

Deathless 211

Chapter 211 (I) Campus [II]

Listen, the first thing you should do if you end up getting the Foreshadowing Skill is killing yourself. I'm serious. Kill yourself. It—it's the only way out. The System is a fuck. It wants you to suffer. It wants you to be miserable. It's gonna break you.

The visions are like a chain of knives scheduled to—to go up your ass. And you gotta deal with them at the last minute. Or... or you get knife-fucked. You ever been knife-fucked, kids? I have. It takes things from you. Precious things. I'm not the same man. [Sobbing] I used to have a full head of hair. It was like a horse's mane. It was beautiful. Now I'm nothing. Now I drink just to get by—this thing I'm holding got enough alcohol to burn through a goblin's gut.

Two—two nights, I got a vision. Was trying to sleep off the worst headache but then I get this vision—you ever see an orc fill a woman with water till her stomach pops? I—they know it fucks me up, so they keep doing it! THE FUCKS KEEP DOING IT! I CAN'T TAKE IT! STOP! STOP! CULTURIST! YOU FUCKKKKK! STOP IT! STOPPP!

Then... then right after that, I get to see—my wife. My second vision was my wife. Got put right inside her head. Twenty-three years of marriage, and I'm there with her in the vision, and leaning over her is my brother, and he's thrusting away, just—just slapping it hard.

[Sobbing intensifies]

I didn't wanna know. I mean, I already knew, but I didn't wanna—I know I'm a cuck, System. I know. I'm never at home. I never get to spend any time with people I care about. I drink. I'm a piece of shit. I drink! I drink! I drink because it's the only peace I can have! I don't want these visions anymore, I don't want to!

Kids! One of you kill me! I'm too much of a coward to do it myself. I need one of you to—no, stop! Let me go! These kids need to kill me! KILL MEEEE!

-Legend-Seer Kevin DeWitt of Killenn, Lone Star, to Graduating Cadets from Alamo Academy (A formal apology was issued later by the official Council of Killenn; no response from Legend-Seer Kevin DeWitt)

An explosion went off inside Shiv's head. It was like every overdue vision he'd avoided experiencing in the past few months was all slamming into him at the same time. His senses went haywire. He plunged deeper into himself—couldn't feel his own skin or even Irons trying to hold him up. As he fell, something dragged him across time and space, stuffing him deeper into another body, making him see through another set of eyes—a pair that most definitely didn't belong to him.

Non-Sequitur: Prophetess Andra Culdottier barely managed to break through the protective spells projected by the Prismatic Guard in time to flee from the Ascendants. Many of her fellow prisoners weren't so lucky. It was only through a combined effort between her, High Marshal Urri of the Vultegs, the automaton known as Divider, and the unseen assassin calling herself Breeze that they managed this escape.

They butchered enough of the Prismatic Guard to collapse a Poly-Magi formation and weaken the wards. When that happened, Andra struck across the narrative threshold of the System itself, casting her Divination mana out through the ruptured barriers before isolating the Dimensionalists among the Republic's forces and flinging javelins of ice through their bodies.

When they fell, the Spatial Wards weakened as well, and that allowed Divider to teleport them away from the supervolcano.

But that didn't mean they were free. The capital itself was engulfed by Harlock's divine power, and the city was effectively caged under a net that refused to let anyone skip out from within its boundaries. Yet, the hubris of the Ascendants could not be denied. They allowed the Jump Stations across the city to remain active, and so Divider managed to access the capital's network.

Now, after a chain of well-hidden jumps, they were arriving at what could be a true place of temporary sanctuary. A burst of black static deposited the four fugitives within a hidden anchor. Dust coated the floors and walls, and the door connected to the chamber was sealed shut and rusted. Moreover, there were no spells gliding along the walls, and that told Andra more about this place's abandonment than anything else.

She wasn't sure where she was—Divider had hidden them long and well in the Jumpspace network established by the Republic, but the machine was merely a Hero, and its endurance was ultimately feeble. They needed to recover now, to center themselves and plan ahead.

But for the first time in decades, Andra was free, and the cold blizzard of revenge whistled its hate in her heart. She had been severed from her home, trapped in a pit of misery and madness for far too long.

Stiller Than Frost would undoubtedly be ashamed of what had become of one of his Prime Disciples since he'd last spoken to her, and that, more than anything, gnawed at her.

But she was resolute. If the Republic was intent on keeping her bottled in their capital, then she would make them pay for this folly with the blood of its children.

For only through triumphant retribution could she redeem the honor she'd lost from being captured, and if she could weaken the center of the Yellowstone Republic, then perhaps that would make up for her shame when she finally returned to the Court of the Shattered Moon in the Everwastes of Torontus.

And so, as the others rested or raged, she cast her Divination out and—

Warning: Skill Compromised

“...What is this? Who is hiding within my soul? Who dares peek from a Prophetess’s eyes? I can feel you, Akbar.”

And then, Shiv watched as a muscular blue arm flaring with brilliant sigils reached out and shaped a needle-thin javelin between her fingers...

“This is not Flamecrown Castle!” Urri raged. The massive Vulteg stomped his feet and hammered his fists against the dirt-coated walls of the anchor. It dented and groaned before his tantrum, but ultimately held. “Jump us again, machine! Again! We go to the heart of the Republic immediately. We slay the weak, mongrel Avatars and spit upon the altars of the Ascendants.”

At the Vulteg’s feet was a pile of scattered components. Divider was utterly used up after jumping the group hundreds of times in rapid succession, and its segmented, snake-like body was in pieces. The length of its spine was disconnected from its triangular head, and both of the bot’s glowing eyes had an “X” dotting their insides. “Can’t... Used up... Only secure place found... Hidden in the network. Not meant to be found...”

If you find this story on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the infringement.

Divider's words died with a final crackle, and Urri let out a chuff of absolute scorn. "Pitiful!"

A slight breeze glided past the angry Vulteg and folded around Andra's arm. The Prophetess of the Jotun stared off into the distance as her body glowed with ripples of Divination mana, Legendary in potency. She had earned this power by ripping into the System's guts, deciphering the offal that was its narrative, and digging through every bit of detail she could glean.

As Prophetess, she'd acquired a favored kind of prey, and that was rival Diviners—or better yet, the unfortunate fools who lacked a true Divination Skill, and were cursed with Foreshadowing instead. As her mana swelled around her, a shadow was cast within her torso. The imprint of another was pressed against her soul, and with how they were flailing, Andra knew they weren't a proper Skaldweaver.

"Andra?" the winds around her chimed. "What is wrong?"

The Jotun's scarred face twisted into a vicious, scarred rictus. "A poor fool has peeked under the System's skirts. They leer at us. They seek to trace us."

"We're being tracked?" Breeze cried, sounding aghast. Her terror made Urri freeze just as he was about to slam another fist into the walls, and bade Divider to fuse back together.

The automaton groaned and crackled. "Does that mean we have to move again? Because I don't think I have the juice for that."

“No,” Andra proclaimed as she drew her javelin back. “It is their misfortune that their eyes have found us. Fate has led them to witness our presence, and fate has damned them to a fine death at my hands.”

As the Jotun spoke, she reached deeper inward with her power and tied herself to the one imprinted upon her soul. Violet mana crashed against her adversary—only to rebound as if waves striking the prow of a surging ship.

Shiv flinched as a stinging pain cracked across his body. It was like smashing chest-first through a wall of stone.

Andra flinched as her magic recoiled. “Legendary-Tier Resistance,” she hissed under her breath. “Who are you?” She held herself back from throwing her spear just yet and traced a sequence of spell-shapes in the air with her left hand. “Reveal yourself to me.” The shapes ignited with power, and they branded themselves upon the fabric of her inner soul, wrapping themselves tight around the intruder leeching off of her narrative.

Prophetess of Fated Damnation: The Undying Thing struggles inside you, confused and lost. He tries to break free, but he does not understand how to wield the power of stories, and lacks the proper limb to wrench himself free.

His name is [Unknowable], and his Path is [Unknowable]; you can seek his skills, but they are [Unknowable]. He stands below you, walking across the campus grounds. You now know of his

presence, just as he knows of yours. You are both located within the confines of [Phoenix Academy], and the anchor you reside in is the [Miriam Hall Emergency Reserve Anchor], meant specifically for the faculty. He, like you, is blooded by death and war, and those around him remain blissfully ignorant of the monster striding among them.

He wears the face of another. Upon his Mask of Stolen Paths, a flayed soul is draped, and he uses the likeness and skills of one Marcus Unblood as his facade.

And the shadow within Andra filled with colors and detail. A face appeared. A body followed. A weak, sickly-looking boy wearing priestly robes stood as a meager sight within the vastness of the Jotun's body. But this wasn't the true flesh of her foe—merely the shell. And that bothered Andra. Hers was Legendary power, so why was the System yet denying her details? How could someone's true name and Path be unknowable to her? She wouldn't accept it.

A flood of violet mana tore inward, drilling against her foe. Once more, her magic rebounded. It was like she was trying to pierce through a mountain of iron using stone tools.

"Rot and Ruin!" Andra cursed. "What manner of being—"

Warning: Flee now, Daughter of the Crone. Flee, or bare your soul and greet the Deathless.

"Deathless?" Andra blinked. A chill washed through her veins.

"Deathless?!" Urri bellowed.

Hidden World Quest Activated: Slay Tanner “Shiv” Lowe, the Deathless, before he fully comes into his power and forcefully drives your world beyond its current Mana Stability Threshold.

Success: Integrated Earth will experience its next Ambient Mana Threshold Evolution. The [Mythical] Skill-Tier will become available to all Pathbearers within this Ambient Mana Zone; Evolve 10 Skills to Legendary-Tier.

Failure: A specialized Incursion will be triggered to destroy Integrated Earth in 9 years, 2 months, and 0 days.

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A chain of notifications struck Andra. She let out a gasp of pleasure as long-dormant power roared to life and flooded into her. Another Legendary level had been earned. After a near-century of effort—her mind snapped back to focus.

“Deathless,” she rasped. She read the details of the Hidden World Quest and clenched her javelin tight. “Ah. I see. Urri. You know of him.”

The Vulteg let out a bark of fury. “That traitorous shit! He stood against me when I tried to honor Lord Scorn! He is the one who seeks us!” The Vulteg drew in a breath. “Strike him down, giantess. Split his heart and mutilate his bones. He has broken his word against me—he used his tongue to twist my mind and cast me to the Ascendants like a coward. Harlock took my mind! Used me! Strike him down!”

The Vulteg's mind was addled, and Andra couldn't make out any real information about the history between Urri and this Deathless aside from the fact that the former bore a great deal of hate for the latter. But then again, there was little that Urri did not hate.

Regardless of this, the rewards offered for the head of this Deathless were beyond salubrious. Andra already had two Legendary Skills—but to possess twelve? Barring Divinities, that might just make her the single most powerful entity on Integrated Earth.

And the Prophetess of the Jotun was nothing if not ambitious.

She reached into her chest with her free hand and tore the shadow of the Deathless free. She cast him upon the walls of the anchor, and drew back her arm...

Shiv saw it all—heard it all; felt himself get ripped out from Andra's soul. He was drifting, then. A shadow splashed against the wall. He could feel himself surfacing, feel the vision break apart as he returned to his body, but across the anchor, he watched as the giantess drew back her arm. Her frozen lance glistened with power, and Shiv's instincts screamed for him to dodge.

The scream of a blizzard unfurled into the shape of a dragon around the Jotun, and her horns and runic sigils burned bright. Air flowed around her body, and behind, the brutish, tentacled head of Urri poured hate at Shiv as well.

"System, come the fuck on! Let me go! Let me—"

With a staggering display of willpower and the activation of the Non-Sequitur Skill, he broke free of the vision.

Only a shame that he did so a moment too late.

The Jotun's arm exploded forward. The javelin cracked through the air and slammed into Shiv's shadow just before he unraveled in a burst of Vitae. Instead of the javelin dashing itself upon the wall, it traveled across the narrative that comprised the world, ripping through the fabric of stories before slamming dead-on against Shiv's neck—whosnapped back into his own body just as his throat was shredded open.

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A jet of blood spewed free between his fingers and painted Irons's chestplate. The Deathless rasped as he found himself writhing on the ground, surrounded by concerned faces. He was still wearing the guise of Marcus Unblood, but the wound inflicted upon him ran deeper than his semblance.

Embedded in his throat was a frozen needle pressed against the vertebrae of his neck. A stinging pain radiated out from the injury, and Shiv was startled by both Andra's throw and his own Toughness. She had pierced his baseline Toughness with ease, but he was still durable enough that her spear was lodged against his bone rather than ripping all the way through.

"Marcus," Irons said, his brows furrowed but his voice even. Damn, was the man self-controlled. He even used Shiv's cover name without slipping up. "What just happened? Where did the shot come from? Point!"

Shiv tried to speak, but found it a bit difficult on account of the length of ice stuck inside his trachea. As he reached up to grab the javelin, he felt the Cryomancy within it swell and rupture. Shiv's eyes widened.

The javelin exploded. Shiv halted time. Everything came to a standstill as he sat up and channeled his Shapeless Tides into the expanding blast. His Leviathan of the Shapeless Tides warred against whatever Cryomancy Skill the Jotun had as he flung himself high up into the air. He felt the mana with the javelin seep into his body, trying to infect his flesh—and his other Magical Fields.

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Shiv's eyes widened as he felt the freezing mana slip over into his Psychomancy field first before spreading to the others.

But that was only the beginning.

Soon his thoughts slowed, and even his Vitae congealed within his soul. The Jotun's frost magic froze everything, with a heavy emphasis on everything. He directed his vectors against the sides of the javelin, and the struggle continued. Even his temporal shell developed a coat of frost, and time dragged against him, ripping pieces free from his body.

In the distance, there came a massive wave of counter-Chronomancy. Shiv tried to sigh, but only managed to blow a bloody bubble out from the gaping wound lining his throat. Of course, there would be temporal wards here, probably spatial wards as well. This was an academy. He didn't have long before it struck him, and considering how large it was—seeming like a tidal wave a hundred meters high—if he let that welling ward strike him, his temporal shell would shatter instantaneously. He also didn't have enough Shapeless Tides to contend with both the ward and the javelin, so he focused on the latter.

His muscles tightened, his tendons burned. Shiv's head felt light from the sheer amount of blood he was losing. A waterfall of red splashed down his chest, coating the robes given to him by the priests back at the morgue. He snarled internally as cracks spread along the javelin. He put in more effort, twisting even harder. The warding rumbled as it drew closer, and he could feel the trembling presence of all the Chronomancy stored within that coming wave. It rumbled next to his ear like a looming avalanche.

Fuck me, does the Republic have a hell of a lot of power. That's the biggest Temporal warding I've ever seen. Bigger than even in the prison. The hells?

"Break!" Shiv all but begged, and with a final surge of effort, the javelin shattered between his hands. An explosion of frost burst out, but Shiv clutched it tight to his chest. It raged against him, trying to freeze him, but where the javelin was focused and piercing, this was wild power, tumbling in every direction. Shiv managed to wrestle it into submission, dissipating it bit by bit until it finally came asunder between his fingers.

The broken remnants of spellstuff untangled from his body, and Shiv watched as fading shapes dissolved into the air. But just then, he had other matters to worry about, namely the huge wall of gold that was less than five meters away.

Shiv spiked himself straight down. He impacted the ground with a wicked thud, and the pavement beneath him fractured into the shape of a spider web. Shiv winced but didn't get a chance to try fixing it as the ward crashed over him. True to his expectations, he felt a wrenching sensation as his temporal shell was sheared free from his body.

Time resumed. The Deathless coughed and gagged. He gripped at his throat and wrapped a mana hydra around it. The wound was crystallized in an instant, and his blood, his magical skills, his thoughts, and his soul resumed their previous fluidity. But he could still feel it, that infectious stasis, that hungering frost. The damned Jotun was a Legendary-Tier adversary, alright, and her skills were weirder than most.

"Marcus!" Irons called out again. Shiv realized he was lying on his side now. He turned over on his chest, and several students cried out in alarm. He looked like a bloody mess. Worse yet, he was drawing far too much attention to himself. This wasn't how he wanted to start his time at Phoenix Academy.

"I'm fine," Shiv managed to choke out. He coughed flecks of dry blood from his throat, and chunks of shredded flesh flew free as well. He spat it on the grass nearby, and some of the students who came to help him gagged at the visceral sight. "I'm fine," he repeated.

He forced himself to his feet, his mind whirling. He whipped his head around and managed to locate Miriam Hall. He'd been heading there alongside Irons before the vision triggered, and now he understood why. A nasty surprise was nested deep inside the building, one that the students and faculty likely didn't know about either. Considering the rusted and dust-covered state of the teleportation anchor, Shiv wondered if it should have been removed at some point but forgotten about.

"Brother, you need to go see a Biomancer!" a leather-armored student said. His blue eyes were wide as saucers, and he kept his distance from Shiv. The student's fingers were curled, and he was clearly at a loss as to what to do.

"I'm fine," Shiv reiterated, waving him off. "I just—" And then Shiv's identity caught back up to him. He wasn't supposed to be himself at this moment; he was supposed to be Marcus Unblood. He grunted uncomfortably and took in the many terrified and pale faces staring at him. There were a lot of humans and automata, some goblins, a few elves, and—he did a triple-take at what appeared to be a rat wearing a Phoenix Academy robe and with a magic staff strapped to its back looking up at him not too far away.

He shook off his momentary stupor and focused on his current issue. Well, he thought, might as well play up my healing capabilities.

"Old injury," he choked out awkwardly. "There was an abscess in my throat, and I popped it when I fell. Don't worry. I'll—clean it up." He looked down at his chest and knew his words were bullshit. The amount of blood that had spilled out of him was staggering. A faint feeling of weakness lined his every sinew as well.

He felt a Biomancy field wash over his body and nearly ripped it apart on reflex. "Let me take a look," a girl's voice said. Shiv turned to find where the Biomancer was, only to look down again and realize the girl in question was the rat he'd seen just a moment ago. His mind went blank again as the rodent channeled her mana at him using her toothpick-sized staff. Though she unleashed waves of Biomancy, Shiv's Shapeless Tides proved to be an impenetrable threshold.

"I don't understand how—" Her words were interrupted as Irons hooked Shiv's left arm and began pulling him away.

