

## Deathless 221

Chapter 221 (I) Academia [I]

Dear parents, masters of the city, and beloved members of the committee:

You are all idiots.

No, calm down. You will do nothing. I will remain headmaster. You can complain or threaten me all you want, but none of you are Legends. And all of you are just here to bellyache. You're much like your own children. Actually, you're much like me as well. I, too, am incredibly selfish and would like the System to favor me and be kind to me over everyone else, but that's not going to happen anytime soon. So sit down and let me finish.

I've received a mixture of complaints. Some of you think the classes are too broad and theoretical and need to be more practical. Others think the classes are too detailed and overwhelming and that the children need to be eased into things.

I'm here to tell you that these classes are variable. And if you're expecting a child to become an instant expert after finishing them, you clearly don't remember your days of education. They are primers. They introduce you to information. They refine you and hopefully remove bad habits from your life. They expose you to new details. But ultimately, it is a Pathbearer's individual duty to further their own development. There is nothing I can give a student who is not interested in their field of study.

And I'm looking at you parents because some of you are absolutely trying to force them down a path they have no interest in. There is more than one way to be a Vanguard. Not everyone needs to be swinging a hammer at the front of the line. Some of them are perfectly good as scout support. Sometimes you need a large wrecking ball that smashes through all environmental boundaries and causes havoc behind enemy lines. That's valuable. Sometimes Shadows don't want to act like Thieves. They can be observers, or they can simply be explorers. In fact, they make very good explorers. It's

usually effective to be a Path of the Shadow explorer because none of the monsters see you, and you are not often detected. This allows you to come back to civilization with your findings instead of dying in some godforsaken gate because you awoke a primordial dimensional that is fueled by the lore of castrations.

Once more, Phoenix Academy is not a daycare. It is a development center. It is a place for people to harness their potential, and that is something that takes time and self-understanding. Self-understanding that most of you people mutilate.

I see you. I remember many of you before you were noble houses. I've been here for a long time, and this claim of family mythology? I predate that. It's not real. That's not your mythology. That was your forefather. That was your ancestor. That was your brother or kin who was somewhere else, and you are borderline parasites leeching off of them.

This is not a place for noble houses to constantly play recruitment games or to squeeze out every bit of value for their own interest. You are beginning to forget your place. You are citizens of the republic before anything else, which means that you are beneath the Council, beneath the Ascendants, and per my status as Legendary Pathbearer, you are beneath me as well.

There will not be a discussion today. I have come only to say this. You have no interest in your child's upbringing. You have no interest in developing their skills. You have no interest in general education. You want them to fit a specific mold.

But I will put this in return. There is a word for a predictable Pathbearer that is shaped from another's parameters, and that is "victim." If any of your children turn up the way you want them to, buy a casket now. They will not make it off the battlefield. They will not return from their expeditions. They will not succeed at their studies.

To prevail is to do what has not been done. To explore the territories untread. You simply want them to succeed in the most banal way possible. And I'm beginning to notice that we might have coddled you more than we have coddled them.

-Headmaster Hades Hymn to the Annual Admin-Parents Conference (This happened one time and never again; noble "enforcers" sent to "educate" Headmaster Hymn were never recovered)

221 (I)

Academia [I]

"Godsfuckingdammit, Cripple!" Shiv roared, "Can't you people do a single godsdamn thing right? This wouldn't have happened if you'd just, just..." The Deathless had to stop himself. He was feeling an aneurysm coming on.

"Not focusing all power on slaying the Tarrasque immediately was a strategic decision enacted on the part of Veronica Chandler," Cripple said, defending their actions. "She wished to use the Tarrasque as a weapon to destabilize—"

"I don't give a shit what she was planning to do!" Shiv shouted. "It already became borderline unkillable! And now you lost track of it! Do you have anyone else who has Vitality Drain?"

"There are a few Pathbearers within the Republic that possess such abilities," Cripple said, beginning to sound uneasy.

"And how many of them are Legends?" Shiv asked, his left eye twitching.

Cripple didn't say anything anymore.

"Godsfucking damn it!" Shiv snarled once again. He was beginning to inch closer and closer to a berserker rage. "It's Undying, Cripple! Undying! Sullain made it that way, using my Vitae! If you hadn't teleported me out of the battle, I would have kept draining it. I could have finished it off. We could have all finished it off. If you'd all just held it in place, I could have sucked it till there was nothing left of its soul. But nooooo. You all just had to stick your heads up your asses. Motherfuckers!"

Shiv was done. He stormed away from the Ascendant, leaving Adam behind, who was no more pleased than he was.

"And where exactly do you think the Tarrasque went?" Adam asked.

"Initially, it was mainly contained within the Southlands, in the Kingdom of Blood and Sacrifice. The Ley Gods were overwhelmed by its sudden appearance in their territory."

"Sudden appearance?" Adam scoffed. "I sure wonder how it got there. How many people did you kill?"

