping them away from sight. The goblins were turned away from them, so they saw nothing. But Shiv wasn't going to let that opportunity pass by.

"Gone? You got this?" the Deathless asked.

"Of course," she replied. "Just have the Hydra let me go, and I'll deal with them."

"Don't kill anyone," Shiv said. "If you need someone to back you up, me and Adam are here."

"Not necessary," Gone said, sounding slightly annoyed.

"Solzimort," Shiv said, "unfuse us."

"Are... are you sure?" the nervous Hydra stammered. "I'm much bigger than you guys. It's probably much safer for you to stay inside me."

"Probably is," Shiv said, not bothering to argue with the twelve-headed creature. The Hydra didn't mean ill, and most of his thoughts were emotionally based. Logic wouldn't work, he was certain about that. "But right now, you might be too big, and we don't want to crush any of these goblins. They just need someone a little bit bigger than them to show them what to do."

"Okay," Solzimort said, though he still sounded worried. "If anything goes wrong, just run back into this corner. I'll be waiting here. We can sink down, really, really far down."

Shiv had to say one thing about Solzimort: the Hydra was reliable. And despite being terrified, he was willing to continue serving, protecting Adam and everyone else. There's still something we're missing about him, he thought. But on the surface, you won't find many Pathbearers like him. When was the last time we met someone who was genuinely good to the bone?

As Solzimort released Gone, Shiv glanced at Adam, who stepped free from the Hydra's mouth alongside him. In the time he took to glance at his friend, Gone dealt with the other goblins. A series of thuds and cracks filled the cellar. By the time he laid eyes on Gone again, she was piling a mess of groaning goblin goons in the other corner of the room. She dusted her hands and all but reappeared next to him. "Barely Adepts," she said, sounding like someone who had accidentally stepped on a cockroach or dog shit. "Nothing to worry about."

It was at this point that Shiv also noticed the half-drained beer jug she was holding. "Did you steal a moment to have a drink?" Shiv asked.

Solzimort's barbed head stuck out from the corner of the room, sniffing. "Ugh, alcohol?" The Hydra gagged.

"It took you guys a while to respond," Gone said, shrugging. "And I haven't had beer in..." She trailed off. Her eyes went somewhere distant. "...haven't had beer for a long time."

Shiv felt a wave of sympathy wash through him. "Yeah, well, you enjoyed that. You earned it. Adam, here's what I think. I think I'm gonna go across. I'm gonna find out what's happening on the other side. And I think that if I smell bullshit going on, or if there's an ambush waiting for us, I'm going to blink back here to my temporal anchor, and we're gonna tear off in any direction that isn't here. Might need an alternative way out of this place without the Educator's assistance."

The Gate Lord nodded along, and he furrowed his brow as he pondered their options. "Might have an idea. It's a long shot, but at Phoenix Academy, there are experimental teleportation devices. I don't think they're free of the Ascendants' influence, and they'll probably have agents there waiting to intercept us, because they know my history. But it's the only other thing I can think of right now."

"Right, you keep thinking. I'm gonna go take a liquor bath."

"Shiv! Wait!"

The Deathless paused mid-step. "Yeah?"

"Captain Irons... Make sure the Educator hasn't done anything to him. I—he is a good man. Rough, but good."

Shiv nodded. "I'll do whatever I can."

He walked closer to the spilling liquor and took in a deep breath. The radiating waves of Hydromancy glided along the sides of that waterfall, and he wondered what he was about to step into. Nothing ventured, he mouthed, nothing gained.

He entered the threshold of foam and bubbling liquid. It splashed against his body and crashed against his Shapeless Tides. Shiv had to bid his Legendary skill to go quiet before he was drawn across. A power seized him, made him shrink and disperse. He melded with the liquor. The sensations were indescribable. One moment, he was whole and heavy. The next, he was freer and lighter, but he couldn't move himself at all. A brief spike of panic passed through him, but he regained control of himself before he could revert his personal timeline.

His own Hydromancy was weak, but it was enough for him to gauge where he was going. He slid up and around a series of pipes before suddenly a pocket of Dimensionality intercepted him. A crushing pressure made the currents carry him thin, and then he was in another set of pipes thereafter, cascading along until he finally hit a curving bend and splashed down on the ground once more.