"Clear out, clear out!" the captain declared aloud. There was no fear in his voice, simply a sense of authority and urgency. "Don't mingle your mana with his, either. The student has a Curse. It triggers at inopportune times and can spread his abscesses to you. Keep your distance." And suddenly, all the people who'd come over to help were backing away. Concern on their faces lingered, but some of it was self-directed now, as well.

"A Curse?" someone called out.

"It's infectious, and it will shred your mana field," Irons declared. The captain's bullshit was better bullshit than Shiv's. He needed to get better at making stuff up fast for his false identities.

As they hobbled away, Irons leaned in and hissed, "What just happened?"

"Non-Sequitur decided to dump a vision on me," Shiv replied. "Got fucked after that."

"What?"

"It's a Foreshadowing Skill Evolution."

Irons did a double-take. "You have a Foreshadowing Skill?"

"Well, technically, it wasn't mine. I got it from Rose." The man's befuddlement only grew, but Shiv didn't have time to explain. "We got bigger problems. There's a group of High-Tier convicts who just broke through the Prismatic Guard containment zone on campus."

Suddenly, the captain went stiff. All pretenses left him. He seized Shiv by his shoulders and held him still. "Where?"

"They're inside Miriam Hall. Is there some kind of reserve emergency teleportation anchor or something in there?"

Irons's eyes narrowed. "It's old. Left over from the time of the war. It should have gone dormant years ago."

"Well, apparently, there's still enough power inside it for a couple of prisoners to jump inside." Just then, Shiv spontaneously connected a few dots as well. "Son of a bitch," he muttered. "It probably still works because the Neath is keeping it juiced."

Skill Gained: Deductive Reasoning (Initiate) 1

Irons's expression turned into a near-grimace. "You know where it is?" Shiv asked.

"I believe so," Irons said. "The old schematics..." Whatever else he was about to say was cut off as Shiv felt another vision tear through his mind. This time, however, the vision wasn't happening naturally; it felt like the System was reaching for him, was being forced upon him.

Non-Sequitur: Andra will not be denied. She knows that you are here, and she will not wait for you to strike first. Across the fabric of stories, she alone holds the edge...

Shiv mustered his willpower and triggered his Non-Sequitur skill. He briefly tore out from his body, and the vision collapsed. This time, he didn't take a javelin to the throat. He shook his head and grabbed Irons by the arm when he returned. He moved on reflex now, his mind blank, his body active. He rushed into the front doors of Miriam Hall and dragged the captain behind him.

"Good afternoon," a well-dressed woman said. A whip of blonde hair flowed down her back, and her crystal chainmail was as luxurious, gaudy, and absurd-looking as it was choked with enchantments and overflowing mana. She held a stack of books close to her chest and gave the two of them a nod. "Why, you're looking fine today, Captain Irons, and, oh, my Ascendants!" she gasped. She dropped some of the books when she saw Shiv's blood-soaked clothes, but the Deathless ignored her.

Irons called over his shoulder as they stormed on. "He's just suffering from a Curse. I'm going to find him some help."

The woman hesitated. "But the hospital is—"

"It's not a biological curse," Irons explained. The woman's mouth remained wide open, but there was little they could do about that. Shiv hoped this identity of his wasn't burned, but things were already off to an ugly start, and it wasn't his fault at all. The System was just determined to be a bastard.

The lobby of Miriam Hall was composed of two splitting sets of hallways, with a massive memorial wall at its front. The illustrations of countless Pathbearers dotted the memorial, titled the Hundred and Eight, for that was how many martyrs it took to hold Miriam Hall to the very end. The other dead didn't get photos; instead, they dotted a trail of etchings and nothing more. A faint sensation of dread followed Shiv as he continued onward.

Irons led him down the left-most hall, and they promptly burst through a set of emergency doors. It was a good thing that evening was coming, for the insides of Miriam Hall were thinning out. Quick steps echoed above them, but they were going down. As they did, Shiv summoned the Last Morsel to his hand and carved bits of shadow away from every place he could see. After that, he shaped a small flame atop his hand as well.

"Alright, plan, plan," Shiv muttered more to himself than Irons. "Shit. Need to figure out how I'm going to approach this without turning everything into a shitshow."

"How many of them are there?" Irons asked.

"Four," Shiv replied. "Two of them are Legends, not sure about the others. I think the bot's a Hero. Pretty well-balanced team too. They got a Jump-Mage and something of a Shadow or Assassin-type Path. The one that struck me is something between a Vanguard and a Combat Mage, and the last one's a Legendary Vanguard as well. Legendary Toughness. Don't think his Physicality is as high, though." Shiv offered what little information he had as he watched an ugly look crawl over Irons's face.

"We need to notify the academy," Irons growled. "And Headmaster Hymn especially."

"What?" Shiv cried out. "And bring the Ascendants down on our heads?"

"Your head. We have two Legendary prisoners here. Understand that you are at risk of being discovered, but I will not risk the lives of my pupils for your self-interest." Shiv wanted to argue with the man, but he didn't have the time, and more importantly, he didn't have a good angle of persuasion. Of course, Irons would be willing to do this. The danger was at his doorstep, and right now it was Shiv, him, and a few orcs against four extremely dangerous enemies.

"Listen, look, just give me a second, okay?" Shiv held onto him. The Captain tried to shrug him free, but Shiv wouldn't let go. For the first time, Irons glared at Shiv, and despite all the tribulations and bloodshed he'd endured, a shiver still climbed up the Deathless's back.

Psycho-Cartography: Don't flinch. This is an Intimidation Skill too. It gets worse the more you react.

"Just a second," Shiv growled through his discomfort. "Look, I think we can use this to our advantage."

"Use what?"

"I don't want the Ascendants to come here. I don't want them to know where I am, and I'm willing to bet that these four don't want that either. It took them a hell of a lot of effort to escape, and if they get discovered, they're either getting executed or put straight back in another Rubix Well. It's probably why they're keeping quiet."

"You intend to bluff them?" Irons asked, an edge of caution and disbelief in his voice.

"I'm intending to do whatever I can to stop the Ascendants from showing up," Shiv said. "It's probably why they haven't just blasted their way out yet. That anchor's pretty rusted, and even if it wasn't, it might as well be made out of paper for a Legendary Vanguard. They're planning just like we are. They came here to hide from Harlock, not to lure his shadows back in. You show me to the anchor, and then you go wait outside. Give me five minutes."

"Five minutes?" Irons nearly hissed.

"Okay, fine. Shit, give me, uh, three. Three minutes. If I'm not back by then, go get help. But after that, Adam and I need to move. You understand? I'm not going back inside that prison, and I'll be dead for good before I let the Ascendants take me again." Shiv meant every word of that. A brief impasse developed between the two men, and Irons let out a growl of frustration before he folded.

"Three minutes," the older man stressed. "And then I call down the hammer."

Chapter 211 (III) Campus [II]

“We should go out now!” Urri spat. “We should find him, tear him apart. If you don't think you're mighty enough, then Urri will—”

“Be silent,” the Jotun snarled back. The Vulteg's resilience was awesome, and it was practically the only reason why Andra hadn't killed the High Marshal yet. Threads of Divination mana expended out from her like the branches of a tree, an apt representation of her Divination skill.

For through the branches and trunk of the System, everything was connected. The Deathless had managed to break free of her Divination twice before, and she wasn't sure how. Her heart was in turmoil, for though he was an enticing prize, her battle-honed instincts told her that she faced a truly dangerous threat. Now he was impossibly missing.

She had found him seconds earlier. It was one of the easiest traces she had ever performed. System-favored burned bright when gazed upon with Divination. They were like bonfires in the middle of dark forests. But this Deathless, he was practically the sun itself, and he bled so much conflict that it clung to those around him. It was already clinging to her as well. She was burning too, slowly catching fire from this single interaction alone. Someone like that didn't just go missing. Earlier, he'd failed to even react to her Divination-based attack in time.

The System told her he lacked the magical means to fight back. That meant he didn't have any Divination mana. He relied on Foreshadowing or something like that. Could it be Exposition? No, she couldn't remember anyone using Exposition to fight back against her. With her power, any messages they intended to inflict were easily swatted aside. It wasn't the same with the Deathless. He simply broke free. He was there, then he was gone.

A Unique Skill, then, she concluded, one that briefly allows him to tread between worlds. Her mother had possessed such a skill, the reason it proved so difficult for Andra to slay her.

"Jotun. I will not wait here. I will not! Urri will not wait. Urri will strike down the ape-dogs of this land and crush their feeble machines. And you—"

"I am the only reason we broke free of that perimeter!" Andra shot back at the raging Vulteg. She turned her glare at the simple creature. How this one had made it to High Marshal was beyond her. His god must have promoted him like certain tyrants promoted their personal pets. The Storm Lord had a century-old turtle that could barely speak or count to ten, even as a Heroic-Tier monster. And it was still significantly more charming than this Fingerling.

"It's not that I don't want to take his life, Urri," she said slowly, as if a master speaking to a soft acolyte. "It's that I don't know where he is. I need to consider our steps. You can fight bravely and end up back in another cage. Is that what you want? To fail Lord Scorn? To see this Adam of yours slip through your fingers again?"

With the invocation of Lord Scorn's name, Urri turned away, ashamed and cowed.

A pet, indeed,

Andra thought. "No," she said softly, "we do this carefully. Right now, we are safe. The Ascendants don't know where we are. But this anchor, it is hidden for a reason. It still functions for a reason." Andra licked her lips and considered how rusted it was. "I think this is a smuggling anchor. Which means the Neath is operational here." And that filled her old stone heart with joy. The Neath. She could do business with the Dragon Brokers. She had a few favors to cash in and coin to burn. "We wait," she said again, more certain than ever. "We wait until one of their operatives jumps in."

"And how long will that take?" Urri grumbled. "A week? A month? A year?"

"It means nothing to us. You have that resolve, don't you, Urri?"

"I don't," Divider crackled from its place on the ground. "Listen, you guys can go a long while without eating, but I practically spent my entire charge getting us out of there. If you don't find a way to boost up my core, I think I'm going to go to... to... I got one more jump charted. One more spot left in me if this goes south. But that's it. I'll be spent for real real."

The automaton's stuttering told Andra that it wasn't lying. She did her best to hide the scowl of judgment threatening to creep across her face. These machine-beings were remarkable in certain ways, but often they were more trouble than they were worth.

"Breeze," Andra said, feeling the hidden Pathbearer glide around her body. "I will be in need of your skills. I wish to know the layout of the campus, and I wish to know what its security looks like, the forces at its disposal, the strongest Pathbearer on these grounds, and potential weaknesses we can exploit."

"That'll take a while," Breeze whistled. "I'll have to move carefully. The Yellowstone Republic has a lot of resources vested in this place."

A cruel smile developed on the Jotun's face. "Good. Then perhaps I might be able to strike a blow for Court and Kith before this travesty is through."

Just then, she felt her Divination twitch. The branches of the violet tree coiled in on themselves violently. She felt him. The Deathless. He was near, very close. But she didn't know where, couldn't see him yet. He radiated with power. She could taste the tension in the air, that residue of strife, and it choked her. He was getting even closer now. Her breath came fast.

"What is wrong, giantess?" Urri said. For once, he seemed unnerved as well.

"It's... it's him. I can feel him. He's close. I can feel his heat radiating through the walls, filling this anchor. He's—" and just then, every branch on her tree speared down and pierced through her. As it did, she realized, a moment too late, that the Deathless was in the teleportation anchor among them.

She spun, summoning a wicked scythe of frost. Her blow split the air, but the winds didn't scream. They didn't even move. All halted before her. Wind, energy, magic, soulstuff, thought. Everything was frozen. But not the Deathless. No, he wasn't there. He felt altogether absent for a moment, and then he was back again.

The tree rattled with intense ferocity, collapsing around her, sinking like a puddle at her very feet. A groan escaped from Andra. For the first time, she felt the full embrace of his residual strife, and it was like being swallowed by a star going supernova. It took a great deal to make a Jotun sweat, and when that happened, heart palpitations followed. A feverish weakness crept through her.

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"He's inside!" Andra hissed. "He's with us!"

"What?" Urri cried aloud. "Where?" He stomped, whipping his head left and right. The large tentacles connected to his skull crackled about, leaving sonic booms in the air.

"I can't sense him," Divider choked out. "Where is he? Where?"

Breeze didn't say anything. Instead, she began circulating through the air, sweeping the chamber. Between the lot of them, Andra had the highest awareness, and it was Heroic. It didn't do anything for her. She couldn't feel any aberrant vibrations in the air, any shifts in the temperature, any...

She let out a sudden hiss of pain as something sank into her lower back. It glided up, and she felt a cut travel through her body. Things inside her tore. Blood filled her mouth. But the Jotun didn't double over. She tried to move, but a crushing strength flooded through the wound in her back and clutched her spine, and this time, Andra did let out a piercing cry. This pain was unlike any she'd ever experienced.

"Jotun!" Urri cried aloud, his voice a snarl of pure rage. "Where is he? Where?" But as he stepped forward, Andra felt herself get wrenched up to the side, used as a meat shield to block the Vulteg's advance.

"Yeah, none of that. You come close to me, and I'll crack her spine." The voice was deep and vicious. She felt the Deathless manifest briefly behind her, only to vanish a second right after. He left this realm again, she realized.

What a Unique Skill... I must have it... Andra sucked in a ragged gasp of air and focused herself. This was a humiliation. But how? She felt the presence of his soul, of his narrative significance. But where was he, actually? Even now, she was having a hard time pinpointing his location, like he was spread across multiple places at once. Just then, she felt a presence materialize behind her.

There was a flash of white and red, and a puff of vitality curled around the corner of her vision. As she looked over her shoulder, there stood the Deathless. He had taken his false semblance off. Instead of looking like a feeble boy, he was the size of a juvenile giant, a colossus of a man. His armor was a mix of skeletal and insectoid, and over his skull sockets were compound eyes, reminding Andra of a dragonfly's.

With a sudden movement, he withdrew something sharp from her back. Andra grunted in pain as a spray of blood flew through the air. To her disbelief, what he held wasn't a blade or even a club. No, it seemed like a frying pan with wicked Orichalcum saws along the edges.

Shaking off her surprise, she began to wield her Cryomancy subtly. She condensed a flow of cold air nearby and started shaping it into the outline of her person. The Deathless had surprised her with his tricks, but she wasn't without her own.

As the winds within the anchor grew more intense, the Deathless tilted his head and barked a command. "Hey, knock that shit off. I know you're there. I can see your vitality. You try anything, and I put her down."

Breeze stilled, but didn't stop flowing.

"Then you will die," Urri said. "Her life is the only thing sparing you from my hands."

The Deathless scoffed. "Yeah, that, the fact you can't grapple worth a godsdamn, and that you're dumb as a pile of broken bricks that had a lobotomized dog bleed over them, which is not unexpected for one of Lord Scorn's special dipshits."

It was the last insult that affected Urri. His single eye turned bloodshot. "You dare speak ill of Lord Scorn's name?"

"I dare to do a lot of things," the Deathless deadpanned. "Right now, I'm daring to discuss terms."

"Terms?" Andra repeated. The Deathless was audacious. He hadn't killed her immediately. It would be his folly, but for now, she wanted to play along. This one was intriguing.

"Well, I guess there's a reason why you haven't just burst out from the anchor and started massacring people." He chuckled humorlessly. "Not keen on going back to jail, are we?"

"Not even a little," Divider crackled from the ground. It groaned. "I don't know, guys. Maybe let's be reasonable. Let's hear the guy out. Give hope and peace a chance. Mainly because if you make me jump again, I'm gonna be taking a nap—and that might end up being real final for me."

The Deathless inclined his head. "Yeah, so, I get that. In fact, we're in the same boat there. I'm no big fan of the Ascendants, either. Frankly, I'm a bit sour on this whole Republic thing in general. Hasn't been that great of an experience so far."

"Oh," Andra said. "And so, the enemy of your enemy is..."

"Not your friend at all," the Deathless cut her off. She felt him tighten his grip, and she bit back a rasp of pain.

"How did you do that?" she asked, her curiosity getting the better of her.

"How did I do what? Survive you stabbing me through the throat? Cute skill, by the way. Divination? Throwing Proficiency?" She didn't say anything. You didn't give information to intriguing adversaries.

"Alright, I'm gonna go with that for now," the Deathless assumed. "Well, you got cute tricks, and I got cute tricks, too. We can both play at being mysterious."

She updated him from being merely intriguing to quite annoying. She would delight in torturing information out of him. Andra had finally finished shaping her simulacrum. Now, all she needed to do was fill its insides with circulating Cryomantic mana. She worked carefully, slowly, and to her delight, she realized her enemy didn't have a very high Awareness Skill either. What an ironic weakness they both shared...

"Whatever the case, I think I know why you're all here. You're waiting for some dork from the Neath to drop by, huh? You probably know that this is one of their drop-off points, don't you?"

"I do," Andra boasted openly. "And it seems you do as well. Have you business with them?"

"Yeah, unwilling business," the man admitted, "but maybe business that could benefit us all. I don't got a lot of time. We have around two minutes before this nice and calm conversation turns into a flood of angry Pathbearers ripping through the outside of this anchor to put you guys down."

That changed things immediately. "You told them where we are?"

"Oh, I'm not the one telling them. But my associate is waiting outside. He gave me a bit, so a bit's gonna have to do. We got around two minutes left, and if things go wrong in that time, then we're all bound for the cells again. Not really the way I want it, but sometimes we don't have good choices to make. In summary, I'm desperate, which means you're desperate, which means I want a few reassurances."

Andra clenched her teeth. She had no idea if he was telling the truth or not, but assumptions killed. She briefly stopped tracing her simulacrum. "What kind of assurances?"

"The kind that makes sure you guys don't go apeshit and kill a bunch of students. That's enough."

She didn't know how long until his reinforcements arrived, but she wasn't going to risk it. He was trying to force her into betraying herself; into accepting bondage. This was an offense to her dignity and honor—one already tarnished through capture. Worse, his tongue wiggled and lashed at her mind in strange ways; she was not going to wait for him to use his Social witchery on her. Such dishonorable skills were greeted with brutal retribution: a sudden strike.

Andra gave Urri a nod and hissed at Breeze. The air went still. Divider sighed. The Vulteg loudly asked her if her neck was hurt because he was dumber than warg dung.