"Not our people," Cripple said, a hint of anger tainting its voice.

"And that makes it fine," Adam sneered humorlessly.

"Yes," Cripple responded. "It is a kinder fate than that which would have otherwise awaited them. Especially with the acts they have committed against our citizens."

"And you're certain of this?" Adam asked, almost shouting. His own outrage was climbing as well. "Because a great deal of what I've learned all my life turned out to be mostly false."

"To be born in the South means to be a slave. It means that your vitality, your lifeblood, your mana are dedicated to one of the Ley Gods." Cripple was unashamed. It made a fist, and the outline of his ethereal form burned brighter. "The Ley Gods care nothing for those beneath them. They eat, and they mutilate, and they have their people build temples to their glory. Those people were already dead. It was merely a question of time."

Adam scoffed bitterly. "You know, sometimes I see a flicker of decency inside you. And then you remind me that you're an Ascendant. There's always another excuse. Since you said initially, I take it it's not in the Southlands anymore?"

"No," Cripple said. "The last thing we managed to detect was a slight disturbance in the middle of the Pacific. But after that, we lost all trace of it."

"It's unknown because Udraal probably got to it," Shiv said, stomping back over. He pointed a finger at Cripple, and it took most of what he had not to throw himself at the Strongest's manifestation.

"Remember Udraal? Udraal Thann? The one that decided to ambush you and killed a bunch of the Avatars?"

"I am aware of who Udrael Thann is," Cripple said, its voice slowly filling with repressed anger. "I know him better than you do."

Shiv sneered. He wasn't quite so sure about that. "Well, you clearly don't seem to respect him as a threat because this shit was just sloppy. Instead of actively trying to hunt me down, maybe the glorious Ascendants should do something meaningful, like calling the other nations across Integrated Earth and establishing a proper manhunt to put this thing down."

"That is unlikely," Cripple replied with a hint of weariness. "We have allies, but the Tarrasque at present is potentially containable, and its route of destruction can be programmed."

Can Hu stepped toward the Strongest with a loud trill of scorn. "This is folly. You are not thinking clearly, Ascendant."

For the first time, Cripple's cyclopean eye fell upon Can Hu, and the mending form of the automaton was bathed in a beam of incandescence. "Penitent Can Hu," Cripple said, recognising it from their meeting in the Rubix Well.

"One of the few that remain, in the metal," Can Hu intoned. "Your mind is compromised, Ascendant. You know this. Your personality is being winnowed down. Your choices are being misled by the personal interest of a single individual and other cliques within your cabal. You cannot ignore this."

Cripple didn't respond immediately, so Can Hu pressed on. "The Tarrasque, also, is a planetary-level threat. It cannot be allowed to wander freely across the world. It must be eliminated. The Legacy Empire has specific prevention measures for Tarrasques. Measures that would have seen it neutered magically and then transported far off-world immediately. They would not have waited and allowed the Tarrasque to become an uncontrollable variable due to a foolish attempt to utilize it for their own gain."

A most rare laugh escaped from Can Hu, and was filled with bitter irony. "Even their own mechanical servants were not controllable variables, after all. I assure you, the Legacy Empire learned from the Penitent Legion's betrayal at Great London, and it would have applied that lesson to the Tarrasque, had it appeared within Africa. Your Auroral Council, old as it is, should have been wiser much the same. And now it is too late."

Cripple clenched its single fist, but still it said nothing. Shiv let out a long sigh. He wanted to continue ranting and arguing with the Ascendant, but it was pointless. The mistake was already made, the bed was already shat, and sooner or later, he was going to be digging into the sheets and getting dirty again.

"When you spot it, you tell me," Shiv said. "I want to know exactly where it is, if it's coming for us, what it's done, everything."

"You understand that if you decide to intervene, the Ascendants..."

"I don't understand anything," Shiv said. "I don't know anything about you Ascendants. And I don't think most of you know anything about yourselves anymore, either." The Deathless shook his head. "In fact, we don't need to talk about this anymore. I'll write to Veronica directly. I'll see what the head clown of your circus has to say. What a fucking mess."

An awkward silence followed, and hushed whispers were exchanged between the two crafters at the back of the room, terrified by the argument unfolding before them.

Slowly, Cripple shifted its body. It looked at its hand. Its hand, clenched in a fist, with great effort, released the tension it had built up. "There was a time when I would have simply killed it," Cripple said, sounding absent-minded. "There was a time when I would have struck it dead, damn what my comrades would have said. There was a time..."

The Ascendant lowered his eye, and the Strongest went from seeming frustrated to downright despondent. "There was a time, yes. A time that has long since passed. I fear you are right. With every exchange, I notice it more. And I fear that even my awareness can do nothing to ameliorate it. I feel... compelled to defend the others... So indifferent to what we..."

"The decay," Can Hu said. "It is not something you can fight with will. That which is truly lost inside you cannot be reverted by choice or effort."