Hydromancy 15 > 16

He thudded hard upon tiled flooring and stepped free of another foam wall with his Last Morsel raised high. The absurdity of brandishing a frying pan as a weapon occurred to the Deathless, but he didn't care. He was proud of his frying pan, and it was a dangerous frying pan. And soon, he would cook and dice up anything that dared stand in the way of him and his Legendary cooking utensil.

The same couldn't be said for the people in the other room. The Educator shook her head as Shiv arrived, ignoring him as one would a mild annoyance. Irons grunted as he tried to pry off a trail of pencil markings running across his body. He was pinned to the wall, and a graphene border was sketched over him.

Nearby, a puddle of blood ran smeared along the floor. Something about the floor caught Shiv's attention. It was tiled—shower-tiled, and there was a drain at the center of the room. The ground was slick with more than water, and Shiv could feel powerful waves of Biomancy radiating from somewhere nearby. Master-Tier...

There was also an operating table of some kind. It, too, was completely painted red, and bits of viscera remained there. Shiv extended a mana Hydra and gritted his teeth as he recognized some of the substance. That was vampire blood. Only vampire blood responded that way, only vampire blood was that animated. He could taste the scent in the air with his damaged armor too.

Might even be an elder. They usually have more of a coppery taste... Shit, I've been fighting and killing too many people. Can tell how old a vampire is by scent now.

Farsight 73 > 74

Curled up into a ball near the only door to this macabre chamber was a goblin, and it was one of the largest goblins that Shiv had ever met. He was practically big enough to reach Shiv's lower chest, quite the feat considering most humans were a head shorter than Shiv as well. The goblin had rows of glistening studs embedded into his arms, and a leather vest, along with some denim shorts, were all that he wore.

Denim, Shiv said, doing a double-take. He only knew what denim was because certain customers at the Swan Eating Toad had eccentric tastes. One of them wanted to start a shop in Blackedge. All Denim Denny's. It didn't take off. A pang of sadness followed inside Shiv. He didn't know if Denim Denny was still alive. Something told him not to hope.

"The hells is this?" Shiv asked casually as he gestured with his frying pan. "And a little heads-up would've been nice. We could have just assumed you dipped out and went our own way."

The Educator rolled her eyes. "This is me making sure that we have a way out of the Capitol. And that there in the corner is our way."

Shiv looked at the goblin again, and he let out a quiet breath of disappointment. "Well, our way doesn't look very impressive. Also, our way might have shit and pissed himself."

"You... you have no idea who you're dealing with," the goblin—the one Shiv guessed was Custiel—said through sobs. He peered through his clawed hands and noticed Shiv for the first time. He went still. His legs extended forward, and he stopped curling so much. "Who... who are you? I... I need to tell you, you... you don't know what you've just done. The Dragon Brokers, they won't stand for this! They'll send people after you."

"The Dragon Brokers will be properly compensated for any disturbances," the Educator said genially. "I'll cover whatever monetary losses have been sustained during this period, both theirs and yours. Right now, I wish for you to listen. There are several individuals I need you to create a shell for. Specialized shells. Legendary-Tier shells. I need the full suite. I need disguises for their skill statuses and for their physical appearances. I need documentation, and I need access to the local Jump Towers. The identities you will make for me must be Prismatic Guard members in profession. High-ranking ones capable of leaving the city in dire circumstances."

As the Educator continued listing off her demands, Shiv walked over to Captain Irons. Shiv leaned closer to the man, and Irons narrowed his eyes at him. He bared his teeth and struggled hard against the border. Shiv shook his head. "Yeah, it doesn't really work. It's kind of a bullshit skill. Force doesn't do anything."

Irons calmed for a moment. "I don't know what this is, but—"

"You're looking for Adam Arrow?" Shiv whispered.

Irons went still. "Adam? What? No. Why? Is he..." Just then, Shiv's notification loaded. Irons's jaw dropped open wide. "You... You're the—"

"Ignore that," Shiv interrupted. He was getting very tired of this. "Okay, wait. So you weren't trying to break into the Rubix Well to save Adam?"