The Jotun acted.

She finished shaping her simulacrum and burst into motion. A blade of pure frost whipped through the air, and the Deathless only managed a partial turn of his head before a clean stroke slid through his neck. His body shuddered briefly, and he tumbled to the ground, legs bowing inward. As he went down, black-red ichor spilled over Andra's back, and it turned into a coiling mess of red and white right after.

Strange blood you have, Deathless. But how disappointing. I expected more resilience.

“Divider—” she began.

Then, another blow struck the back of her skull, and this time she felt a cut glide through bone and split her brain asunder.

And with that, Andra let out something between a snarl and a choked gasp as she went down as well.

Chapter 212 (I) Pacify

“Pull that crossbow away from your neck. You’re not going to shoot yourself. Stop pretending.”

"Leave me alone. You won. You fucking won. Let me have what's left of my honor."

"What's left of your honor? Don't be absurd, boy. There's no honor in this. You failed. Failure is humiliation. Failure is disgrace. Even if you kill yourself right now, you're not going to redeem yourself in any way. How could you?"

“ ... ”

"Your goal was to overthrow the royal council, wasn't it? To establish your own free and liberated district within the capital. I let you have that. I allowed you to claim legitimacy. I even recognized your little state.

"And then you choked us!"

"No, I simply overcharged you, and since you lacked a proper military, there was no way for you to compel me to adjust my prices otherwise. I warned you before. I told you that you had powerful Pathbearers among your organization. I admitted to you that I was reluctant to take a forceful approach for a simple reason: because it would cost me the lives of my citizens, and I have spent a great deal of effort trying to establish a state of enduring peace in this capital."

"Peace? You call what you did to us peace?"

"Yes, because I didn't shed your blood. No, your organization imploded on itself, as do many revolutionary organizations. It's the inevitable consequence of being a revolutionary."

"Fuck you! You don't know anything. You don't know anything! It would have worked if it just..."

"If it just what? If everyone in your governing council would have listened to you? If your attempt at absolute democracy didn't degenerate into chaotic anarchy due to the inherent vice, lust, wrath, and avaricious nature of man and enlightened machine alike? Yes, I suppose it would have functioned perfectly if you were perfect people. But that's the problem with your like: you're not perfect. You're flawed, and you were made so through the trauma inflicted upon you by the state. As Kull Masalov said: 'To reign is to delude oneself that they are a wise master, when in actuality, it is an exercise in resisting the urge to enslave and dominate; such is the inevitable urge of all yearning hearts.'"

"What... You..."

"Oh, don't look so surprised. You're not the first Pathbearer to play at revolution or to read the old literature, to dream of true equality and harbor noble ideals in your heart. I was in your place some a century and a half ago. I got further, since my goals were more pragmatic, and I was simply seeking recognition for my faction within the purview of the royal council, but ultimately, inevitably, and tragically, it collapsed. It always does. Those I regarded to be my brothers and sisters, kindred in arms, turned on each other and me, because though critiquing a system is easy and finding its flaws is obvious, fixing them is where the problem begins."

"..."

"What I found noble and beautiful was offensive and repulsive to some of my comrades. Hence, my lover tried to slit my throat after drugging me during intercourse. Hurting her was very traumatic, but she was always a bit of a fool. The dosage was too low."

"..."

"Now, shut your mouth, lift your head, and come with me. You're still alive for a reason, and that reason is that I have use for you."

"Why would I do anything... anything that you ask?"

"Because, alternatively, you will have to swallow this bitter failure eternally. This will be the defining moment of your life: to have failed, to have led your glorious revolution to destruction. But, if you want to do some good—and a bitter, narrower, far more deserved good though it might be—I have a position on my cabinet, and it's suited for someone who cares greatly about the small and helpless. So, wipe those tears away, hold on to this moment as a lesson, and develop. Think of it this way: I let you do this so it could be an educational exercise. You are educated now. The exercise is over. Now, the actual work begins."

-Veronica Chandler and Uriah Townsend, Master-Brother of the Union of Dawn Revolutionaries

Non-Sequitur 104 > 106

Inertial Overdrive 170 > 173

Pillar of Orichalcum 225 > 228

Farsight 74 > 78

For a moment, Shiv thought his social offensive had been going well. Then, he was beheaded from behind, struck down so fast and so brutally that not even his Shapeless Tides spared him from death.

In retrospect, Shiv started getting suspicious when the air behind him grew colder and colder. He had been paranoid from the start. Thanks to his Last Morsel, he managed to turn himself into a shadow. And between that and Non-Sequitur, he slipped into the teleportation anchor while evading the giantess's Divination Skill.

He'd thought he had her pacified. He buried the business end of his pan against her lower back and seized her vertebrae. But that was a stupid assumption. He was a Legendary Pathbearer as well, and it would take more than that to put him down; they stood at the apex of Earth's power, unless one received divine reinforcement.

That'll teach me to feel self-assured, he cursed himself.

He exploded into motion as his Vitae sprawled free from his beheaded body. Just like the Jotun surprised him, he surprised her once more.

He buried the fanged rim of his last morsel in her skull using a web of tendrils. The frying pan struck the giantess's head like a morning star. A sickening crack filled the air as orichalcum teeth chipped through impossibly hard bone. The wet squelch of brain matter told him he struck home.

And as she spasmed and went down, he saw the front side of her face burst open in a spray of blood as well. But he was done underestimating her. He wrenched his frying pan free and struck her three more times. Each cut going deeper, shattering her skull, leaving her brain matter a chasm of weltering gore.

Not the only one who underestimated the other. Not the only one with other tricks. Not the only one with shit awareness.

These three thoughts went off inside Shiv's head like a cluster bomb.

And then he was in the fray once more, launching himself at Urri and the scattered automaton that looked like a massive mechanical snake of some kind.

Urri's single eye was wide with surprise. He hadn't seen Shiv go down before. Hadn't seen him resurrect. Didn't really know what Vitae was. That bought the Deathless almost half a second to act freely.

A flood of static spilled out from the automaton as the spell pattern powering the teleportation anchor flared to life. It went dim a second later as Shiv drove a lashing blow down on the automaton's head. The bot gave a mechanical shriek. Its exterior was hard, Low Heroic perhaps, but it was ripped wide open as a surge of Shapeless Tides cleaved into it.

The rest of Shiv slammed into and wrapped around the Vulteg. Urri was tough. And the more one hit him, the more durable and powerful he got. Shiv remembered that from their prior scuffle. So instead of trying to beat Urri down with brute force, he was just going to drain the Vulteg until there was nothing left of his vitality.

A trail of cuts glided over Shiv's Vitae. Pieces of him were ripped free, but the damage he sustained was minimal. Bladed currents glided through the air, and a scream of battle fury filled the insides of the teleportation anchor. A spread of vitality drifted along the fast-flowing winds, and it painted the form of a young woman with a long, trailing ponytail, hidden by the gales. Shiv ignored her for now. She might be able to leave some cuts on his body, but so far, she was the least of his problems.

"What is this strange—Nyah!" Urri let out a roar. He wrapped his massive hands around Shiv's Vitae and pulled. But Shiv wrecked his overflow tides against the Vulteg. A clash of striped vectors pushed Urri back.

And then the coiling mess of Vitae twisted brutally. Urri was still strong, but he was wrestling against Legendary Physicality and Grappling. And though he defied Shiv for a moment, eventually his arms were pinned against the wall, and threads of red-white mana were wound over and over around his neck.

Urri gagged, but he didn't stop fighting. He never stopped struggling. "Nothing can stop Urri! NOTHING!" he roared. The veins of blood trailing along the corner of his eyeball widened as if fracturing. His muscles bulged. His body grew larger. He had activated a Berserk Skill. He took a step forward and Shiv expected to struggle a bit more, but he had plenty of tides. He would hold the Vulteg down and—

Urri vanished and then reappeared right next to Shiv. The transition was so sudden and jarring that the Deathless reeled. He reeled even more as Urri struck him with a closed fist. The blow was a natural two. Instead of being a straight punch or a hook of some kind, he blinked. One second, he was a meter away from Shiv. The next, he exploded against him like a bomb going off.

Another portion of Shiv's Vitae cracked, and coldness climbed deeper into his core. Despite this, Shiv converted the latter half of the blow into Overflow Tides, and he sent that back against Urri, launching the massive Vulteg back.

"I am fury unleashed! I am my senses unchained!" Urri declared. It was a reverberating resonance in his voice, and it felt like there were several other people speaking from inside him as well.

Just then, another splash of Dimensionality came out from the automaton. This time, instead of being a focused spell meant to activate the teleportation anchor, it took the shape of a slithering serpent, and it reared down to swallow Shiv. This anchor wasn't that large; it only had 20 meters of width to work with.

The snake took up all of that.

"Alright, time for you to go to the trash kingdom," the automaton slurred weakly. At the same time, Urri blinked, and he appeared right behind Shiv, but then he vanished again, and this time appeared after Shiv was struck. Another portion of the Deathless broke. He failed to convert any Shapeless Tides this

time. What remained of Shiv spilled down on the ground, as the broken parts of his being turned to hissing streams of vapor.

Just then, the serpent crashed down on him, and he felt a crushing pressure begin to wrench at his very being. It was trying to pull him into the serpent, to pull him away from the world and hide him somewhere else. The automaton Dimensionalist was strong, but unfortunately, it wasn't Legendary. Shiv swung his pan upward as flowing vectors swirled across his dense knot of Vitae. He resembled a rope lined with fast-moving saw blades surging along its length.

With every second, his vectors grew faster, and the color of their mana turned black and static to match the dimensional spell being unleashed upon him. The serpent bit down—and was cleaved in half from skull to tail. A spill of sparkling midnight filled the inside of the anchor, and the automaton gave an agonized wail at the ruination of its mana field.

Urri blinked. Shiv halted time. He was promptly struck by two walls of counter-Chronomancy. The first was unleashed by the university, and it crashed down upon him like a tsunami coming out of nowhere. If that wasn't enough, a wall of golden mana expanded free from the Vulteg's body as well. And more than that, Urri was flickering, as if he was blinking in and out of existence while his Berserk state was active. Shiv only got a glimpse of the Vulteg's skill before his temporal shell shattered, and then another portion of his body did. He only had 30 percent of his Vitae left, and the cold tongue of oblivion was quickly licking its way to his very core.

Stride of the Unbending Path 161 > 163

Motherfucker! Shiv screamed internally. He needed to adapt. He needed to—

"And the Zephyrs will never yield!" the winds around him roared. All the slashing currents converged together, and it became a silvery gash that was carried down from the air. A whirlwind slammed into

Shiv, but he intercepted it with his curling strands. The insides of the anchor groaned. This cut was stronger than all the ones that came before, but it had a weakness.

It was a single cut, and Shiv was pretty good at stopping singular attacks by this point.

Just like with the automaton, he wielded his Shapeless Tides against the unseen Aeromancer. Her vitality imprint betrayed how much she was struggling. She was holding on to the silver crescent as if it were some kind of greatsword. But though she twitched with exertion, she too was a Hero wrestling against a Legend, and the outcome of attempting to leap across such a gulf was inevitable.

Shiv gathered another buildup of Overflow Tides as he coiled strands around the cut. He even ignored Urri ripping another section of his body away as the Vulteg suddenly reappeared. He had a new target now, and he was going to eliminate her and the automaton as soon as possible.

Process of elimination,

Shiv thought to himself, from the weakest to the strongest.

The Overflow Tides he'd harnessed went down as he pulled his leftmost strands. At the same time, his innate tides carried his right limb aloft. All of a sudden, the air went still. The winds sputtered, and the gales died.

"No, how?" That was as far as the Aeromancer got before Shiv snapped the cut in half. A burst of uncontrollable wind erupted at the center of the room, and even that wasn't loud enough to drown out the Aeromancer's shriek.

She plunged down as a veil of air ripped free from her body. Her arms and legs were bare. They were lined with colorful whorls, especially around her hands and soles. Her torso, however, caught Shiv's attention. It was caged in a strange set of bronze vestments. He couldn't even call it armor from how odd its mechanisms were. Thick, jutting ribs extended out the sides of her apparel, and between them were coppery wires alive with humming electricity.

Shiv noticed how her head was encased in a transparent bowl as well, flowing stormstuff partially obscuring her features. But her eyes were the color of dark clouds split by lightning, and her face and skin were the same kind of blue that characterized Adam's aesthetic.

As Shiv wrapped his Vitae around the downed Aeromancer, he curled his mana hydra over her body as well. Before the onslaught of two Magical Skills, one being Legendary, her resistance shattered with a burst of mana, and that worked in Shiv's favor. The repulsive force spreading out from her stunned Urri just as he reappeared.

His body vibrated in place, and he clutched his head, letting out a pained bellow.

Shiv didn't have time to capitalize on that, however. Instead, he began draining from the downed Aeromancer. Her incessant screams turned into a gurgling cry as the Deathless ripped the vitality free from her body. A flood of life force washed into him and crashed upon the flesh of reality. The air around them shimmered with crimson majesty, and in an instant, Shiv was reborn, hatching free from red-white vapors.

Urri struck him again, driving a curving hook into the Shiv's midsection. He didn't lose any Vitae this time, but he did hiss as one of his ribs was fractured.

"Getting tired of that shit." Shiv swung the back of his hand and struck nothing. A second later, Urri manifested, knee-first against the side of Shiv's temple. A burst of whiteness spread out from behind

Shiv's right eye. A section of his helmet and skull were shattered as he stumbled, and the moment he did, Urri swept his legs out from under him before bringing an elbow down on the same rib that was fractured earlier.

Shiv activated Non-Sequitur before the Vulteg could do anything else.

He snapped free from his body and watched as Urri shattered his vitality. He heard Urri snap the vitality decoy over his knee as a burst of vaporous Vitae filled the air. Shiv went from Non-Sequitur back to the outside context state, and Urri briefly stumbled, confused as to what just happened.

Shiv took that opportunity to be a bit of a bastard. If the prisoners wanted to be a pain in the ass, so would he. His mana hydra tore out across the room, and they assimilated his recent remains. A chain of microspells manifested along the length of his Biomancy field, and Shiv swung it against the Vulteg's head. A look of utter confusion lingered on Urri's face just as the crimson hydra struck him.

But Shiv wasn't attempting to break the Vulteg's Magical Resistance. The bastard was a juggernaut in more ways than one. Instead, he projected some of the biomass he'd assimilated, and he sculpted it around Urri's face. Shiv watched a dangling arm materialize in a flash of redness. It was connected to a section of Shiv's lower back, one ass cheek, the heel of his foot, and part of his face. That monstrosity was promptly molded into a loop and then fastened upon the Vulteg's face.

Urri gave a muffled cry as Shiv returned to context. But instead of trying to attack Shiv, Urri reached up, fighting desperately to rip the flesh cocoon away. Once more, his lacking Physicality worked against him. Urri was only Heroic in terms of strength, and Shiv's corpse inherited the qualities of orichalcum as well, though not the full potential of ever-escalating Toughness.

A groan came from the Aeromancer. She tried to rise, but let out a violent wheeze as Shiv pinched the major arteries in her throat. He used his mana hydra to do that for maximum control. She kicked and clawed against the ground briefly before her eyes blinked, and her gaze went distant.

"That's right," Shiv said, "go to sleep."

Nearby, he heard the automaton let out a mechanical cough. "Ow," Divider said. Shiv moved to disable the second-weakest threat of the group, but then something bit into the back of his neck. He tried to move forward, but his legs wouldn't listen. His body wouldn't obey, and—and then he was free again, detached from another corpse.

A snarl of frustration bubbled up inside; his head struck the ground first, his body following a second thereafter. But Shiv didn't have any time to vent his anger. A bleed of frost crashed into his Vitae, and he felt that infectious slowness gallop through his soul, course through the marrow of red-white mana that comprised his alloyed being.

Shiv pushed back against the magic, but he lacked the Overflow Tides to fully overpower his ambusher. A second later, he found himself pinned against the wall. Urri slammed into the anchor's walls beside him, leaving a gash in the rusted metal. Bits of Shiv's corpse wrapper were coming free from the Vulteg's head, and he would be back in the fight before long. But he was the secondary priority.

Non-Sequitur 106 > 110

Vitaemancy 116 > 121

Inertial Overdrive 173 > 177

Pillar of Orichalcum 228 > 230

Farsight 78 > 81

Once more, across from Shiv stood a sight he didn't expect.

Shiv gasped with disbelief.

A series of cracks sounded through the room, and each of them was as loud as an explosion. Andra was standing again, and she wasn't alone. She was being propped up by a Cryomantic clone, one radiating with that stilling coldness. And to Shiv's utter incredulity, it also carried a spark of vitality. There was a thin tendril of redness lining the space between Andra and her ice clone. And Shiv was at an utter loss for words. What the hells?

The Jotun's many tattoos were glowing now, flaring with the power of Biomancy, and her flesh began to rapidly reconstruct itself.

Chapter 212 (II) Pacify

Parts of Andra's skull surfaced. And every time they did, another loud explosion of cracking bone followed. A jet of ruined brain matter squirted along the ceiling of the anchor.

Shiv stared with disgust and disbelief. She had a long javelin in her hands, needle-thin and impossibly sharp. She pushed hard, driving the tip deeper into Shiv's Vitae. A creeping trail of frost spread out from the point of penetration, expanding like a rash.

The Deathless focused his Shapeless Tides, and they crashed against the expanding coldness. But then, Andra's cryoclone twisted past her, bringing down an axe shaped from ice magic as well. As it fell, Shiv swung his frying pan upward. He had to sacrifice some of his tides to do so. Every action he performed, every feat of force, was an interplay of his vectors and his kinesiology. And though he managed to parry the cut, his Frictionless Vector causing the anchor to be hewed clean through to his left, he didn't have enough resources to stop the javelin from sinking in deeper.

Frictionless Vector 88 > 92

"I know not what tricks you have, Deathless," Andra said. Her words were slightly slurred, and she kept blinking. Leftover brain damage, Shiv blearily realized. That was probably the only reason he was still fully alive.

His thoughts and movements were slowed. He was half-frozen over. He couldn't even keep track of Urri's wild, flailing movements anymore. Meanwhile, Andra and her clone were doing their best to hold him in place. The Jotun herself struggled to control her movements and command her clone at the same time. But even so, the advantage was theirs. Andra held Shiv against the wall. She snapped her javelin and speared him with another.