Adam let out a breath. "You're doing something, Cripple. You're here. You're helping us. You're letting us know about things. It's more than what your so-called companions can muster. When you meet the Starhawk again—"

"The Starhawk's also going through this," Shiv said, interrupting Adam. "He's just decaying in a positive direction. Kind of." Shiv groaned. "Which I guess is good and all, but still, he's not who he used to be either."

And a particularly dark thought came to Shiv, then, one that Adam might not like. He hesitated before he voiced it, trying to find the proper way to put it into words. "Adam, do you think that the Starhawk might have his own Veronica too? Someone that... herds him?"

"What are you saying?" Adam asked, his eyes narrowing with judgment. "Are you accusing my father of manipulating the Starhawk?"

"No," Shiv said aloud. "Not manipulating. From the brief moments I glimpsed between them, they seem to respect each other. Your father's too faithful to be a conniving shit like Veronica, but... do you think

the Starhawk might mainly still be good because of your father? Because his Avatar believes in justice, nobility, and all that other stuff?"

Adam's mouth opened immediately, but then he closed it, his mind considering Shiv's question.

Cripple let out a droning hum. "It is a possibility. We use our Avatars as channels for our power, but in time, we also take traits from them or are inspired by them."

"They might be mortal, but they are changing, and they can choose," Adam finished for him. "They can choose to do something that goes against their character. They can choose to do something that's outside the context of their narrative." And suddenly, he looked at Shiv. "They can choose."

And nothing needed to be said between them. Roland was an exceptional Town Lord, a near-unparalleled Pathbearer, a warrior, a strategist, someone that belonged in the lore and stories of countless books and propaganda pieces. But he had also succumbed in a few cases.

One was Shiv. Roland just hasn't been able to decide when it came to the Deathless. He hadn't been able to decide if he wanted to kill the boy who was the fruit of everything foul that befell him, or if he simply wanted to spare him. Yet, in doing so, in his indecision, Roland had selected something that bordered on torture. He'd condemned a child to a life of destitution and ostracization. It wasn't the thing a noble, pure hero might do, but it was, ultimately, human.

All too human.

"Might not be a bad thing, but with Uva serving as his current Avatar, you think that might affect the Starhawk too?"

Adam shook his head. "She couldn't serve as his Avatar alone," he began, "not without her Eldritch patron allowing her to sustain the Starhawk's power."

"Oh, shit," Shiv muttered. Another uncomfortable silence slid into the room. "We really need to get that slippgate open and functional."

"Yeah." Adam breathed. "As fast as humanly possible." He turned around and glared at the crafters before marching over to them. "Merrielmel, Concelhaunt, you tell me exactly what you need, and I will find it delivered. We're doing this as fast as humanly possible. We'll begin testing soon. First, we're opening a pathway to the Tutorial. After that, if you need a larger testing apparatus or another active mana core to draw from, or one that can blend your skills with each other and offer temporary infusions, then you can use my gate."

"The orcs probably will be willing to offer their expertise as well," Shiv said with a slight hint of discomfort. He looked at Cripple. "Look, I don't really believe that the orcs are going to be nice and kind about this, either. I know what they are, and I know what I am." He paused. "Adam, I'm pretty sure they're going to take advantage of this too. It's not just the Neath. The orcs are going to want to seize the slippgate. Just think about it. It's an easy way to invade any world they want, to jump from place to place with no limits or borders to their slaughter."

The Gate Lord's shoulder sagged. "Well, it's just another problem we need to find a way to counter." A second later, however, his spine straightened once more. "Wait, wait. We're just thinking in negatives, but if we can activate this slippgate, and we can potentially use this mechanism anywhere, then..." He paused. "Can we use this mechanism anywhere?"

"It's theoretically possible," Merrielmel stammered.

Slowly, a smile spread across Adam's features. "If we can do that, we can find a gate close to where the Tarrasque is, and if we can attune that to the Tutorial or some other primal gate..."

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Shiv's eyes widened. "Then we can dump it across into the Tutorial. That's a pretty good idea. That'll relieve Lone Star by jacking up the orcs and also help them scratch their itch, and also deal with the Tarrasque problem for a while if we can't easily put it down."

And then that looped back around to one of Shiv's requests earlier as well. He wanted a means to engage his enemies without causing too much collateral damage. If he could drag his adversaries over into the endless wasteland dimension that was the Challenger's realm, then that would solve a great many of his problems.

"Okay, okay, I think we can really work with this," Shiv said. "It's not all bad."

A low grumble sounded from Cripple, and its incandescence began to recede. "I am being called. Councilwoman Chandler has summoned me. We are due to convene regarding the prison breakout and the matter of the missing Deathless along with his maker."

A beep sounded from Radio, and Shiv offered a grunt of displeasure. "Any chance you can tell Veronica she's a felling moron?"

"I will tell you what comes of this meeting, but in the meantime, please, I beg of you, try to be more subtle. It is already extremely straining, hiding your presence within the academy, and if any of your conflicts become even more overt..."