"Adam was in the fucking Rubix Well?" Irons snarled under his breath. "What did that fool boy do to get put there?" A sigh followed. "More like what did his fool father do to implicate him. Godsdamn it, Roland. I told you. I told you to wait. Be more patient. You never listen."

Shiv read Irons's expression and realized it was genuine concern on the man's face. Irons was a hard character; Shiv could read that from his posture, from his constant attempts to break free of the Educator's etching. But he did care for his students. I guess that gives me an answer,

Shiv thought to himself. How many pure-hearted Pathbearers are there in the world? Apparently, I'm two for two in a very short period of time.

"He's with me right now," Shiv said on a whim, taking a chance with Irons. "He's safe. Well. He's alive. Can't say anyone's safe now. Especially not around me. We got some heavy heat on our asses."

Irons went still, his pupils dilated. "Adam? But why? Why is he here? How did he end up in the Capital Rubix Well?"

Shiv gritted his teeth. "It's not really his fault. It's a big fucking mess happening inside the Republic. Worse than you can possibly think."

"I sincerely doubt that," Irons said with a bitter grunt. "Another of my students went missing. Do you know Melissa Harrington? Wait, who are you? Are you from one of my classes?"

Shiv collapsed his helmet, and Irons's jaw couldn't fall any lower.

"Harlon?!" he sputtered. "Harlon Lowe—"

"Nah," Shiv said, cutting the captain off once again, "He's dead. I'm his son."

Irons blinked, and he swallowed. "Son... I didn't..." He fell silent and frowned. "And who is she?" he asked, nudging his head in the direction of the Educator.

"Do not tell him anything else," she snapped, looking over her shoulder.

Shiv ignored her. "Just some Forgotten Ascendant. No one you'd remember."

And in a heartbeat, she slammed into him, pressing a brush against his throat. “Do you enjoy testing my patience, boy?”

Shiv bit back a snarl as he felt her Animancy-tipped paintbrush pierce his Shapeless Tides, but he continued speaking to Irons as he ignored the Educator. “She does this sometimes. Very emotional. Terrible self-control. Guess that comes with her divine degeneration. Or maybe she always had a shit personality.”

The brush pressed harder. Shiv just rolled his eyes. “Drive it in if you want. You don’t talk to me about what you’re planning, and I don’t give a shit about who I talk to or about what.”

“You have implicated him in something beyond his meager life,” she hissed. “You have sealed his fate.”

The Deathless finally turned to glare at the Educator. “Right. And were you going to let him live if I didn’t show up? Or would you paint him into your book like you did that vampire after interrogating him?”

The Educator didn’t say anything. She just glared. He met her withering gaze with a flat look of unimpressed scorn. “You’re all broken,” Shiv said. “I’d call you spent and ruined, like a rusted relic, but you’re really not worth that much. Get your shit together, Educator. You wanna work together? Talk like a grown woman. You want me to keep your secrets? Stop playing cloak-and-dagger games without telling us. Otherwise, this is the best you can hope for.”

Her face twisted in a snarl, and Shiv wondered if she might just finish him off. But then she stepped away and stormed toward the goblin once more.

“Ascendant,” the stunned-looking Irons breathed. “Forgotten.”

“Yeah. You might just be one of the unluckiest bastards on Earth. We’re in a bit more trouble than you are.”

The captain considered that for a moment and chuckled. “I still doubt it. She wouldn’t be the first Ascendant I fled from this day. I barely survived the last one too.”

“What?” Shiv asked. “What do you mean?”

“I think I’m being hunted by Daughter,” Irons said. “I ran into her in Flamecrown Castle while searching for my student. Barely got away. Something happened to Daughter—a cut opened up on her head just as she was about to drive a blade through my chest.”

And now it was Shiv’s turn to be flabbergasted. A laugh escaped him. It started as a snort, then it grew to a guffaw. Soon, he was almost doubled over, and Irons stared at him like he was insane.

“A red-white scar?” Shiv asked between wheezing breaths.

Irons frowned. “How’d you know that?”

“Captain Irons, you might just be one of the luckiest bastards on Integrated Earth.”