The cryoclone channeled blasts and scything blades of ice magic that curved in from the side. Worse, the mana they radiated out from themselves was crawling into him as well. A crusted layer of dense black ice coated his Vitae, and he found himself succumbing, without and within.

He triggered his temporal shell once more. The campus' wards didn't hit him this time, but Andra was like an inferno of time, burning his Chronomancy field away. Even so, it didn't do it that fast. Shiv had a second before his partially regenerated shell was dissolved.

And during that time, he wrapped what remained of his biomass around Andra's face, arms, and legs. He would have gone for his newest corpse as well, but then the temporal wards erupting from Urri's body struck him, and the little bit of time he had turned into practically none at all.

Even so, he did manage to do something. The Jotun flinched back with a muffled cry of surprise. Instead of trying to fight the ice, Shiv wrapped a thin string of white and red around her midsection. Bits of his body crackled and broke as he forced himself through the stilling frost. But he managed, and with a burst of force further fueled by his rage, he flung Andra into her cryoclone.

This proved to be a mistake. As Andra and her cryoclone met, a burst of power erupted from them. The air grew twice as cold, then thrice. The Jotun slammed a foot down on the ground, and the insides of the anchor froze over immediately. The walls around Shiv turned dense with thick layers of frost. And instead of trying to rip the biomass free from her body, she started freezing it instead. As she did, it turned brittle, and with a flex of limbs and a brief pull at her face, Shiv's dirty trick turned into naught but shards of glinting gore.

Godsdamn it,

Shiv hissed internally.

The Jotun was a problem, and then Urri appeared behind her. The Vulteg looked more furious than ever. He clenched the mangled remains of Shiv's flesh cocoon in his right hand, and he nearly threw himself at him again.

Shiv had bought himself enough time to trigger Non-Sequitur once more, but as he did, he only suffered a blast of pain creeping through his body. It was like he was pinned in place, like his mana wouldn't—the javelin, the ice. Of course he couldn't use his Magical Skills. They were frozen as well, and his Unique Skill required his soul to be fluid too.

The Jotun let out a breath, and it billowed forth like waves of steam, masking the room in a haze. The outline of an ice-shaped dragon manifested behind her, and he felt the temperature inside the anchor drop to the point where even the air particles seemed to freeze.

But instead of panicking, her breath inspired him. He still had another skill to use, one he couldn't rely on against adversaries with superior Awareness—or Harlock in particular. As Urri and Andra moved, seeking to finish Shiv, a swelling tide of blackness erupted out from him as he called upon his Creeping Void.

Immediately, the difference between the two Legendary Pathbearers made itself known. Urri blinked across space and drove a fist into Shiv. A good section of the Deathless shattered, and death loomed ever closer. But Andra flinched back. Andra hesitated. She was the more cautious of the two. And that was what spared him. That and her lacking Awareness.

"What is this trickery?" she cried aloud.

Urri, meanwhile, threw fist after fist in the direction of Shiv. But that was an apt description. In the direction. He'd already shattered Shiv, and now that he couldn't see where he was, he was simply pounding against Andra's ice lining the insides of the anchor.

The Creeping Void 115 > 117

Come on! Shiv cried internally. He gathered his power and drew on both his desperation and what few Overflow Tides he managed to amass. The remainder of him snapped free from the wall with a crackling noise, and then he leaped sluggishly through the air, using Urri's vitality signature as his guide. He touched the Vulteg and immediately started draining from the brute's being.

Once more, the insides of the anchor came alive with lifeforce, but Shiv had more left to offer. Urri blinked and swung another fist at Shiv. He missed dramatically, and the Shiv wrapped his growing Vitae around the Vulteg, draining from him once more.

Vitaemancy 121 > 123

With the final burst of life force, Shiv resurrected, and this time he didn't fight alone. "Orcs!" he called aloud. "Time to scratch that godsdamn itch! Bring out the bracelet too!" Shiv cut out his Creeping Void right after.

And the reinforcements hiding within his cape responded without any hesitation. As they emerged, Shiv saw they were crusted with frost as well. A section of Tequila's face looked bruised, probably from how fast Shiv was moving around. Then there was Helix, who seemed utterly unbothered.

Waves of twisting Biomancy extended out from behind the orc, and they formed the shape of wings designed in the orc's namesake. Around his arm, however, was a construct of glistening golden Dimensionality, and Helix punched forward, flinging it free from his body. A second thereafter, the ring activated, and from inside came a new shape, a new Pathbearer entering the battlefield.

A chain of Veilpiercers struck both Urri and Andra. The Vulteg shrugged the missile off, but the Jotun let out a cry of annoyance. Maybe she was weaker in terms of Toughness, but that didn't help if she could regenerate.

Shiv needed to destroy her body entirely, probably crush her soul to make sure that she stayed dead.

"You will be still!" Andra cried aloud. She held out a hand, and the bracelet briefly began to freeze. Adam's Chronomantic form lagged in the air as well, and Shiv felt his stomach drop as he hoped his friend wouldn't be affected.

Stolen from its rightful place, this narrative is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

But that was when Shiv noticed Adam was wearing his Legendary armor once more, and he was also using a new bow, one that looked far too large for him. As Adam's golden form plunged back into the bracelet's center, the orcs attacked.

Tequila was the first to strike, his wands flaring bright and hot as bolts of Dynamacy impacted both Jotun and Vulteg. They didn't do any damage either, but the bolts didn't fade. Instead, they stuck to the Legendary Pathbearers' bodies and immediately began pulling them upward. The bolts shivered and pulsed with power, and the gravity clinging to the escaped convicts was inverted.

Urri pawed at the bolt, but then let out a very uncharacteristic cry as a swarm of stinging insects crawled into his mouth and pried at the corners of his eye and ears. At the same time, Helix flapped another one of his wings, and it spiraled through the air, slamming into Andra's chest. She froze a portion of his Biomancy field in response. The orc winced, but then shattered that wing without any hesitation. It turned into a spray of ichor, and instead of freezing, it boiled hot. He sustained himself using his Biomancy, and he grew brighter with power as he generated more insects from his depths.

Whistling blades tore past Shiv's head. They glistened like stars in the night sky, falling to strike dead those who oppose the magnificence of darkness. Shiv didn't know where Whisper was, and that made him smile. The orc's Stealth Skill was a nightmare. With the automaton prisoner disabled, it was likely no one could easily contend with Whisper via their Awareness.

So long as Shiv kept both the Vulteg and the Jotun busy, they could win this. The Deathless launched himself forward. He slammed boulder-first into Andra's chest, and then threw her against the walls of ice she'd created. Her cold constantly lashed at him, but his Shapeless Tides flowed faster, keeping him from being consumed. His inertial sheath rumbled and barked with incredible force; his bones rattled and fissured. But he didn't detonate, not with the orcs nearby, and especially because he needed the speed advantage.

Andra was fast. She moved through the air like there was no resistance at all. She formed a javelin in her hand and swung it down, trying to pin him beneath her. She had half a meter of height on him, a bit short compared to most orcs, but even so, it gave her a reach advantage.

One that didn't matter once Shiv left context.

He slammed into her again, picking her up by her back just as the top part of her javelin clipped his vitality decoy. It began to freeze, but it wasn't destroyed entirely. Shiv felt a chill wash through his core. There was still a connection between him and his decoy, and he guessed part of her magic was spilling over.

But he didn't have time to worry about that. He had a prisoner to disable. He buried his frying pan in the base of her neck before she could rise. A wet snap of gristle and parting tendon was his reward, but her vertebrae were made of harder stuff.

Shiv stomped down with his boot, trying to drive his pan all the way through. But then her cryoclone burst free from her body, sending Shiv stumbling. The clone cleaved and cut blindly, summoning javelins, axes, and whips. Tequila let out a cry of alarm and then blinked forward ahead into time, barely avoiding the blow.

Another one of her cuts struck Urri in the back, but the Vulteg was such a defensive powerhouse that he didn't even notice.

Finally, Helix dealt with the blow his way as well, dissipating into a swarm of strange-looking creatures. They resembled winged reptiles, and they flew through the air without any fear of the ice at all.

As this continued, Adam reappeared from the corner of the room, slipping out of the bracelet before he fired another few shots. One of them clipped the cryo-clone at the ankle, and it stumbled. That gave them just long enough for more reinforcements to arrive. The many rifts opened in the room were tunnels, tunnels connecting this anchor to a certain coliseum hidden underground.

This had been Plan B. If Shiv couldn't talk the prisoners down, then they were going to meet them with overwhelming force.

Gone exploded out from the portal, and she tore into Andra's body where Shiv stood beside. The goblin was so fast that the scene before Shiv resembled a blur more than anything else. It was like a small whirlwind of death and blood had suddenly manifested before him.

The goblin absolutely savaged the giant's flesh. Every bit of meat was peeled clean from Andra's bones. Despite this, despite countless nicks becoming thousands of nicks, becoming nothing but nicks, the bones endured. Gone was fast beyond fast, but ultimately, her lack of might and Andra's passable Toughness spared the Jotun a final end.

Shiv joined the fray once more. He brought his frying pan down but gasped as he struggled to move. Then he realized that he was bleeding vitality. Not only that, his decoy had shattered, and a wave of coldness was creeping out from his center. He was freezing over again.

Goddammit, Shiv repeated for the third time. He directed his tides inward, crushing the ice and forcing it back. If he didn't have Shapeless Tides, if someone didn't possess overwhelming Magical Resistance, he would have had his soul frozen entirely long ago. Andra's Cryomancy was a nightmare. It was a fatal affliction. Just a single nick would damn you to a quiet and still end.

But while he was stunned and struggling, he still had a few convicts of his own. Kura joined the fray, exploding out from one of the rifts and besieging Urri. She was an army unto herself, and though a few of her time clones burst apart in sprays of gold, she still had more. A lot more. The golden shadows swarmed out from the pathway as a legion, and their bladed limbs tore spraying pieces away from the Vulteg's Magical Resistance.

Just then, Adam appeared again, and he fired a particularly large Veilpiercer directly into the Vulteg's eye. Urri roared as it bounced off, and then, from within the dimensional rift, there came a wave of heat, and the magical ice in the room began to melt.

"Alriiight!" a loud voice echoed from all the rifts. It turned into a maniacal cackle of laughter, and from a pathway right next to Andra, a simmering incandescence began to flow, and the flickers of a distant flame grew closer and closer. Suddenly, the temperature spiked. Suddenly, there was a struggle as water started to rain down, as the ice turned fluid, and Candles entered the fray, rubbing his shoulders exaggeratedly. "Who left the fridge open?!"

A blast of Cryomancy exploded out from Andra's clone, but she did something else as well. She pointed a finger down at her original body, and a dense block of ice formed over her mangled form.

Shiv cursed as he swung his frying pan down. A moment too late, as he chipped a bit away from that ice, but then it began creeping over his pan. As he ripped it free, he barely dodged a lashing backhand from the cryo-clone. Gone struck the clone under the armpit like a cannonball, and then vanished before it could strike back. However, Shiv caught sight of the goblin staggering away, and she was rapidly slowing as she vanished down the length of a pathway.

The Deathless winced. Just being near Andra cost Gone her full potential. But that might not last.

As Candles fully emerged, he stood before Gone and summoned a column of fire by his side with a snap and a flourish of his arm. The column spread, igniting even the Jotun's ice itself. But then, undeterred, unbowed, the cryo-clone unleashed her powers as well. The ice magic she wielded was immense, and she ignored Shiv in favor of facing her nemesis, the opposite of her element.

That proved to be a mistake. The Deathless slammed himself into her again. His Shapeless Tides rattled and burst inside him as he felt the full power of her Cryomancy. She also felt his full power as well, and instead of her being frozen and him resisting, both of them were flung back. She slammed against the wall. Candles unleashed two fistfuls of fire by throwing sloppy jabs, and they burned holes entirely through her torso, at which the cryo-clone threw her head back and let out a piercing cry.

Shiv rolled over and shot to his feet once more. He reached out and seized the cryo-clone's ankles. Then he started to drain. There was a slight flicker of vitality there, just a bit, and it took little effort to sever.

The clone burst apart in a spray of red, and the ice sustaining it collapsed as well. But then, at the same time, the block of ice encasing Andra's original body exploded, and from within the Jotun rose once more. She was still half-flayed, and her neck hung at an awkward angle. But the tattoos lining her flesh glowed bright, and she was rapidly regenerating.

What's more, she felt more powerful than ever. It seemed that she had only severed her connection to the cryo-clone, and instead of that destroying her power, it reset it. She was mighty again, fused with her Cryomancy, and undaunted by the growing foes entering the fray.

Despite her injuries, she managed a vicious sneer. "I am Andra, Prophetess of the Dead Realms, and I will not be denied my freedom, not by the Republic's dogs, not by the Ascendants, and certainly not by you."

Her words echoed as if an emanation of her spirit, her mouth remaining utterly still. Her teeth were clenched tight, and her eyes blazed with power, but it wasn't Cryomancy. Instead, violet energy spilled free from her, and she drew back her javelin.

She launched it through the air, just as Shiv and Candles attacked at the same time. A veil of frost swirled around her. The Deathless crashed into it with his shoulder, but found himself struggling to break through. He managed a second later, as a jet stream of hyperheated plasma plowed past her wards. But it was too late. Too late to strike at Andra, who sank down into the ice around her. Too late to stop her from throwing her javelin as well.

It soared—then vanished in a burst of light. But still it sailed, aimed for someone or something Shiv couldn't see. A cold feeling erupted inside of him, and he prepared for one of his allies to fall.

Chapter 212 (III) Pacify

"Prophetess of the Dead Realms!"

Adam heard the Jotun's cry echo within his mind, and he clenched his teeth. He felt tendrils of Divination coiling around him. He wasn't truly studied in this art, not like his mother, but he did have a Master-Tier Divination Skill given to him by the System. As such, he could feel, and if he could feel, he could guess, and he could deduce. She was coming for him somehow, and Adam prepared accordingly. He summoned his own Divination mana, and his eyes came alight with the same violet glow that the Jotun possessed.

Instead of focusing on her, however, he let his instincts guide him. He stared upon her javelin and saw trickles of Divination spill into the weapon, and felt it connect to him as well. It was like a cord bleeding directly to his body, damning him to inevitable fate.

For a bit, Adam looked on with utter disbelief. He couldn't believe it, if she was actually going to—and then, as a veil of ice formed around her, as Candles and Shiv went and leaped out to strike her low, she flung her javelin and passed it into the narrative of the world itself.

Adam couldn't describe it. He felt it move. He felt it cross over. The power she wielded over the nature of causality and stories was staggering. But he wasn't without Awareness, and he wasn't without options.

The Gate Lord focused. He ignored everyone going in and out of his pathways nearby, ignored the crafters crying out an alarm, fleeing from this section of the maze they described as a nigh-impenetrable testing ground. He even ignored how the ground at his feet was freezing over and cracking with bits of blackened ice. He focused, and he followed that trail of Divination leading to his throat. Andra had thrown the javelin. She was going to strike him dead on, and he couldn't intercept her, not really, not until it finally surfaced into reality.

But it would take a second, and when you gave Adam Arrow a second, he would make the most of it. He fired his arrows. One tore a patch into existence before him, and as it ruptured free from the space at his side, he fired three more arrows—before the javelin finally arrived, and a cataclysmic clash took place.

She struck the center of his armor, but her impact barely lasted a second. Adam shifted and took the hit on his chest. At the same time, every single Veilpiercer he fired slammed into its needle-thin side and sent it tumbling astray.

It left a scratch along his armor.

Adam flinched with surprise. It was superficial damage; the armor itself wasn't ruined. But still, after so long, for something to scratch his Legendary armor was disconcerting.

Veilpiercer 184 > 190

Vectors of the Eternal Ascent 171 > 176

The javelin struck the wall, and it burst apart into shards, but from those shards expanded patches of all-consuming ice, and the Gate Lord let out a hiss. He would need Candles back in a while. Either him or Shiv. Only they seemed to have the skills capable of suppressing Andra's Cryomancy.

"Prophetess you may be, but a good shot you are not," Adam quipped as he drew back another arrow.

"Candles," Shiv called, "melt it all."

"Oh, I love the sound of that!" the burning Pathbearer cried. He threw his head back and laughed, and as he did, a spew of flame erupted from his jaws, and jets of blazing heat carved out from his every digit. The insides of the teleportation anchor became an elemental war.

Fire and ice formed explosive steam, and even without Shiv's Creeping Void active, everything was obscured and chaotic. Shiv, however, didn't care. He had his own task to perform. He slammed a fist down on the ground and began channeling his Shapeless Tides into the ice itself, letting them circulate around the room. He tried to focus, tried to cultivate as many tides as he could, so that he could seize control of the anchor and crush it inward.

He was going to break the ice. Candles was going to melt it. This was effectively a two-on-one fight—and then a blow struck him in the back of the head again. This time, he felt something in his lower neck break. As he went tumbling forward, he got up just in time to wrench his Shapeless Tides in the opposite direction and intercept a lashing kick from Urri.

The Vulteg's eye was covered in a swarm of stinging bugs, and a small army of temporal clones clung to his arms and legs. They stabbed away, chipping at him, but he continued raging on.

Shiv drove a fist into his chest, but then the Vulteg vanished and rematerialized behind Shiv. He swung wide and hit nothing because he didn't know where Shiv was. The earlier hit he achieved was blind luck alone. Quite literally, he punched in the opposite direction where Shiv stood, and the Deathless moved on instinct, letting his Legendary-Tier Grappling guide him.

He rolled and coiled his limbs around the Vulteg's lower legs. Before Urri could vanish, Shiv seized control of his lower left leg and locked his feet around his knee as well. Then, with a wrench of his body and a burst of vectors, he tried to cripple the Vulteg with a kneebar. A brief pop was heard. Urri let out a yelp, but then vanished once more. Shiv guessed that he might have achieved a partial tear at most, and that was a terrifying thing considering he spent a good portion of his overflow tides, what little he had left after trying to seize the anchor.

"What the hells is he made of?" Shiv muttered under his breath.

As Urri reappeared once more, a Veilpiercer slammed into the side of his head, and he went stumbling. The moment the Veilpiercer ruptured, however, another attack followed. It was the roar of a cannon, the impact of an artillery shell. A massive blast filled the room, and Urri went flying against the wall. Another few explosions struck, and Shiv stood his ground as rippling waves of force expanded through the insides of the anchor. He pinned himself down and cultivated his toughness.