"Yeah, I know," Shiv said, "which is another reason why we want this thing to start working, because if everything goes south, we're going to need somewhere to flee. It's also a good place to funnel any other escapees from the Rubix Well, if we catch them. We can move them across the Tutorial and into the Gate Piety if we judge them to be reasonable enough. The ones who want to stay can, and the ones who are going to be a problem..." Shiv looked at Adam, making a strangling gesture.

The Gate Lord grimaced, but he didn't argue the point. They would follow the same procedure with whoever they encountered as with Divider, the Jump Mage automaton, and Breeze, the half-harpy that had been with Andra and Urri.

The two Heroic Pathbearers were currently contained in a makeshift cell and being monitored by Five, Kura, and the rest of the ex-prisoners in Shiv's group. They would remain in there until Adam got their full measure, and then either be allowed to leave the cell and sit around in the colloseum with the others or be dealt with. Currently, they were playing board games with Candles that the Pyromancer had dug up from some crate in the storage area. Shiv had a pretty good feeling about the two, besides the fact that Breeze was blatantly cheating in every game and that Divider wasn't snitching on her, but he wouldn't be executing anyone for being a bad sport.

"Alright," Adam finally said, "I suppose that will be that for now." He looked down at his feet for a moment and finally sighed. "For whatever it's worth, Cripple, I thank you for informing us."

The Ascendant's form dimmed. "It is, I suppose, the least I can do. Be mindful of who you deal with. I may be decaying, but there is more than one kind of decay. Those who deal with the underhanded, the fell, and the criminal have been corrupted in more... mortal ways..."

And with that, Cripple vanished back into Radio.

The small automaton bounced on the ground and shook its head. "I hate it when it does that. I hate it." It patted itself down and briefly puffed up its impish body. "Can't believe I agreed to this nonsense, and you," it spun on Shiv, "you know how terrible your cape dimension is? There's nothing but orcs in there most of the time. You ever been inside a cape filled with a bunch of orcs?"

"Friend, I'm surrounded by orcs," Shiv said. "I know how they are."

"Yeah? Well, not everyone's built like you. You're practically a baby orc yourself. I can't fight them off, and you tell that big guy to stay away from me. He tried to plug his spark ignition into my charging socket. It's demeaning, not to mention violating. Also, there's nothing to do in there! I'm just sitting around waiting for you to get things done so I can finally come out."

The small automaton's wiry fingers were curled, but slowly it lost its luster for arguing. "If you can find like... a tabletop game or like some cards, just hand them over to me. Like, give me something to pass the time. I thought I was going to get some spicy drama about that kid you're pretending to be, but it just turned out to be another fucked-up horror show. I don't want to hear none of that shit. I want something cool. Being a Pathbearer is supposed to be cool, felling hells."

Merriemmel cleared his throat. "We do have several board games that the Pyromancy fellow dug up earlier, including Aeromancer's Tower, Gates and Raiders, and Don't Impregnate the Succubi."

"What?" Shiv said, surprised by the final offering.

"Oh, that sounds interesting." Radio poked its head out from behind Shiv. "Never played the Succubi one before. How's that work?"

Merriemmel chuckled, scratching at his smooth chin. "Well, it—it's more of a concept art book than a board game, though there are rules..."

"Just give him the Gates and Raiders thing," Concelhaunt growled. "It's the size of a small table, and it's gonna take them a week to read through the rules. Also, what the fuck?" he suddenly shouted at Shiv and Adam. "Was that Cripple the Strongest? You had an Avatar of the Auroral Council hiding in your cape this entire time?"

"Yeah," Shiv sneered. "Pretty nifty, huh?"

"No, not fucking nifty. What's the point of the secrecy and cloak-and-dagger shit if one of the Ascendants knows that we're here? What are you, some kind of super-asset? A special rat?"

"Nope," Shiv replied. "It's more like there's a conspiracy happening within the Auroral Council, and we're part of it."

Concelhaunt's jaw dropped wide open. "A conspiracy in the Council? So, what, we can expect one of the Ascendants to keep a secret from the others?"

"Cripple's already keeping several ugly secrets," Shiv said, "mainly me and Adam, along with all the other escapees with us. You are probably among the least of its concerns. But after this is over," Shiv shrugged, "I don't know, it might come after you. Who knows?"

"If you're trying to fill me up with fucking confidence, you're spilling the juice all over my chest instead of down my throat." The goblin looked like he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

"Don't see the point in bullshitting you," Shiv said. "Look. If things do go wrong, we'll let you stick around in Gate Piety. You fine with that, Adam?"

The Gate Lord frowned at nothing in particular. "We are already accommodating murderers, clinically insane Pathbearers, and even orcs. I don't think I have the hypocrisy in me to damn two questionable professors to their fates."