A Pillar of Orichalcum began to form around him, and just then, the battered body of the Aeromancer slammed into him as well. As she made contact with him, he felt her biology with his mana and realized she was still alive, and quite healthy, in fact. There were several patches of her that were frozen, and nasty contusions everywhere, but she was very much alive. Her internal organs weren't harmed, and it seemed the same case with the Dimensional Automaton, as Shiv saw a fragment of the bot prisoner smack into him as well.

As it bounced down, the Automaton let out an "Ow," and then was kicked aside by a passing orc. It was moments like these that struck Shiv with awe-struck delight. It had been one battle after another, and through it all, he just didn't appreciate how tough he'd gotten. He and practically every other Pathbearer who got to the point of Master. The things they were surviving were absurd. Their skills were absurd. A Pathless, well, never mind that, an Adept would have been liquefied if they were caught inside this teleportation anchor. And here everyone was, shrugging off each other's attacks in one way or another.

A loud yelp came from his side, and Shiv saw Candles pinned to the ground now, the blazing Pathbearer prying at a long, thin javelin sticking out from his chest. The javelin was melting, but from the ceiling, Andra reappeared, and she plunged down with another spear-like weapon in her hand.

"The hells you don't," Shiv snarled. He launched his mana hydra into the Jotun's side. He knew it would freeze some of his Biomancy, but it was faster than trying to attack her physically. As his mana hydra hit, a burst of red filled the air as her Magical Resistance endured. And soon, as he expected, creeping frost

formed along the outside of his Biomancy field. But then Shiv was upon her. He slammed into her midsection and dropped her against the ground in a piledriver. Something in her neck fractured again, and she hissed. She swept her blade up, and he dodged back, albeit barely. She took a piece of his pinky away, and Shiv used his Biomancy field to sever half of his hand so that he didn't need to deal with the spreading ice.

Inertial Overdrive 177 > 179

He grabbed her by the ankle and swung her head-first into the frozen walls of her anchor. She fused with it, becoming ice herself, but Shiv was still holding onto her. His vectors crawled along her body, and so long as he held her tight, freedom was beyond her grasp. Shiv pulled. A section of the wall came free, and Andra tumbled out with it. He drove a knee into her chin, and her head snapped back with a satisfying spray of blood.

He hooked his arm around her head, and then they tumbled. His vectors spiraled around his body, turning fast, and they were as if an alligator and its prey, doing death rolls in the water. Andra used her Cryomancy, but he battered her with fist and pan. He rolled over atop her body and wrapped an arm around her neck. Slowly, he tightened. His Overflow Vectors crashed along the curve of her neck like countless war wagons sieging the walls of a fortress. She grunted and choked. He tightened his grip, and soon Kura joined in as well.

Her time clones stabbed down upon the Jotun, and her blades pierced her skull and shredded her sides. Andra choked and coughed. She still kept struggling, and the faint glow of violet mana spilled out of her eyes. That glow faded as Gone struck again. A blur of cuts rained down, and the front end of Andra's face simply ceased to be, along with both of her eyeballs.

"Just go to sleep," Shiv hissed next to her ear. "Just pass the hells out! I didn't want to do this shit; I wasn't trying to—"

And then she activated her Divination regardless. It seemed she didn't need her eyes for the skill. Her fingers thrust forward, and Shiv hissed as something punched through his lower ribs. A spread of ice clawed along his abdomen. Hissing, he seized Andra's neck and began to twist to the side. He started draining her vitality as well, and just as he felt something inside her about to give, a massive boot struck him in the back of the head for the third time.

Shiv was sent stumbling off of Andra's body, and Urri tripped over him as well. Holding onto Urri's back was Whisper, stabbing down with blade after blade. As Shiv looked to his left, he saw Tequila partially caked to the wall. The orc was still alive and laughing, but he was clearly in pain, and Helix was trying to reconstruct the orc Chronomancer's lower body.

Just then, a hand hooked under Shiv's armpit, and the temporal form of Adam wrenched him back to his feet. "Finish this!" Adam cried aloud.

"Will do," Shiv growled. He flung himself on Andra with renewed vigor, but she turned, fusing into the ground right before he slammed down. Unfortunately, she still wasn't fast enough to avoid his Shapeless Tides. They circulated out. The vector struck something that wasn't dead, that had a soul, and Shiv pulled. With a roar of effort, he wrenched her free from her cover and flung her against the ceiling.

Her head impacted the corner of the anchor, and part of her horn snapped. She kicked off of it, however, doing a backflip and slashing Shiv's right cheek open in a startling counterattack. She moved so fast that he barely reacted, and she stabbed him a series of times before his eyes could even follow. He had no idea where the speed came from, why she was so fast all of a sudden.

He clamped both hands around a rising javelin just as it sank into his chin. A spread of ice began to spread, but he held her in place. She lifted him off the ground. He slammed himself back down using some of his vectors. He snapped her ice, and he elbowed her in the throat. Andra gagged. He swept her legs out from under her, but then she rolled. She caught herself and then came up with a sweeping strike. It was intercepted by one of Kura's clones, and then she promptly disintegrated, as well as the temporal wards ripped through the room.

Then, Candles entered the fray again. He clung to Andra's face and began channeling flames directly into her ear canals. She roared with pain, and that turned into a pitched shriek as he drove the bladed edge of his frying pan up between her legs. It cut through her armor. Her eyes, now regrown, widened as she snarled and somehow laughed with disbelief. "Agh! You utter wight!"

And then she did something unexpected. She reached out with her left hand and slammed it into her own chest. A welter of blood erupted, and she ripped her sternum free from her torso entirely

As it came loose, Shiv froze. His nerves screamed with terror. He flung himself back a second using his Chronomancy, and that was perhaps all that spared him and all his allies from a certain end.

For what spilled out from Andra's very core was a wave of vile energy. Her heart was not human; it wasn't even an organ. Instead, at the center of the Jotun's chest, he beheld a shroud of crackling, sickly-green mana coiling around a dagger.

Candles let out a yelp as the corrosive mana flung him aside. His Magical Resistance held, but he still found himself launched as if a dart flung by a titan. As he hit the far end of the room, Andra grasped the dagger, and it became a long curved glaive as she pulled it free. It crackled with verdant energy, and a series of Chronomantic clones manifested behind her, but they were outlined with Necromancy, even if their insides were portals to an endless expanse of howling Blizzards.

"You've fought well, Deathless," she said, "but now I grow tired, and now I will show you how I have earned my name. If the Ascendants are to slay me, then so be it, but I will not strike an accord with someone who uses the forked tongue, and I will never bend or let myself be taken again, not after my shame."

The Deathless got back to his feet and sighed. He held up his hand and tried to think of a way to bring her down. Maybe his Shapeless Tides could hold the Necromancy at bay, but if she surprised him just once, then everyone within this anchor, and probably a good portion of the capital, were going to be destined for an ugly end. And Shiv didn't want that, not even a little.

"Look... Listen," Shiv hissed. "I don't want to kill you. I don't give a shit about—"

"No more talk!" she spat. She held her glaive high. "We finish this. Witness the harrowing cold! Witness the Prophetess that will claim this world for the eternal winter."

"I can still get you out of this mess!" Shiv snarled. "Why are you so fucking determined to die? What the hell is wrong with you?"

Everyone was giving Andra a wide berth now, and the Deathless's mind raced. Adam's Veilpiercers tore into existence from all angles, but they shattered around Andra like glass.

Shiv had a very, very bad feeling about this. The anchor wasn't going to sustain this, and with the sheer amount of power spilling out from them, this was probably going to be a massive blip on the Ascendants' awareness, so to speak. His mind spun—then settled on a name.

He called out the only name that connected him to the Dragon Brokers, because if he couldn't convince Andra, then maybe throwing one of their operatives at her would do the trick.

It was his last shot at solving this peacefully and avoiding a genocidal event in the capital. "Cullywier!"

But the moment Shiv summoned the fairy, Andra cut down, and every bit of ice within the anchor came alive with the foul touch of Necromancy, lashing out at all those trapped within.

Chapter 213 (I) Troubleshoot

There are three basic things you should know about the fairies. The first is that their Tiers and levels are constantly in flux. The second is that Necromancy doesn't work on them, since they can't really die. And the third is: don't bother keeping them as slaves.

Yeah, it's kind of fun to imagine forcing the System's favored bastards to pop every boil on your ass or fold your bedsheets, but they just don't work that way. Their rules are weird and nonsensical. Their legend is tied to stories and song.

Forget to play three strings in the morning? Oh, well, that Adept fairy's now a Legendary Pathbearer for the next, I don't know, until whenever the next monsoon hits where you live. But also, they are deathly afraid of chickens, and if you throw one at them, it will mortally wound them for a century, and they'll have to spend all that time recovering.

Sounds strangely specific? Yeah, it's because I actually suffered through that.

But I wasn't done. Nope, I was determined to actually get my money's worth, so I kidnapped another one. This one was a fae warrior, a real killer, named himself Beast of Beasts, and he ran from one world to another, butchering the biggest, meanest, ugliest monster he could find.

I thought I'd gotten myself a real edge, could start harvesting monster parts to make a fortune. But as I brought him into Integrated Earth, guess what happened? That's right, he touched a piece of synthetic material, turned into a flock of doves, and vanished into a spray of colorful light that played a song about friendship and stabbing monsters in the eye or some nonsensical drivel.

Last I checked, he's back in his usual spot in the Fairwoods, in between hopping other realms and murdering more monsters. Tried kidnapping him two more times, but it seems that anything that's not a natural material banishes him back to where he was spawned.

Why? For what reason?

Stupid as it might sound, the fairies are things that are made from stories. You can try vivisectioning them too, but there's nothing inside, unless the story says so. A couple have hearts, but that's because it fits their lore. And if you steal these hearts from them, it either makes them inhumanly powerful, or utterly weak and beholden to you in all things.

Now, you might ask me, "Realmrunner, Realmrunner, why don't you just take one of those easily enslaved fairies, then? The heart thing you just talked about, that sounds simple."

I did. And guess what? This Legendary-Tier fairy that I managed to steal the heart from—took me considerable effort and nearly a million minions, by the way—became less than an Adept. Because stealing their heart severed them from the source of their power, and because they don't feel formidable anymore, they weren't.

That's it. That's the story, kids. More of a cautionary tale now that I think about it.

Putting it simply, stay out of the Fairwoods. It's a miserable place. It's gonna eat up all your mithril, it's gonna eat up all your resources, it's gonna kill all of your forces, and you're gonna end up back where you started with less than what you had, except with a desire in your heart to burn the entire Fairwoods down.

Unfortunately, that doesn't work either, because it's just as likely that your flames suddenly wake up and start holding hands with the trees and singing a happy song before leading them back to you and beating you so bad that you develop a phobia of vegetation for the next 20 years.

Yeah, I experienced that too. Laugh it up. It'll happen to you.

Stay out of the fairylands.

Stay out of the fairylands.

Stay out.

-Fairy and the Fairwoods, by the Realmrunner

The insides of the anchor combusted with corrosive mana. Shiv came within an inch of flinging himself back across time to where his temporal anchor resided within the Coliseum. The orcs and convicts who'd entered the fray to assist him were diving through the pathways. And at the heart of it all was Andra, clenching her corroded heart in a closed fist and wielding a Necromantic glaive that promised soul-rending wounds to anyone it licked.

But, and quite befitting the theme of this fight, another surprise unfolded.

Cullywier materialized before Shiv in a flush of color and fragrance. The fairy stepped free from a place beyond Shiv's awareness, beyond perhaps even this realm, and stood there, a rail-thin creature beholding certain death.

Regret immediately seized Shiv. He should have blinked away, returned to his temporal anchor, and had the others beat their retreat as well. Andra was a Legendary Pathbearer, and she was far harder to kill than he expected. Now, it seemed that the poor fairy was about to pay Shiv's price.

But then Cullywier did something unexpected: He held up a single finger, and every bit of corrosive mana went still before him. His body came alight with the faintness of blue. Shiv's eyes widened. He stopped mustering his Chronomancy and found himself entranced.

The Animancy flowing from Cullywier evolved. It became something else, something of a rippling resonance. Then the Necromancy sawed across it, and it sounded as if a bow greeting strings. A melody played, and it was sweet and inhuman. Blood began to seep down from Shiv's nose, poured free from his ears and eyes. But inside, he felt a strange sorrow claw its way out of his heart, which then turned to manic happiness the second thereafter.

His response to the fairy's song was muted compared to the orcs and other prisoners. Gone let out a piercing cry and tumbled just short of one of the dimensional rifts. Helix immediately obliterated his eardrums, jets of viscera spurting free from the sides of his head. Every single time-clone Kura dispatched into battle vanished as one, and Candles clutched his head as he began to mutter about the memories coming back.

But it was the Necromancy that responded the most to Cullywier's siren song. Instead of lashing out and cleaving into everyone's souls, it surged toward the fairy. It speared into his rail-thin being and melded with that faint blue, painting the space around him like a halo. A co-mingling followed, and the faint blue became a purest white.

The Necromancy was neutralized entirely. And across from the fairy, Andra let out a snarl of frustration and disbelief. "What ape trick is this?"

Undeterred, even as she began to bleed as well, she flung herself at Cullywier. But instead of striding forth as an unstoppable Pathbearer, she staggered, she stumbled, and she swung her Necromantic glaive as if a drunk fielding a boat oar.

Her first blow missed Cullywier by a good meter. She readjusted, but before her second strike could fall, Shiv slammed into her chest.

At the same time, Urri dove through the air, trying to strike Shiv from behind, but promptly missed and slammed headfirst against Candles instead. The Vulteg let out a shriek as his face caught fire, and reflexively, the blazing man clutched the High Marshal's tentacles as they started another sloppy wrestling match and tumbled to the floor.

Andra roared, and that turned into a choked sound as Shiv slammed his forehead into her lower jaw. A piece of her chin fractured inward, and he wrapped his hands around her shoulder and wrenched hard. A satisfying snap followed as her upper clavicle burst free below her neck. Shiv spiked his vectors down and slammed her heart against the ground, then began to knee her, using his legs while keeping her arm secured.

She struggled and fought, unleashing her Cryomancy against him. Meanwhile, Cullywier strode toward them, and her glaive flickered before it, too, was wrenched out from her grasp by twig-thin fingers. It entered the fairy's body, just as the corrosive mana had done before.

Cullywier seized the Jotun's heart, and she let out a panicked cry, one that quickly turned into a groan as Shiv dropped an elbow on the side of her temple. He took advantage of her discombobulation and

readjusted his positioning. He spun until his chest was pressing down on her head, and then he dropped two more elbows and a frying pan against her neck.

Andra gurgled. She reached up with a hand, but Shiv cut her fingers away, then he stomped down on her face once more. She tried to say something, but he wrapped her face using his Vitae strands, and he began to drain in earnest. A flood of life-force splashed within the anchor, and the heat built in the atmosphere.

The story has been illicitly taken; should you find it on Amazon, report the infringement.

The Jotun choked and struggled, and Shiv could barely make out her words. "No! Stop! Help, return—lactery!"

That confirmed things for Shiv. What she possessed wasn't just reminiscent of Valor's Soul Cage; it was clearly of a similar make.

"How the hells did you manage to perform the Ritual of the Dichotomous Soul?" Shiv muttered.

The Jotun's Cryomancy exploded out of her, but instead of being allowed to consume the room once more, Shiv had been gathering Overflow Tides, and he expended them all at once. They slammed against the Jotun's magic, and a clash followed. Legendary Pathbearer struggled against Legendary Pathbearer, and an impasse was the result. Glistening vectors shattered rushing surges of ice before winking out themselves.

With every heartbeat, Shiv generated more strength to spend, and the outline of a dragon began to flicker around Andra's body as she tried to get back up. Her face healed, but Shiv kept draining her, and

she got weaker and weaker. A rasping cry escaped from her brutalized throat, and he pressed down with a feral growl of his own.

Didn't need to go this way. Didn't need to die at my hands. Didn't need to make a mess of things.

Her strength flagged; Shiv's didn't. His anger climbed as he wondered if his cover was lost. They'd kept their fight mostly contained to the anchor, but with the sheer amount of power they threw around, Harlock would have to be absolutely blind if he didn't see it, or blinded by a combination of Veronica and Cripple's efforts—hells, the Educator had to be involved as well.

As Andra gave a final cry of effort, the ice around her surged, but it was then that Shiv noticed a glistening outline clinging to her magic, and a blackened grid as well. He sliced into it without hesitation, his frying pan carving bits of her mana free.

This time, Andra gave a genuine shriek of pain, and Shiv took full advantage. He smashed through her Cryomancy, delivering another blow to her neck. It crackled and popped, her veins spewed open, and blood began to spurt out like gushing rivers. She tried to muster her mana, but Shiv cleaved another part of it away, and then he brought the blunt end of his pan down.

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The front part of her face flattened and caved in before the blow. But that wasn't enough, Shiv knew. He cut another piece of her mana away, but this time shoved it into the center of his pan. It began to swirl

with blackness, and he swung down once more. This time, his blows were heavier; his cuts ran deeper. The upper half of her face vanished entirely, turning into a spray of viscera.

He kept going. He cut again and again, cultivating new Overflow Vectors and wielding his strength in tandem with his Deepest Edge. Shiv mangled her body in ways Gone couldn't earlier. Her bones turned to powder, her insides turned to paste, and her mana was scalped piece by piece and infused inside his rumbling Morsel to increase its density, its weight, its power.

He struck her again and again, cracking the ice beneath her, shattering her armor and body, sending splashes of burst tissue and hot blood over himself.

By now, he was knee-deep in bloody muck. Ropes and trails and steaming mounds of exposed tissue sent him into a near-berserk state, but he held himself back. He forced his Vitae deep into her being, and he started pushing hard, so hard that her Magical Resistance finally shattered. His mutant spirit surged into her soul, and he could feel her recoil, hear her fear. A chain formed between the Jotun and the Deathless, and it was a frozen thing, a black thing of red, white, and midnight-crusting frost.

A loud shout came from behind Shiv, and he reflexively twisted, bringing his pan behind his head. A loud ringing sound deafened him as Urri's punch landed hard upon the surface of his frying pan. Then two Veilpiercers hit the Vulteg's ankles, just as Candles and Gone slammed into him from behind. As they went rolling over in a heap, Shiv returned to the task of finally ripping the Jotun apart at the deepest level.

"Didn't want to fucking do this," Shiv growled, more to himself than anything. His mood grew blacker, and the tendrils of Vitae he projected lashed harder, coiling back like snapping, striking serpents as they slithered deeper into her mangled body. "Could have avoided this shit. You happy, System? You happy? Here, I killed another person. I'm gonna rip them apart from the inside. Another Legendary death! Are you fucking happy?"

He felt her magical skill, and began to sink his Vitaemancy inside it. Just then, a notification flashed before his eyes, and he clenched his teeth.

Stop! Deathless, you have bested me. You are a true warrior, better than I. But I must ask of you, stop. I do not fear losing my own life, but there is something—

Shiv stopped reading.

He didn't give a shit anymore. The Jotun had lost mercy privileges when she cut him in half from behind, if she hadn't already due to what he saw of her plans in his Non-Sequitur vision. He didn't have it in him to be kind anymore. Any mercy offered would be at his peril and the peril of those he cared about.

He began to tear, and things inside her broke. He couldn't hear her scream, but he knew that she was begging somewhere, knew that she was desperate not to have her skills and soul mangled by how much harder the fear-chain between them was growing. Power surged into Shiv. He grew larger, his muscles swelled, his Vitamancy went from tendrils to dense cords. And as a result, her soul came asunder, breaking down the middle as he shattered the first of her skills. It didn't feel particularly deep, so that wasn't her Cryomancy.

He moved on to the others, spreading out like a branching infection creeping under the skin, seeking every major organ he could to destroy them from within, to rip away that which made them whole, and to murder the lore that sustained her soul.

"Deathless," Cullywier said. There was a melodic quality to the fairy's voice, yet Shiv ignored it, even if he yearned to turn and hear the fae speak again.

"Deathless," Cullywier repeated, a little louder, "I must advise against this."

And that barely brought Shiv back to reality.

It didn't matter how nice the fairy sounded. This fucker tried to kill him, did kill him twice, did force a fight when it didn't need to be one, and also had no qualms threatening the lives of everyone within the academy and far beyond.

A gust of fragrant wind rushed around his form and tightened its hold upon Shiv. The Deathless's fury was forcibly incensed, and he clenched his teeth so hard his jaw began to creak. "Cullywier, if you intervene on her behalf, I swear to the System, I will do you in after."

"It is not on her behalf that I act, but yours. This is simply unwise. She is not someone you wish to kill, not without damning yourself to a lifetime of being hunted."

A bitter laugh tore out from Shiv's throat. He popped another one of her skills, and it was ever so satisfying to feel her come apart from the inside out. His anger and frustration had alchemized into hate. The System wanted this of him? Then he would feed it. He would give it the show it so desired. He would mangle, cripple, mutilate, and obliterate every single individual and monster that was forcibly sent his way, especially if they were too stupid to take up his offer of peace and see themselves spared.

"I'm already hunted," Shiv snapped. "What's a few more bastards on my ass? Just more victims-to-be, just more people to bloody my pan, to bloody—"

That made Shiv's insides recoil with even more strain. His pan was bloodied. He was killing people with implements from the kitchen. It wasn't that violence and bloodshed bothered him, but it needed to be

separate. The shape of his artistry and creation shouldn't be so closely aligned to the brutality he inflicted upon his enemies.

This was wrong, but the System just—it kept forcing him and pushing him and making him more and more into a monster. Shiv sucked in a breath. It just wants me to be a monster. It gave me the pan. It just wants me to break and kill and hurt. That's all it wants. It doesn't care about anything else. It just wants me to eat, eat, eat, hurt, hurt, hurt, and there's no way out. I keep trying, but it won't let me go.

A new emotion joined the swirling vortex building inside Shiv. Exhaustion, existential exhaustion. He would never give up. He would never fold, but this was wearing on him, wearing on his mind. He didn't want to kill and fight constantly, incessantly, forever, without reason, without a chance for peace, without a chance to cook, without a chance to be a person. He wanted to be a person, his own person. That was the entire point of him seeking to be a Pathbearer. And as his thoughts grew more agitated, he began ripping more of Andra's insides apart.

A loud snap came from behind him, and in the corner of his eye, he saw a spreading fracture growing upon that dagger. Her soul is bound to it, he thought. Time to finish you off. He still hadn't found her Legendary Skills yet, but he was getting closer, and he could feel the coldness.

"I understand that your circumstances might be different from most," Cullywier said, a faint hint of indifferent whimsy to his voice. "But if you kill her, understand that the Court of the Shattered Moon will come for you. All of Jotunkind will hunt you until none or left, or until you meet your final end."

"Fuck them," Shiv snarled. "Let 'em come. It's a sooner or later thing by this point."

"And if that is not enough," Cullywier continued, "know that if you slay her, you may very well find yourself at the end of Valor Thann's blade when he finally pieces himself back together."

And that stopped Shiv's mind dead. His head snapped to the fairy. "What?"

"What?" Adam's chrono-clones echoed just before he was dragged back through the expanded bracelet.

Just behind Cullywier, Shiv saw Urri trying to get back up, but a few dozen of Kura's time-clones had returned to the fray and were actively holding him down. Most of the Vulteg's face was melted. Candles channeled his Pyromancy without any restraint, while Gone dragged scratches along the massive Vulteg's chest. Helix, Whisper, and all the other orcs attacked Urri in support as well. Despite this, he was still getting stronger. Urri's muscles swelled. His Magical Resistance flared so bright it became a literal shield around him. Shiv thought his Toughness had been good, but what the Vulteg had was absolutely absurd.

"Valor," Shiv coughed out. His Vitae twitched. He was so close to ripping Andra apart, so close to finishing her off for good. "What the hells does she have to do with Valor?" he hissed, his eyes wild, his hands shaking. He kept his strands buried deep within Andra's battered body. Once more, it was beginning to heal, but she wouldn't come back in time, not before he drained all of her vitality dry, not before he broke her final skill.

"Because she is one of Valor Thann's disciples, and it is he who taught her the Ritual of the Dichotomous Soul." Cullywier tilted his head, observing Shiv's reaction, how his body locked up. "You didn't know this."

Shiv stopped draining. His Vitae strands twitched, and so did his left eye. "No," he muttered, his thoughts racing. "No, I did not. Cullywier, are you bullshitting me?"

"No," the fairy said. A look of genuine pity for Shiv developed on his inhuman face. "The Dragon Brokers told me that you and Young Lord Arrow are now considered Valor Thann's closest confidants, as you

have been spotted with him at multiple points. They assume you two were accepted as disciples as well." The fairy's unnaturally large eyes briefly flashed with Divination mana, and he squinted.

"However, I am beginning to suspect this information might be incorrect or lacking critical details. I say this because Valor Thann has been known to be extremely honest with his actual disciples, especially due to matters such as these. And it seems he has left you entirely in the dark."

Chapter 213 (II) Troubleshoot

"Such as these," Shiv said dully. His head throbbed with a building headache, and that existential exhaustion inside him overtook all other emotions. The easy thing to do would just be to finish Andra off. She couldn't stop him. Cullywier didn't seem to want to stop him. He was only advising Shiv, and the winds he cast over the Deathless's body were half-hearted impediments at most. No more than a soft breeze could serve as a bulwark against a falling avalanche.

"Valor Thann has recruited many disciples, trained many Pathbearers," Cullywier said. "I have even encountered He Who Halts Eternity on several occasions, and he slew me thrice and worked with me approximately twelve times otherwise, though he was only aware of me on two of those occasions. As such, I have some insight into his character and personality."

Just then, Adam entered the fray. He erupted from one of his dimensional pathways and came to a halt right next to Shiv. The Gate Lord was a tempest of activity. His vector wings flared bright, and his hand reached out, snatching the dagger heart out of Cullywier's hand and clutching it tight with his Necromantic vambrace. The fairy tried to say something, but Adam held up a finger.

"Don't know what you are. Don't want to ask. Shiv! Conference, now!"

Adam Lord promptly blasted Shiv with his Unique Skill, and Shiv felt himself obtain Adam's Commander's Foresight. The cognitive endurance shared by the two of them was more than doubled when Shiv projected his Psychomancy into Adam's mind.

"How'd you know it would do that?" Shiv asked.

"I didn't. I guessed," Adam replied. Then a growl of frustration escaped him. "Did I hear that right earlier? Did that stick-elf thing say that the giantess is a disciple of Valor's?"

"He did," Shiv said dully. "I'd like to say it's bullshit, but look at the damn dagger. Look at her Necromancy."

"Could still be a ruse," Adam said.

"Could be," Shiv replied. "But I don't think so. My gut tells me that Valor probably trained her at some point in the past few centuries. Now that he's broken and his mind is as scattered as his soul is, he doesn't remember at all. So he can't tell us about everyone he trained before us specifically."

"Right. Great. Wonderful. But we don't know exactly. So what do you think we should do?"

Shiv didn't respond for a few seconds.

"Shiv? Shiv? Are you alright?"

A tired noise escaped the Deathless. He tried to find the words. "My pan's all bloody, Adam. I've got bits of brain matter inside my pan. It's all crusted on the sides. Using it like a knife is... I... I don't..."

And then Adam understood. "Oh. I'm sorry."

"Yeah. Thanks. I, uh... I can keep fighting. I'm... I'm not done, Adam. I'm not..."

"You don't need to justify yourself to me, Shiv. I understand."

"I'm not done," Shiv continued. "It's just... I don't want to be just a murderer. I don't want to be just bashing and murdering and ripping things apart over and over again. I'll do it. It won't stop me. I'll do it, and I'll even enjoy it on some level. But I haven't gotten to cook, Adam. I haven't even gotten to play at being a student yet. I just fucking got here. I haven't been a chef in... I don't know how long. And now the System's making me use a kitchen instrument as a weapon."

"I know," Adam said again, and Shiv could taste his discomfort, his misery as well. However much Shiv hated this, Adam was suffocating under his own weight too. He had to contend with the rulers of his republic proving to be some of the worst people Integration had to offer. He had to contend with his missing family, with his current situation.

"It's trying to drive us insane,"

Shiv uttered.

"What is?"

"The system," Shiv said. "The System. It just wants us to kill, kill, kill. We just don't die, and so there's just more things coming our way, and soon that's all we'll be doing, just killing, killing, killing for just a few seconds of quiet, a few seconds of peace. We can't. There's not gonna be a life this way. I just don't see it. I can see war. I can see myself giving in at some point, just turning into a monster."

"No," Adam said, and this time he was filled with resolve. "You're not going to turn into a monster."

"I mean, I'm already kind of a monster, Adam."

"Yes, but that's, that's powerfully literal. You have bits of a monster inside your mind and soul, but the fact that you care about all these things and that you want more than just violence, bloodshed, and a life beyond base animal desires means that you will never fully succumb, even if the System keeps pressing you."

Shiv couldn't bring himself to fully agree. "I tried, Adam, I really did. I wanted this to end peacefully, to make it clean. I didn't want this to happen, but she just forced it. I don't know if it's because there's something wrong with her, or if she got greedy when my notification appeared, or whatever, she just forced the fight."

"Well, you don't become Legendary without being favored, I suspect." Adam sighed. "She was likely consumed long before you were. She likely took to the System's lesson more willingly than you did. And look at her now, a splattered mess on the ground, dead at the hands of a greater monster."

"Dead and at our mercy," Shiv said. "We're not giving her away. That Phylactery of hers, it's ours now. The Dragon Brokers can make whatever demands they want, but considering who you are and what we offer, I don't think they're going to bid poorly when the choice comes down between the Jotun and us."

"Hope not," Adam said. "How badly did you cripple her?"

"Pretty badly. Didn't get to her Legendary Skills yet, though. Hadn't found them yet when Cullywier decided to drop that nasty bomb on me. But I've shattered a lot of her. She's not going to be complete again, not unless someone like Udraal or, to a lesser extent, me, fixes her soul."

"Right, well, that's one reassurance." Adam hesitated. "Alright, so, I'm going to ask you a very simple question. Cripple or kill?"

Adam's viciousness surprised Shiv a bit, and he felt every ounce of the Gate Lord's malicious intent bleeding across their psionic link.

"I don't know, I think killing her is the safest thing."

"But if you break all of her skills," Adam interrupted, "do you think she'll be a useful source of information and knowledge?"

Shiv considered the implications of that. If he killed her, then, according to Cullywier, he'd be dealing with the Jotuns as well. All of them. He didn't think Valor would turn on him over this, especially since he was justified.

But that thought led him into ugly territory.

He thought that was how Valor would respond. But who among them actually knew what Valor was like when he was whole? The Valor that Shiv knew was a shadow of the Legend that used to be, in more ways than one.

And then there was her Divination skill, and her Cryomancy. That was the deciding factor for Shiv. Previously, he'd tasted Sullain's Omnimancy, and though it was immensely powerful, he'd spent it immediately to gain an edge against the Inquisition. Other Legendary Skills were invaluable, and with his Vitaemancy, he could use them against his enemies.

"Cripple,"

Shiv said, determinedly. "For now, we cripple her. I take away everything except her Divination for now. I think that can be real useful for us."

"Her Divination," Adam said slowly. "Is that how she managed to fire that javelin at me?"

"Yup. Got me in the throat the first time, nearly put me down."

"Oh, well, I managed to dodge it."

"You managed to dodge it," Shiv said flatly. "How?"

"By paying attention," Adam replied with a slight huff. "It's quite obvious if you have the Awareness and the Reflexes."

"Oh, I have the Reflexes," Shiv said. "It just suddenly appeared in my throat. Not all of us have Divination."

"Well, then you weren't paying it any attention or trying hard enough. It's nothing to be ashamed of. Some of us are simply untalented compared to their peers."

A grumble of agitated laughter escaped from Shiv. "Okay, yeah, squawk that beak, little hawk. Sing your own praises. Do it. I'm going to remember this when you next eat shit."

"Well, hopefully I die then, so there's nothing for you to vent to."

"Yeah, well, I'm going to bring you back somehow. And then I'm going to beat whoever killed you to death and hold it over you."

"I think not. We've already established you're a little too slow and a little too blind. I fear they may just escape and become a mystery in the night. Death might be the final insult you'll have to endure, Deathless. You'll be thinking with me forever and crying while cooking."

"Maybe for 50 years," Shiv said. "After that, I might get a bird of my own, call it Adam Asshole, train it to say 'bastard', and eventually, after I live long enough, you'll just turn into the same people in my mind. And if that one dies, I'll get another bird. A blue one."

Adam snorted. "You bastard." Both of them fell quiet for a moment and shared another laugh.

"Hey, Adam," Shiv said. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it," Adam replied. "I think I needed a moment too. But this is annoying, frustrating, and we need to expect more moments like these. More Legendary surprise disciples who used to study under Valor. That, and more likely, situations the System tries to force us into. The capital's already in grave danger, things are already going poorly, but you will always be drawn toward conflict, so I'm thinking maybe you should just attack it directly."

That statement threw Shiv for a loop. "Sounds like one of my plans, just throw myself at it."

"I'm not saying just throw yourself at it blindly," Adam scolded. "What I am saying, however, is that we need to play more offensively against the System. Not literally, obviously; it might as well be omnipotent. It's going to try to do things to us at every angle, using every means it has, using every person it can affect. So we must prevent, and we must prevent by directly controlling as many variables as we can. It means establishing our own sphere of awareness, our own defenses."

Adam bit back a bark of frustration. "Gate Piety was that for us. It still is that. We need to get back there. It is a reliable fortress, but everywhere we go, we need to fortify. Everywhere we go, we must be prepared for a siege. We must be building, scouting, adapting, and shaping the circumstances to our advantage."

Shiv sort of liked what he was hearing, but he didn't grasp it, not fully.

"I'll explain more to you in detail. Right now, I think we should finish things out here, and we should deal with that Vulteg as well."

"Yeah, this one, I'm definitely gonna kill," Shiv deadpanned. "No way to use him reliably. I'll steal his Toughness skill, though, before he slips away. That bastard is made out of harder stuff than even I am."

"I know. He just shrugged off my Veilpiercers like they were toothpicks."

"I tried to rip his legs off, and I think I barely sprained him. But I got something he can't counter."

"Oh? And what's that?"

"Vitality Drain. Looks like I'm going to be sucking someone's life force empty today after all."

"Avatar Chandler. Avatar Chandler, confirm," Harlock said. "You do not wish for me to move in on the massive mana fluctuation originating from Phoenix Academy?"

"No," Veronica said, trying to keep her right eye from twitching. She'd made a mistake. She'd thought that boy was smart. Instead, he was simply audacious. What fugitive started a fight on the campus of Phoenix fucking Academy mere seconds after they arrived? Now, she needed to come up with a ridiculous excuse for Anthony's Ascendant to spare Shiv from recapture. I'm embarrassed for you, boy.

"There's been a bit of confusion. Those are my assets. They're handling things." Veronica leaned against her table and exploited her power. It was the technical truth, after all.

"Handling things?" Harlock repeated, sounding unconvinced.

"Matters that are best resolved through rhetoric; the Neath is involved."

A loud hiss of disgust came from Harlock, and she knew Shiv was spared. For now.

"I see," Harlock replied. She felt the Ascendant's presence recede from her mind. Veronica clutched her head and sighed.

I wasn't this stupid when I was... when I was younger. I was subtle. I was careful. I thought about my actions. What is it with children these days?

And with a huff of annoyance, she pulled out her sync-letter and began drafting a note of feedback for her wayward grandson.

To her surprise, there was already something there for her. The corner of her lip quirked up as she read his profane message directed toward her, and she scoffed. "System, boy, we need to do something about your Writing Skill. This is more of a tragedy than your lack of tact. Here: a demonstration of formatting."

Dear Idiot “Grandson”:

It appears that when your father finished inside Udraal, he forgot to release the bit of seed that carries one’s brain cells across...

Chapter 214 (I) Admittance [I]

Sympathy is a weapon. Sympathy is an opportunity. Sympathy is a drug, because everyone has been wronged in some way by the world, by their own nation, their own people, by an enemy. Sympathy will make you betray yourself.