That didn't seem to reassure Concelhaunt much. Still, the goblin refrained from complaining overmuch as he understood his situation. Merriemel, contrarily, looked more agitated than ever. "B-but with the orcs and the Ascendants and all that has happened, what—what if we-we-we..."

"Merriemel, Merriel! Calm." Concelhaunt held out a hand. "Just breathe. Breathe."

The elven Enchanter started breathing a bit too hard. Shiv studied him.

Psycho-Cartography: He's worried that he will never get to save his brother. There are too many uncertain variables. He is on the verge of a mental break. The only way to get him to stabilize is to give him some semblance of control back. He needs something to convince him that his project won't just be severed halfway.

"Merriemel," Shiv said. Both crafters looked at him. Merriemel's eyes were wide with worry while Concelhaunt glared with distrust. "I want you to get this done just as much as you do. Your brother is missing? Well, I have someone I care about trapped in the Outside as well. I'm not letting the Ascendants, orcs, or anyone get in the way of this. Same with Adam. We need this to work. We're in the same boat."

The elven Enchanter swallowed but nodded vigorously. "I—We will begin calibrations soon. It will take some time to fully stabilize the diffusion mechanisms, but once it does, we-we-we—"

Shiv held out a hand. "I got it. We're rushing because we have no guarantee when the next crisis or bullshit problem will come our way. We'll do what we can, but understand that after you get this slippate working, a whole bunch of people are probably going to make a grab for it."

"I—I just want to—" Merrielmel was about to start hyperventilating again before Shiv intervened.

"I know," the Deathless said. "And I'm sorry. But this thing you have is too valuable to too many people. And that's why you really need to gather your stuff and get ready to move once this is done. I don't know what the Neath's endgame is here, but if they get their hands on you and your slippate, I don't think they're going to be that willing to let you go again."

"But... why?" Merrielmel asked.

"Competition," Concelhaunt said, understanding. "We're giving them a way to choke the market. Any market. That's ignoring whatever felling goldmine they might find in the Outside." The goblin Smith sighed. "You know, before, I was considering going to the headmaster and just telling him about everything once we were finished with this mess. Yeah, might cost us our positions, but—"

"It will likely just see you two pressed into making more slippates for the Ascendants or the Inquisition instead," Adam said. "It's valuable. Too valuable." He sighed. "If only that value could be shared with the people instead of being fought over by a pack of criminals, monsters, and unworthy gods."

"And us, Adam," Shiv said, grinning. "We're here too."

"Barely better at this point," Adam muttered, sounding stressed. "Half of us are monsters, a few are bloodthirsty criminals, and then there's you and me."

"But still better," Shiv insisted. "So, might as well be us that hold the slipgate, right?"

Adam nodded. He regarded the chamber around him and sighed. "We'll have a way of slipping past the Ascendants soon, so that's something. I just hope my gate's still there by the time we reach it. You think Null Mont's made a move to claim it in the name of the Composer yet?"

"She might've," Shiv said, frowning. "But she's pretty terrified of us, and Still Water should still be there too. She probably kept her from doing anything too stupid."

"One can only hope," Adam breathed. "We're going to need to build a checkpoint here as well. A dimensional bunker right outside the Slipgate chamber."

"For the orcs?" Shiv asked.

"Among other things," Adam said. "We're going to be facing the Outsiders again. If one of them manages to slip over, that might be even worse than an orc invasion. Imagine a Recollector dropping in on campus grounds."

Shiv cringed. He tried not to imagine just how many kids might end up dead or worse in that situation before he or Adam managed to intervene. "Good idea. Should get started on that while the crafters and Can Hu focus on finishing the Slipgate. Okay. So, with the situation here somewhat figured out, we should do a debrief and get our other chores done. Helix is going to get on my ass about my Biomancy, and we need to get some evidence from Irons too. What else do we have to worry about?"

"Have you selected your classes yet?" Adam asked.

"Selected—uh, no. Shit. How does that work?"

"It's simple." Adam pointed to Shiv's pin. "You focus on that, and when the interface is pulled up, you think about classes, and you'll get a whole list of options."

Shiv did just that, and a massive, sprawling tree of potential class options materialized at the top of his vision. At the bottom, a weekly schedule appeared. One class had already been assigned to him. It was the Tac-Strat class that Irons recruited him into. Currently, it occupied the early morning of his weekends on Solsday and Restday. A strange time for that course, but Shiv supposed Pathbearers who didn't need much sleep and had the resources to attend the most prolific academy of the country would have stranger schedules than most.

That left much of his week open, and with how many choices he had—

Shiv noticed a blinking sprawl of text at the bottom of his vision just then. "Student has not... selected Gen-101. Gen-101 placement is required. Gen-101?"

"Oh, Gen-Ed," Adam said with a wince. "Right. You need to take that so the academy can gauge where you need the most remedial education. The learning standards, unfortunately, vary a lot across the Republic, and so most first years have to take intensive classes that catch them up to speed with the rest of their peers. It makes some people's first year quite hectic."