I ask of you now, my gathered little birdies, how many sympathetic people do you think exist across the totality of Integrated Earth, within the grand walls of the Yellowstone Republic, in the far-flung lands of High Harbor? How many people are dissatisfied with their daily lives? How many people bear old wounds, inflicted upon them by those they once considered their family or fellow citizens?

Many. I can see them. I can feel them.

They call out to me when I dream, and upon my face, they rest. I can feel the twitches of their muscles, those grimaces, those ugly, messy tears. I can taste that sour bitterness as they swallow more and more of that poison known as cynicism. Because if even your home is against you, where, then, will you find salvation? Where, then, will you be spared this misery?

Nowhere. That is the answer.

But what if we can change the answer? What if we can give them the means to inflict harm?

Of course, many of these sympathetic individuals will never truly side with New Albion. No, the programming they suffer is too deep, and they fear us. We are the stranger. We are the unknown. We are that gap in the dark of the woods, those gleaming eyes that hide between the clefts of shadow. No normal child, empathetic or not, will wander so deep into the woods.

But they might bargain with us if we leave them boons and gifts and means. After all, one does not need to sell oneself to the devil entirely to accept a nudge or a small expression of favor. So, let's give it to them, these little incremental gifts. Let's hand the knives to those who seek revenge, to those who have been wronged. Let's not reveal ourselves. Let's let things play out.

Let tragedies and retributions unfold. And as they do, let us watch how sympathetic these people can become and see if eventually these poor, wretched children can hatch into something beautiful.

Let us see if they hold enough promise in their hearts to open their cages and join the rest of us in the sky; let us fulfill their hearts' desire.

Then let us see if they come to us in the aftermath, when the flames are settled, and the blood stops flowing.

I can't wait to see the little plays that will unfold... Can't wait!

-The Faceless Queen, New Albion

"I told you before!" Urri roared through charred vocal cords. He wrenched an arm free and scattered a few of the golden shadows, reaching over his chest and clutching the flaming thing that wouldn't stop burning him. "I am High Marshal Urri, and I am on—"

His words were cut off as a jet stream of water blasted straight down his throat. The High Marshal gagged and then screamed as an impossibly powerful force slammed down against his elbow. The Vulteg's arm cracked and tore in two places, but the moment he sustained a wound, Urri grew even stronger.

But just as Urri prepared to renew his struggle, he felt something deep inside him get torn free. It was like a heat that sustained his being, a flame that nourished his life, and it was being siphoned out as if by some kind of winnowing vacuum. Urri tried to pull back, tried to kick away from his other adversaries. But then something struck him in the back of the head, and he briefly lost track of where he was, of who he was. When he regained his focus, a feeling of unnatural lethargy swept through him, and that turned into an overwhelming torpor.

Still, Urri, High Marshal of the Vulteg, fought on because that was what Lord Scorn commanded. Lord Scorn, his God, that beautiful, beautiful God of Hatred, who always showered Urri with interminable praise.

Urri, you worthless fuck, if you let him kill you, I will find your soul's remains, and I will shit into them! I will fuck the shit after I fuck it into you, and then I will make shit babies from your corpse! Do not lose, you fuck. Don't lose! URR!

My Lord, did I make you proud?

WHAT?! NO! NO, YOU OVERSIZED KIDNEY STONE! YOU'RE LITERALLY DYING! FUCKING DO SOMETHING
YOU MOTHERFUCKFUCKFUCK AGGHHHHH

He was hallucinating his struggle now. His body was going limp. He was still kicking somewhat. His muscles were still growing, his Toughness getting ever harder. But that bit of him that sustained his life, that painted the canvas of his soul, was slowly fading into nothingness.

But still he twitched, still he kicked, still he swung his fists a few final times.

His vitality went from a flame of red to blank mist. And, with a triumphant smile on his face, Urri died as he felt a bit be plucked free from his spirit, letting the sweet snarls of his God carry him to the chasm which waited thereafter.

Nothing can stop Urri.

"Guys," Shiv gasped, "I think he's dead, guys!"

The others didn't listen to him. A rain of glistening daggers continued to spear into the Vulteg's eye. Helix started mangling Urri's corpse in weird ways, causing bugs to hatch out from under his armpits, making his skin molt and shred. Kura dissected and dismembered the large brute with Gone's help, and Adam hacked away as well, using his rapier to carve bits free from what remained of the Vulteg's body.

This continued on for a few seconds longer before everyone came to a stop, slouching forms and shuddering breaths painted a portrayal of exhaustion and suspicion among the victorious Pathfarers. Even the orcs eyed the mutilated remains of the Vulteg with vigilance. Tequila fired another bolt into Urri's face, and then another five when the eyeball still refused to pop.

Parts of the High Marshal's body continued to burn, but even so, despite being shredded in so many ways, his bones remained intact, his tendons remained like iron cords. They were scratched and nicked in various ways, but they were not severed. Ultimately, Urri's cause of end was all vitality leaving him, the one thing he couldn't resist, the one thing he couldn't shrug off.

"And you thought my Toughness was bullshit, Adam," Shiv muttered, shaking his head. He examined Urri's Toughness Skill and narrowed his eyes at its title.

Animated Skill Infusion Gained: Cauldron of Remembered Undestruction (Legendary)

"Cauldron of Remembered Undestruction?" Shiv muttered.

"Remembered?" Adam looked over his shoulder. "What do you mean, remembered?"

"Maybe a Memorization Skill is fused into it?"

"How in the Broken Moon does that work?"

Shiv shrugged, the Gate Lord sighed—and then Urri twitched once more, and everyone leapt on him again.

"He's still moving!" Kura hissed. "Take his head. Destroy his organs. Deathless, shred his vitality some more!"

"He's dead," Shiv said. "Can't see any vitality. Guys, he's dead. Really."

"There's still oxygen in his blood," Helix snapped. "Until brain activity stops, we continue!"

They didn't listen. They kept attacking him. Shiv stared at Urri for a moment, and then he shrugged, hitting him a few times just for good measure using his frying pan. Assumptions were fatal for Pathbearers, and even if Shiv couldn't sense any life force, it was best to make sure. Doubly sure. Triply sure.

As he ripped his Last Morsel free of a chasm he'd excavated into the Vulteg's chest, Shiv stomped away to resolve his other problems. He pulled Andra's Phylactery in front of his face. He could faintly hear the Jotun screaming from within. Her psionic cries were tinted with howls of pain and frustrated anger. But the fear chain connecting her to Shiv was stronger than ever. He had shattered everything inside her, except that Divination skill. And now she could see, she could feel, but she couldn't react, couldn't do anything but submit to Shiv's wrath.

"That might have been a little excessive too," Cullywier commented. He manifested a streak of Animancy mana over his left eye, and Shiv realized it was the representation of an eyebrow. It rose higher, and the fairy chuckled at what they were doing to Urri's body. "Lord Scorn will not like this."

"Yeah, well, Lord Scorn can go fuck himself," Shiv said. "He's already coming for us, so nothing's changed there."

"Truly," Cullywier said, humming. "The Dragon Brokers aren't aware of this. What did you do to incur the loathing of such a sequestered god?"

"You know, the usual. Fight off his invading Vultegs, detonate an Animancy bomb within his dimension, do something similar again afterward and kill a few million of his people."

For the first time, the fairy seemed genuinely surprised. "Is this one of the jokes you humans do? Because I don't understand where the comedy is."

"Not a joke, it just happened," Shiv said. "As well as some other shit that we didn't really want to happen, but, well, things just turned out that way. Despite whether we wanted to or not. Story of our godsdamn lives."

"So you tell yourself," Cullywier mused. "Such strange interpretations you have. So bitter. So blinkered. Ah, nonetheless, you should gather the other escapees you have neutralized and take them to a safe place. Or finish them off."

Cullywier gestured toward the downed automaton and Aeromancer. They both sported deep wounds, burns, slashes, and encrusted layers of black frost. Even so, they were still alive. Their wounds were only superficial. Another reminder to how tough Pathbearers got when they weren't beset upon directly by overwhelming force.

"What? Not gonna talk me out of murdering these shits too?"

"They seem to be mostly independent Pathbearers," Cullywier said, "which is a pattern-based way of saying that there is no consequence for their deaths. No one cares for them, and no one will remember them after they pass." The fairy's face twitched, as if he had tasted a flood of overwhelming fear. "It's such a bleak and horrible thing to always be on the edge of that cessation, that silence. I don't know how you do it, and I think I envy you for it."

Shiv didn't know what to say to the elf, but his Psycho-Cartography activated.

Psycho-Cartography: Well, we know Cullywier apparently has some kind of half-human offspring. He's got a fascination about who we are and how we act. We could use that to our advantage at some point, but there's a distance between him and anyone who is, how does he put it, pattern-based. He's also unusually passive in certain ways. Be careful about this one. Everyone I helped you dissect is mostly comprehensible to you in some fashion. They had emotions or logical ways of thinking that you could guess at. We have no understanding of the fairies, and maybe there's no understanding them at all.

The fairy in question regarded the downed prisoners. "Nonetheless, if you would accept my advice, I would recommend that you keep them alive."

"Alive," Shiv said flatly. He regarded both the Heroic-Tier prisoners. The Aeromancer was all but helpless against him during their fight. She seemed to be made for stealth and perhaps group-based combat using her bladed currents. The automaton, meanwhile, was a Jump Mage. He didn't know what else it could do, but it was pretty spent on energy right now.

I think I'll hand them over to Adam, he said to himself.

"You're going to do what to me?" Adam asked, walking over.

"We've got a few live ones here. Along with this undead one." He held up the dagger Phylactery once more.

Adam let out a scoff. He regarded the Aeromancer and the automaton. "So, we have one automaton Jump Mage. What about the other one?"

"I don't know. I've never seen anything like her before."

The Gate Lord narrowed his eyes for a bit, and then he let out a breath. "Ah, a half-harpy."

"A what?"

"It's one of the Sky Folk. The Storm Lord's people."

"Oh, him. He's that monster king that rules over part of the Vast Atlantic, right?"

"He rules the skies of the Vast Atlantic." Adam held up a finger. "Do not get confused. We have treaties with several of the aquatic kingdoms, and some of them are monster-run too. Regardless, the true rulership of the Atlantic is always in flux and constantly being debated."

Shiv snorted with disgust. "So, not even being a monster spares you politics, huh?"

"Shiv, don't be silly. Politics is inevitable. Because the only time there wouldn't be politics is when you can kill absolutely every single one of your enemies without any chance of suffering harm in return."

And that made the Deathless think. "So, you know, if I die enough and get a bunch of Legendary Skills eventually..."

"Shiv, please don't tell me that you imagine to make politics obsolete by becoming the single most powerful Pathbearer on integrated Earth through repeated deaths."

"What the hells do you think I've been doing all this time, Adam?"

"Trying to be a decent person despite how much the System is attempting to groom you?" the Gate Lord offered as an alternative. "Because I don't think you would enjoy politics."

"I might," Shiv muttered. "If I was felling in charge of shit instead of being hunted by every asshole with two legs..."

"Shiv," Adam cut him off with an annoyed huff. "Do you know how every violent revolutionary gets their start? They tell themselves, 'well, maybe if I had all the power, I would be the one wise enough, smart enough, and calculated enough to make the world better.'"

"And it's almost never the case," Shiv said. "Almost. But I am different."

Adam cringed. "And I can guarantee that just about every other revolutionary had the same opinion of themselves. It's not that I necessarily doubt you, Shiv, it's that we're barely adults, and people far older... Gods, I'm already a Hero, and you're a Legend... Well, beings as and more powerful than us have made crippling mistakes as well. We need to be considerate, calculated, and careful." Adam fell quiet for a second. "Alright, I'll take those two to the coliseum. And give the Phylactery back to me. It's better stored down there instead of on your person. It's radiating so much Necromancy that it's likely impossible for you to hide on campus, even with your Perfect Semblance. Too much of a risk on you, anyway. Last thing we need is you going off like a bomb."

Shiv let out a breath. "Yeah, got it." He handed over the knife and ordered a few of his orcs to carry the surviving prisoners across a dimensional pathway.

"Deathless," Cullywier said, "in light of these most unexpected and unfortunate events, the Dragon Brokers wish—"

"The Dragon Brokers are going to have to wait," Shiv snapped. "I need to find Irons, Shit, has it been three minutes yet?"

"A bit over," Adam guessed. "Stop time and run for it."

"Godsdamn it!" Shiv hissed.

Chapter 214 (II) Admittance [I]

He halted time before anyone else could say anything and exploded into action. He carved a bit of shadow away and then fed his pan with a bit of fire. As it burned this time, however, he remembered that he had bits of Andra's ice stored within his Last Morsel as well. As such, when he slipped across, the darkness around him grew colder, and every patch of shadow he traveled hardened into jagged pieces of midnight rime.

"Shit, Godsdamn it," Shiv hissed internally. He avoided letting his shadow settle over any of his allies as he zipped out of the anchor through the cracks lining the wall and went Non-Sequitur. He emerged from the darkness back in Miriam Hall proper and slammed his Mask of Stolen Paths on his face. His Perfect Semblance activated, and he began sprinting down the steps and winding across the halls.

He didn't know where Irons was. The man was true to his word; three minutes and no more. He was going to get help, and things might go from horrible to absolutely fucked if Irons did. Shiv had left him a floor below, keeping him a little bit away from the immediacy of the conflict zone, considering he was just a Master. Shiv couldn't see his vitality signature anywhere nearby. Hells, most of the floor was devoid of signatures. Irons was gone—Shiv had no idea where to go or how to find him.

"Shit, shit, shit," the Deathless cursed under his breath—his curses doubling as he had to disable his temporal shell when the wards closed in. For a moment, his mind spun as he tried to think of how he could find Irons. But then he recalled his armor enchantments. That was the main reason why he had the Voidmantid. Not because it had regenerative capabilities. Not because it increased his strength somewhat. No, he could taste pheromones. His senses were augmented.

Shiv breathed in, and his armor processed the odors and flavors. More than anything, Irons was someone that reeked of sweat and metal. Probably because he was always clad in armor and always on the move, always acting.

Shiv zeroed in on that taste and followed.

He dashed through the left wing of Miriam Hall and kept going down, flinging himself down an entire staircase. He emerged from the way he went in and found himself running along the right side of the building. He nearly ran over the blonde instructor he'd encountered upon first entering the building, and barely dodged in time. The world around him blurred.

His Inertial Overdrive thundered with delight. And that was when he remembered he was supposed to be a physical cripple. Someone barely able to lift a single weapon, let alone break out into a full sprint. And here he was on the verge of shattering the sound barrier and igniting the air.

"Huh? What was that?" a student cried out, barely able to keep track of Shiv's form. It was a good thing that he could keep his momentum and exertions controlled via his Shapeless Tides, because if he was still stuck to his Gravitic Wrestler Skill, a lot of people would be little more than paste by now.

The Deathless hissed and froze time—just in time to nearly catch another counter-Chronomantic wave on the chin. He briefly slammed his Shapeless Tides against the wards to stall for time. His Overflow Tides were sacrificed en masse to sustain this feat. A Chronomantic tsunami that could swallow a small mountain stuttered and went still against Shiv's speck-like form. It was barely enough time for him to direct his Innate Tides inward to slow himself. He let out a ragged hiss as a portion of his lower back was wrenched out of place. A few tendons tore. Some bones broke. He ignored it and shed his Chronomancy field.

As Shiv staggered into motion once more, he moved like Marcus might've when he was still alive. Limping, wincing, with his body twisting in odd directions. He hobbled with all the speed he could muster and sniffed hard at the air. "Godsdammit, Irons, three minutes wasn't enough. Why are you such a man of your felling word? And I can eat shit too. Dammit, Shiv. What's wrong with you? Why did you think you could talk a group of High-Tiers down in three minutes? Aghhh!"

"Aghhh!" a bot student chimed nearby. They resembled a barrel on four legs with academy robes wrapped around them. "I feel that way too, friend. GEN-102, am I right?"

“Uh, yeah,” Shiv called over his shoulder. “It’s, uh, really and sh—uh, stuff.” He limped faster and tried to avoid any more conversations. Irons’s scent was getting closer, it was—

“Is it done?” Irons asked from right next to him. “Are the threats eliminated?”

Shiv nearly jumped out of his own skin. “GAH! Fuck! Where’d you—”

“Is it done?” the captain repeated without raising his voice. He walked alongside Shiv as if there was nothing wrong. He had emerged out of nowhere, ambushing Shiv before the Deathless could find him.

“Yeah, it’s done,” Shiv said. He looked the captain up and down. “How the hells did you manage to get the drop on me?”

“I have experience; you have poor Awareness.”

“I was literally following your pheromones,” Shiv whispered viciously. “I was tracking you.”

“No. You were tracking my previous position, and I noticed you first. This would net you a Fail as a Scout or a Shadow.”

Shiv wanted to complain that he didn't have the Path of the Scout or Shadow, but Shiv wasn't the whining kind. Failures and weaknesses needed to be fixed, not vented about. He needed to make his tracking process not shit as well. "Yeah, well, you can tell me all about what I did wrong later. What you need to know is that the academy is not in danger anymore. For now."

Irons narrowed his eyes. "For now?"

"We're always in danger, Irons. The System wants us to kill each other or suffer endlessly. Can't get out of that deal without being dead and staying dead."

The older Pathbearer grunted. "So it seems. Turn around. We're heading back to Miriam Hall to finish the admissions process; I was in the middle of sending a notification to Headmaster Hymn when I spotted you. Cutting it very close, Marcus."

"Yeah, like you wouldn't believe," Shiv replied. Irons made a nonchalant U-turn, and Shiv followed along, wincing slightly.

"Are you wounded?" Irons asked.

"Ripped up my back and pelvis trying to catch up to you," Shiv said with a chuckle. Irons stared. "It's not from the fight. There's a bit of a skill difference between my baseline Toughness, Physicality, and Reflexes."

"Ah. The Fragile Triangle." Iron nodded. "I understand. You moved too fast and then remembered you were supposed to be physically invalid. So you slowed down and ended up hurting yourself from the inertia."

The Deathless blinked. "There's a term for that."

"It's an extremely common problem for Vanguards," Irons said. "If you are too fast and strong, you will sustain damage from acceleration and combat. If you are too strong and tough, your speed will leave you a sitting target. If you are fast and durable but lack the strength to pose a threat or carry your own weight, you might be invalid regardless, depending on the nature of your skills. Vanguards require more balance, not less, compared to other Paths."