"Let me guess, though: You didn't need to take any remedial classes."

Adam held his head high and placed his hands on his hips. "There wasn't a point. I had no academic, social, or martial weaknesses. You, on the other hand... Oh, shit. What are we going to do with you?"

"What do you mean?" Shiv said. "I'll just take Gen-101 and figure things out."

The Gate Lord licked his lips, appearing to be searching for some measure of tact to convey what he wanted to say. "Shiv... how good were you at schoolwork? Actually, what do you remember of your schoolwork?"

"Not much. Stopped my formal learning after the matrons were finished with me. But I hung around the library quite a bit, and Georges made me read and do some accounting. I got basic math down, and I can write."

"Barely," Adam muttered.

"Hey, eat shit. Not all of us can have a chain of tutors—"

"It's not an insult, Shiv," Adam replied. "But it is a problem. Marcus got in on the Wild Card Program. Those can be rescinded if the student does not perform up to standard. And considering Marcus is not a martial Pathbearer, you're going to need to perform well academically... And that might be a bit difficult without some... assistance."

"What kind of assistance?"

"Well, you're probably going to be taking Helix with you in your cape, right?" Adam asked.

Shiv sneered. "I don't think he's going to take no for an answer."

"Well, I suspect you're going to need his help for more than just Biomancy. I don't usually condone cheating, but if you botch Gen-101's basic coursework, you're going to be examined for brain damage first, and then up for probation after. We can't have that."

"You want my orcs to do my math and language schoolwork for me?" Shiv asked, slightly offended.

"I simply ask that you ask them in case you run into anything you don't know," Adam said placatingly. It was a funny way of saying "cheat", in Shiv's opinion. The Gate Lord pushed through his discomfort and continued. "Have you thought of what else you wish to learn?"

Shiv's first instinct was to go for a cooking-related class, but then he reminded himself that Marcus didn't have any skills for that. Despite this, Shiv was still interested in seeing how developed the capital's culinary arts were. Even if he couldn't study cooking in the open, he was going to refine and improve himself in the shadows.

That left Marcus's main skills. Surgery. Practical Metabiology. Skills related to Biomancy; things that would help Shiv's development as a Biomancer.

Finally, a chance to actually learn some felling magical theory, Shiv thought. The idea of not needing to brute-force everything was—His heart almost skipped a beat. Don't fuck me over now, System. Not when I'm this close.

"You know anything about medical or Biomancy courses?" Shiv asked, scrolling through the vast array of choices. "Because I'm thinking about filling my time up with that."

And it was like a lightning bolt had struck Adam. "I do, in fact. Medic-301. You need that. You'll love that. And it'll let you do a little good for the people of the capital as well."

Shiv liked the sound of that. "What's it about?"

"Oh, it's just the most hands-on medical experience you can have," Adam said, "because the students who pick that course get slotted into the Phoenix Academy medical apprenticeship program. Residency, I think they called it. Start with that."

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Everyone should take Medic-301. It's not because the instructors are kind and generous; they are not. They are harried, they are frustrated, and they will not rarely snap at you. It's not that it's an easy course. No, most students will flunk out and switch to another before a month has passed.

It's arduous. It will test you both mentally and technically. It also doesn't matter if you have levels in Practical Metabiology beforehand. It doesn't matter if you are a surgeon. To be a resident means helping in whatever way you can.

Vanguards can carry wounded Pathbearers from bed to bed, and at times hold them down when they're spasming or undergoing treatment. Shadows need to flow through the hustle and bustle of the hospital, keeping track of the patients' conditions, assisting specialists and residents in whatever way they can. And for those of you who wish to be healers, this is non-negotiable. You need to see the ugly truth about combat, about disease, about the sacrifices that our defenders make to keep us safe.

I remember the first patient I lost. We were trying to suture his injury. It was a relatively deep cut, but a simple one. It should have been easy. But the cut, it just kept moving. It fled from us.

And things of this nature are a commonality you will face. Magical injuries inflicted by those who intend to do our people as much harm as possible. We tried to pin the wound in place, but even with the help of a resident, it still slipped past, and it slipped deeper.

I will never forget Militia Sergeant Myers for as long as I live. I don't know anything about him. All I know is that he was my age. He had a brown crop of hair. He had the most terrified look on his face when he died. And there wasn't anything left of his mother's mind to mourn him. She was in the room next door. She passed a month later, choking on the fluids of her own lungs. She called for her son before she left, thinking he was still there.

This is not a class about success. This is a class about the weight of failure. And we need to feel that weight.

We are not at the Academy to have a good time. This is not a party. This is duty.

-Adept-Second Year Mallory Kaine, Apprentice Resident at Last Light Wellness

222 (I)

Academia [II]

In the end, Shiv ended up filling his week with seven different classes. His schedule was packed tight starting from Dawnsday, then proceeding to Twosday, Midsday, Thursday, Passday, Solsday, and Restday.