"Huh," Shiv said. "That would've been good to know beforehand."

Irons nodded. "You don't have a formalized education." That was a statement, not a question.

"No. Just a practical one."

"I see. It's hard to tell with you, sometimes. You seem exceedingly capable in some ways and utterly unprepared in others."

Shiv grimaced but thought that was an apt portrayal of his Pathbearing career so far. "Yeah. Probably a good way of putting it."

As they marched back toward Miriam Hall, Shiv watched another dozen or so aerial Pathbearers rip through the air. This time, a rat on a pencil led the race. What is up with intelligent rats on this campus? I've never seen them anywhere else. Wait, are they even rats? Is this some kind of Blessing thing?

“Are you going to tell me about the threats, or do I need to ask?” Irons said.

Shiv frowned at the man. “Doesn’t this count as asking?”

“You can choose to be secretive. I have no means of forcing information from you.”

“Could report me to the academy and tell on me to the headmaster.”

“And you can reveal my connections to the Neath,” Irons countered. “We are both stained by unwelcome circumstance and company. It is your choice.”

Psycho-Cartography: He’s trying to make you feel more comfortable. Just in a weird, roundabout way.

Psycho-Cartography 93 > 94

“There were four of them. Two Heroes. Two Legends. One got finished off. Vulteg—uh, they’re—”

“I know what a Vulteg is,” Irons said. “A rare species to encounter. At least on the surface. Someone of note?”

“Big brute. Called himself Urri.”

Iron’s eyes widened slightly. “High Marshal Urri?”

“You know him?” Shiv asked, surprised.

“Not personally; he was supposed to be dead. Or that’s what the papers and cries declared after his failed attempt to assassinate Councilwoman Chandler during one of her diplomatic missions to Jewel’s End twelve years ago.”

Shiv wondered how a Vulteg High Marshal got mixed up in that mess. Jewel’s End was... far east, from what Shiv could remember. Didn’t know anything about that part of the world besides that. “Other fugitives were some half-harpy, some snake-model-thing automaton, and Andra of the Dead Realms or something. A Jotun—”

“Daughter of a Crone!” Irons gasped. He stopped dead in his tracks. “Her.

You fought the Prophetess of the Dead Realms? The Devouring Winter?”

“Ice-cold pain in my ass, more like,” Shiv grumbled. “I tried to keep things peaceful with her. Tried to discuss how she could be evacuated diplomatically so we didn’t end up destroying the academy if a brawl got started. Managed to get the drop on her, and I tried to be nice and merciful. She rewarded me by cutting my head off from behind.”

“She... cut your head off.”

“Yeah. Rat bastard thing to do when someone’s making an attempt at peace, right?”

Irons kept staring. “How did you...”

“Oh, getting beheaded isn’t that bad. Frankly, I like it compared to some of most other deaths. Like, there was this time I got burned to death inside an anchor—had to turn myself into this tumor-cube thing to protect some people I was with. You know tumors still have nerve endings, right? That hurt like a nightmare. Still pretty high up there in terms of painful ends. Nine out of ten by now. Only thing worse is getting my soul ripped up.”

Captain Irons looked down at the ground and frowned hard. “You are not joking?”

“What? No. The dying thing’s pretty normal by this point. You get—well, I got used to it pretty early on. Wouldn’t have made it very far at all without it. Anyway, she cut my head off, and then I smashed her skull in, fight got started, things went sideways, but eventually, through a chain of bullshit, I managed to break her soul and skills. Turns out, she has a Phylactery, and that’s with Adam now. You can take a look at it later if you want. He’s taking it back to the Coliseum.”

A low noise escaped Irons’s throat. “I... see... And the other two—”

“What about them? They didn’t put up much of a fight, so there’s not much to tell. The Vulteg was the second-largest problem. Took everyone holding him down and me draining the literal vitality out of him before he finally went dead. Took a good while too. Hard bastard. One of the few outright tougher than me so far. Hands down.”

“Marcus. Are you aware that your recounting sounds like the drink-addled boasts of a High Adept?”

“They do?”

“Defeating four High-Tier Pathbearers is an astonishing feat of arms.”

“Yeah, well, I had a bunch of help too. But I would’ve given them peace if they took it. It’s their fault. Dumb bastards.”

Irons just looked at Shiv like there was something wrong with him. “This... You don’t seem affected at all?”

And Shiv finally caught on to why Irons was so doubtful. “Listen. Not too long ago, I was busy getting life after life beat out of me by a Tarrasque grown from my soulstuff and wearing my face. Like a day and a bit ago, I was still in a Rubix Well because the supposed gods of my Republic are freaks who use the bodies of little girls as vessels or literal slavers who want to experiment on me. Yeah, I guess the Vulteg and the Jotun were Legends. But by this point, I really don’t give a shit, Irons. I have bigger problems behind me, and bigger problems ahead.”

“I... see,” the captain breathed.

“Look. I don’t blame you for doubting me. My life is... Well, it’s something else. How old are you?”

Irons seemed taken aback. "Eighty. Why?"

"I'm eighteen. I'm a Legend. What do you call that?" Irons struggled to find the words, but didn't manage fast enough. Shiv did it for him. "Ever since I got my Path, I've been fighting and dying. That's the norm for me. Peace? Downtime? That's the oddity by this point. How many hours have you spent in battle, captain? Real, active battle with the risk of certain death? How many times have you fought something you were hopelessly outmatched by?"

This time, Irons did have an answer. "More than I count in terms of instances, but the actual time is hard to quantify."

"Have you ever died?" Shiv asked. Irons glared at him. "I'm only being half a bastard with that question. You haven't died. And you haven't come back. And so you don't confuse the System so much that it keeps throwing things at you, because you keep technically surviving these impossible battles. And the favor clinging to you grows and grows until it's a wildfire burning up everyone around you who keep surviving as well. That's probably going to include you soon, if you don't die. Today isn't special, Irons. I don't even think I'll remember this brawl in a year. If I'm still alive by then. Because being Deathless means you're never done fighting, and you're never done dying."

A few seconds passed. The two of them just stared at each other. A group of students stumbled by with heavy tomes in their hands and a glowing orb hovering just overhead. The sun was beginning to go down, and the campus bells chimed once more.

"Broken Moon," Irons breathed.

“Yeah. Broken felling Moon. Now that we got that all cleared up, let’s get me finally godsdamned admitted before I have to wrestle the entire Frost Giant army coming to avenge their captured Prophetess or some shit. Just so I can pretend to be a normal fucking student for a single second in my life.”

The captain looked on blankly for another beat and swallowed. “We can make it fast.”

“Best that we do. I’m not kidding about the Frost Giant thing.” Shiv looked up at the sky. “Eat my shit, System.”

Chapter 215 (II) Admittance [II]

—UUUUUUUCCCKKKKKK!

VULTEGS! L-LISTEN THE FUCK UP! WE’RE... WE’RE GOING TO DO SOMETHING VERY SPECIAL.

I’M CALLING THE LORDS OF CUNTING LAW! V-VULTEG’S, GET YOURSELVES BACK TO VULKETH! FROM WHEREVER YOU ARE. WE’RE GONNA... IT’S TIME FOR A RETRIBUTIVE INCURSION!

I’VE TAKEN THIS SHIT FOR THE LAST TIME. I’M DONE WAITING INSIDE MY TOWER LIKE I’M SOME KIND OF—THOSE FUCKS ARE LAUGHING AT ME. ME! A GOD! YOUR GOD! FUCKING ADAM ARROW AND HIS CORPSE-SHEDDING—I DON’T KNOW WHAT HE IS TO ARROW. I DON’T CARE WHAT HE IS. I DON’T CARE IF THEY’RE BROTHER, SISTER, PET, MASTER, SLAVE, SEX-PARTNERS! DON’T CARE DON’T CUNT-FUCKING CARE!

WE KILL HIM! WE KILL ADAM ARROW!

ARRRRROOOOWW! SHEDDERRR! DO YOU HEAR ME? IF YOU GET THIS NOTIFICATION, I'M GONNA FIND URRI'S CORPSE AND SHOVE BITS OF HIS SHIT-STUFFED DEAD ASS AND FUCK HIM UNTIL THE SHIT IS PREGNANT AND SHOVE UP UP YOU AND FUCK YOU AND MAKE THE SHIT BABY FIGHT YOUR CORPSE BABIES YOU FUCK FUCK YOU FUCKKKK—

-Lord Scorn's Message to all Vultegs

As Shiv and Irons re-entered Miriam Hall, they went to the right wing of the building instead. They went up five flights of stairs and then moved down a long marble hallway that was polished to a near-reflective sheen.

There were no decorations along the walls or ceilings of this place. Everything was pristine and white, without a speck of dirt or any hint of scratches whatsoever. There was also the taste of chemistry in the air. Soaps and disinfectants meant to cleanse the atmosphere of bacteria.

Shiv noted how wide this hallway was. It was large enough to fit perhaps five orcs lying in a row, head to foot. It was also tall enough to accommodate a small-sized Dragon-Knight standing up. This made it positively cavernous compared to all the other hallways in the building, and it gave the feeling of a tunnel leading into an arena rather than just another administrative area.

"This place feels ridiculously wide," Shiv said. He picked up a faint distortion in the air as well. It pulled on him. It crashed against him like soft, rippling water spreading across a once placid lake.

"That's because it's spatially enlarged," Irons grunted. "So you don't have much Dimensionality, do you?"

"I don't have any Dimensionality," Shiv replied, "barely have Portomancy."

The Captain grunted again. "Adam does, though. It's part of his arsenal now."

Shiv held himself back before he said confirm anything about Adam's Skills. "Best that you ask him about his skills personally. I don't think it's my place to be giving away the Gate Lord's secrets."

Irons raised an eyebrow. "Gate Lord?"

Shiv bit back a wince. "And that's why I'm not saying anything else."

After a near-minute of walking, they turned around a corner, and Shiv briefly stopped dead. Next to them were two iron doors, two iron doors that suddenly twisted aside and crashed hard against the walls. It was then that he realized they weren't doors at all, but the fronts of tower shields.

Behind them were two golems, each bearing a scepter of some kind. One was shaped like a crescent along its edges, while the other was a quill on one end and a blade on the other.

The golem on the right had a single gem for an eye, socketed at the center of its face. The rest of its body was a thing cast from bronze and veins of mithril. "What's this so late in the day, weeks after the beginning of the cycle, where most young have already been marked and blessed? Is that Captain Irons, I see, and an unknown boy in tow? How frivolous a body, how odd of a soul."

Compared to its counterpart, the golem on the right seemed a thing of reinforced titanium, with a streak of adamantite splitting its face down the middle. It had two eyes, and to Shiv's surprise, they were made from flesh. They glistened like gelatinous orbs, and the golem blinked, constantly teary-eyed. "Another comes to join the chorus. Another, I see, that I will someday mourn, that I will long remember. Tell me your name, small one."

Shiv wasn't sure what to make of these golems, but Irons shot him a look. "Go."

"Go what?" Shiv asked almost dumbly.

"Tell the Mourning your name."

"Mourning," Shiv said, and his eyes settled on the golem to the right. "Right. I'm Marcus Unblood. I'm from," Shiv paused as he racked his brain, "Old Brunswick, somewhere around there. Yeah, I got poisoned during a Jotun attack, and most of my friends also got killed. It was really bad. I went into a coma, and my heart beat really, really slowly, so they thought I was dead too. They loaded me inside a corpse freezer, and now, well, I woke up earlier, so here I am."

As Shiv finished rambling, the two golems simply regarded him for a second, then they turned to each other.

"This one is nervous," the leftmost golem said. It shook its scepter, and its bladed edges began to gleam with a pale sheen of power. "I like the nervous ones, the anxious ones. They take their studies seriously. They are burdened with the need to become."

"I pity them," the golem called Mourning said. It stroked something with its quill, and Shiv briefly saw an imprint of a symbol manifest in reality, but then it faded like ink dissolving upon the surface of water before he could memorize it. "For they are weighed by duty and will never know the true succor of joy." Then it made a sound like breathing in. "I bid you, as Keeper of Mourning, as the Archivist of Regret, of Potential, of Possibilities and Failures."

Stolen story; please report.

"And I spur you as Keeper of Ambition," the leftmost golem carried on. "The one that dreams, the one that hopes you will see every glory, desire, and even those that you cannot fathom, the one that strokes legends, the one that strikes down horrors and turns them from nightmares to bedtime stories."

And at once they lifted the implements they carried, and with a resounding click they clashed said implements together. A brief flash sparked from the point of impact, and Shiv looked away. There was an imprint of light that lingered in his vision, but then the golems receded, the ground beneath them groaned, and a rush of cold air spilled over him and Irons.

Behind the golem, an even longer path was revealed, but it was plush and vibrant, the color of blood, rich and healthy blood, the kind that would flow from an elder vampire's throat once slit. Along the path were tall chairs, each of them almost throne-like in their own regard, and they continued running forth. Along descending steps, Shiv saw rows of these chairs sprawl forward as if parts of a rolling hill. The entire auditorium was built like an amphitheater, and as the carpet got to the very end, there was a stage at the bottom, a stone stage with a series of spells carved into its surface.

They circulated around each other in patterns so complex that it took Shiv a moment to separate all their greater parts. There was a series of rings at the center, eight in total. All the major magical lores and mana types were included, but then there were approximately twenty-five other rings randomly interspersed through the sides. They didn't all intersect, and one was only connected through a few mithril circuits, an island bound to the rest of the spell by a single bridge. At the center of the stage was also a small pedestal that carried an orb.

Irons strode past Shiv, and he only caught up a moment later, too entranced was he by the sight of the auditorium before him. As they walked down, Shiv looked to his left and right, and then looked up again, as he saw more chairs built above on another level to this place. It was vast. This area wasn't just cavernous. It was colossal. There were enough chairs to seat thousands of students.

Slowly, a childlike smirk crawled over Shiv's face. This place gave him a strange feeling, the feeling that something wonderful might happen, the feeling that he was a young adventurer entering a dragon's hoard. He'd only heard stories about that a few times when he was still in the orphanage.

And among the many fables and fairy tales the Matrons told, he liked that the best. Of course, his memory of these fairy tales was quickly ruined by the other children asking if there were Omenborn hiding within the hoards as well. Which the Matrons most assuredly replied to them that it was unlikely, and the worst they needed to worry about was perishing nobly against a brutal behemoth of a dragon.

"There is usually a ceremony for such things," Irons began. His gruff voice echoed far and wide through the auditorium, and Shiv continued scanning his surroundings, trying to see if there was anyone else here. So far, he saw no one, tasted no vitality in the air, but he still had a faint feeling he was being watched. By whom or what he couldn't say, but his guard remained up.

"Ceremony," Shiv replied, "with all the kids walking this carpet? The ones who are ordained?"

"Yes, these seats are meant for established instructors and witnessing Pathbearers."

Shiv shot the surrounding seats another look. "Witnessing?"

"Yes, Phoenix Academy has a great many alumni. A good amount still works within the city, and they are always looking for new apprentices. The Ceremonies of Ordainment take place over several days, and recruitment begins from then on. Thousands of students are sworn in over those days. Their Paths are declared, their highest skills are revealed, their initial dedications in terms of college and specific skills will also be decided, and from there, their futures are sculpted in turn."

"Huh," Shiv said, surprised about how proactive and fast-paced everything was in the capital. "So Adam went through this too, huh?"

"He did," Irons said.

"And did he get picked out and recruited on the first day?"

"He did," Irons repeated once more.

Shiv snorted. "Figured. It's kind of hard to miss someone like that, huh?"

"The thought of him squandering his true potential is even harder," Irons declared. He looked over his shoulder and stared at Shiv. "He was talented, but he was also prideful and soft. That made him sharp, but brittle, dangerous to himself and those around him. He needed to be fashioned with more discipline. So I deigned to accept him and a few others into my class ahead of time, as well as offering to include them in the academy militia."

"Wait, you're the one who recruited Adam?" Shiv asked, his mouth falling open.

"I am among the many who did," Irons said. "Young Lord Arrow is someone of a great many talents and of near-tireless dedication. Do not mistake my criticisms for scorn. It is because of that promise that I was compelled to pick him up. Promise that I did not want to see tarnished, and I was not alone in such thinking. Heratana, the Hero Hydromancer in charge of the city's water purification, also took him on as a pupil, though he was one of her tertiary apprentices, and not her direct disciple. Even so, it suited her needs just as well. It taught him much better control of his water magic, and in turn, he helped resolve a few inconvenient matters on her end as well."

"She's a Hero, though," Shiv said. "He was a student at the time. What'd she need his help for?"

Irons almost laughed. "Some Heroes have less-than-stellar Awareness, as you might be able to attest, especially if they're non-martials."

Shiv took that jab gracefully and nodded. "Okay, I get it." The Deathless looked around and huffed. "Well, looks like no one's gonna be recruiting me."

"At least not initially," Irons said. "But once you are enrolled, then you should make a name for yourself."

"I hope not," Shiv muttered under his breath. "Last thing I need is more attention."

The captain didn't pause for a moment. "I fear it might come to you regardless. You don't seem to be the quiet kind."

"Would you believe me if I said I was trying?"

"I do believe you. And I pity you. I don't think it matters."

This time, Shiv did wince. "Maybe I'll find a Master Chef or something. Say, you know if the Academy has cooking courses or something?"

"We do," Irons replied. "But considering your cover and background, it might be difficult for you to get in."

"Maybe for Marcus," Shiv said.

"But," Irons cut him off, "if Marcus suddenly shows a High-Tier Cooking Skill, that might provoke questions as well."

And that briefly stymied and soured Shiv's mood. "Shit, you're right. Okay, godsdammit, I can't do it in the open. I need to think more about it. You know if someone here worked with Hero-Chef George Archambault before?"

Irons froze. He turned and stared at Shiv before spinning on his heel and doubling his pace toward the stage. "It is best that you do not invoke his name at the Capitol."

And there it was again. Georges's mysterious exile and the purchase of his debt. Roland Arrow had kept George close by for a reason. And now Shiv was another step closer to learning about his mentor's mysterious past. "And why is that?" he ventured.

"Because serving the ends of a revolutionary group and successfully poisoning two Auroral Avatars would have normally seen Georges Archambault publicly executed instead of simply excommunicated."