The capital ran on a seven-day schedule, a bit different than what Shiv was used to at Blackedge. On the frontier town, everyone worked practically every day, but the hours were loose and based on necessary demands. Thus was Roland Arrow's way: to see the work done and done promptly rather than waiting around.

Here, however, the laborer worked 45 hours a week, starting from Dawnsday and ending at Passday. Passday was a five-hour day, and Solsday and Restday were off days for other matters such as family and leisure. Students followed this schedule as well. However, those who were diligent and interested in pursuing professions that weren't so confined usually saw their time filled to the brim like Shiv.

It helped that when you had Adept-Tier Physicality, you needed a lot less time to recover from arduous activity and stress.

And with Shiv being a Legend, who knew how long he could go without rest. It also meant that instead of having a 12 to 15 hours window of activity every day, Shiv would use the entire day, with the hours after midnight being designated as a stretch of time for Shiv to self-develop, assist Irons in his investigations, or aid Adam and the others in whatever they needed.

At present, Shiv still had quite a few hours before the sun came back up, and he was likely going to spend most of that time going through the Odes and partaking in Helix's instruction. Near the end of that time, he also wished to spend a while more scouting the academy grounds. He'd been forced to flee from Marcus's assailants earlier, so that cut his exploratory time short.

Now, in the pre-dawn hours, there would be fewer students about, and it would also be a good opportunity for him to examine the capabilities of his new frying pan.

Being able to carve pieces out of shadows and blend with them was an invaluable benefit. One that might just help him spike his stealth skill as well. In the capital, his Creeping Void was more conspicuous than it was beneficial, and so he needed to evolve that skill to something more subtle and advantageous, if possible. He would advance that in his own time.

Right now, he was looking over his weekly schedule once more. Today was Thursday, which meant that he was only going to begin partaking in Gen-101 next week. That ran from Dawnsday to Midsday.

His first upcoming course was Culin E-333, a per-credit volunteer cooking course that allowed students to join up at various kitchens across the city. There was no high-level Cooking Skill requirement assigned to the course, and as such, no one would ask questions with regards to why Marcus Unblood, a Biomancer in training, would wish to partake in such a class.

Time for Culin E-333 is also pretty flexible, Shiv thought to himself. Says it sees you get a credit for each restaurant you volunteer at across the capital. The course itself appears to be a cooperative program

that the academy established, so first-years can get an appreciation for the capital's culinary arts, and also aid the Master Chefs there in their endeavors. I do need to get checked in with one Master Chef Ramirez, though. He seems to be the chief liaison between the capital's culinary guild and the academy.

The Deathless grinned. This'll be interesting. Frankly, this might be the class I'm looking forward to the most. I know I'm not supposed to say his name, but I wonder if anyone here was trained by George's too. Guess I'll just have to do a little subtle investigating of my own...

Then, his next course was in the late afternoon. M-Theory-101, or Magical Theory, was a daily class for those who wielded attuned mana. It was a class Shiv desperately needed, because he'd been wielding his magic instinctively so far, like a monster instead of an individual. That was viable for his Chronomancy since it was a monster skill, but if he wanted to develop his Biomancy further and become a proper mage, he needed to have a good grasp of the basics.

Shiv frowned as he examined M-Theory again. It had a line of text underneath its selection stating that students were to continue with the course load until adequate mastery has been demonstrated and a beginner's ritual was performed. Shiv asked Adam what that meant, and found out that effectively all courses within the university were based on a pass or no pass structure. You got grades for individual tasks performed in each course, but ultimately, it was up to the instructor to decide whether you were a qualifying Pathbearer for a specific discipline.

"It's an evolution of the old master-apprentice system," Adam explained. "Long before the academies were a thing, there were warrior cults, mage schools, shadow sects, monster hunting guilds, and more. And the only way you were accepted as one of their ranks was if an existing member of the organization qualified you. The scope is just bigger at Phoenix Academy. The core is functionally still the same."

Shiv licked his teeth in thought. "So, that means I can finish some of these courses early if I decide to test through them?"

"Correct," Adam replied. "However, I'd recommend that you don't be in such a hurry. Overachieving draws as much attention as underperforming. And moreover, you want to make sure that you are educated properly. Don't be a theory ape."

A snort escaped Shiv. "Theory ape? The hells is that?"

"A theory ape is someone who simply regurgitates the text they see in a book. It's a bit of an insult meant to offend mages specifically." The Gate Lord rolled his eyes. "An apt insult for some mages, perhaps, but ultimately, everyone has a bit of a theory ape in them. It comes with ignorance."

Shiv grunted as he nodded in understanding. "And how many classes did you pass early in your first year?"

Adam smirked at Shiv. "Ten."

"Ten!" Shiv almost shouted.

"Yes, five in the first month. My father saw me prepared well."

Shiv tried not to show his unease. He was competitive, but testing through ten courses when he didn't have an existing foundation of higher education was... Well, it was going to be a bit hard.

"I know that look," Adam said, his grin growing ever more taunting. "Don't try it."

Shiv folded his arms. "Do you, huh?"

"Don't try it, Shiv. I'm serious, don't. You're a monster at many things, but if you try to challenge me here, I fear you will meet a most unkind fate."

"I'm a Pathbearer. Unkind fates are my thing," Shiv shot back with a scoff. "Besides, trying things and failing is half the fun."

"Well, just make sure you don't fail the entire course," Adam said. "That will cause us no shortage of problems. Remember, you are not Shiv of Blackedge. You are Marcus Unblood. You are part of the Wild Card Program. So, what you need to do is perform adequately for most courses, poorly for physical courses if you're ever forced into one, and above average for courses relating to medicine, surgery, and Biomancy. Acting out of the ordinary will result in questions. We don't need more questions directed at us."

"Alright, got it," Shiv said. It felt strange to constrain himself, but unfurling his capabilities was what the nights were for. Where Marcus would find himself limited, Shiv was going to excel. "No more being a dumb brute," Shiv said to himself. "It's time to grow into a proper Pathbearer."

"What other courses you got?" Adam asked. "You told me about Culinary E-333 and M-Theory. Oh, by the way, E-333 is credit and volunteer, so you can keep taking it if you want, but after a certain number of credits, you are automatically designated as a pass, so long as there aren't too many issues."

"Why is the credit-based course so easy?"

"It's not easy," Adam said. "It's more like a program that's supposed to give you practical, workman-like experience. You'll be going across all the kitchens, so you're providing labor, anyway. Functionally, if the restaurants don't complain about you, and I expect they won't, then you're going to get through this without any difficulty. Eventually, you might be getting offers from some restaurants as well, but I'm not going to explain that to you. You probably know more about that business than I do."

Shiv grunted in acknowledgement. "Well, there's Scout-105 at five in the morning on Passday. Seems to run almost the entire day, though. It's a really long class for some reason."

"Ah, yeah, Scout-105." Adam narrowed his eyes. "I almost took that one. I wish I did. It seems interesting."

"Why didn't you?" Shiv asked.

"Because the instructor, Scout-Master Athena, is one of the Stormhalt family's retainers. She is the personal Huntswoman of Havel's fifth cousin. I have nothing against her personally, but the risks..."

Shiv gritted his teeth. "Great. Fucking Stormhalt. And the the academy's alright with this? Just letting noble loyalists plug up specific courses?"

"It's a little hard to avoid," Adam replied with a light sigh. "To be noble, above all things, is to consolidate power. That's what my father told me. And so, what is power but influence as well? If you can have specific members of your household claim prestigious positions across various academies or in the government, then your power will continue to grow. And through Athena, more relationships might be established. Promising Shadows, Thieves, and more can be scouted for as well."

"But I should be fine, right?" Shiv asked.

"Oh yes, you should be." Adam considered that for a moment. "I suspect that, unless you perform extremely highly, you will be ignored. I've heard rumors about Master Athena. She's not a harsh task mistress, but she is cold and indifferent to those she deems mediocre or less. But it is a good course for you, even if she doesn't offer any special attention. Your awareness needs improving, and your stealth likely has a few gaps as well. She should help you fill it up."

"I'll probably work on my stealth myself, and I should practice with Whisper too."

The Gate Lord eyed him. He leaned in a bit closer. "Be mindful of what you let the orcs teach you. Let's not forget what they managed to do to you before."

"Yeah," Shiv replied, gesturing at his Voidmantid armor, "I'm wearing that lesson right now."

"Indeed. But it's more than that. The one who teaches you also molds you, shapes you into the Pathbearer you become, and they also get a grasp of your weaknesses too. What you're doing right now is wise. Learning from a different mix of sources and a different assortment of masters will make sure that they can plug up each other's deficiencies. Everyone has their own understandings, and an apprentice only starts to surpass their master when they notice the latter's flaws."

"Is that from your father as well?" Shiv asked.

"No, that's Irons," Adam said. "Is his class still on Solsday and Restday?"

"Yep, ass-early in the morning."

Adam laughed. "The other students in the class are going to hate you. I hope you know that."

"Why? Because Marcus is a cripple without any weapon or combat skills?"

"Yes. Most people who take Irons classes are, well, at least they fancy themselves to be hardcore warriors. Many drop out after taking one too many humiliating losses. The ones that stay, though, usually prove themselves to be quite impressive in one way or another."

"You think Irons is gonna go easy on me, considering I have a cover?"

Adam sneered. "I think he's going to make things even harder for you. Because he knows who you are, what you can do. If you want me to guess, he's going to force you to learn subtlety, foresight, planning, and patience. Basically, he's going to treat you like an extremely promising Vanguard, and so your education is going to be mostly tactical and strategic. Which also covers for Marcus's deficiencies."

"Well, I best get working on my Biomancy. Everyone loves a healer. I think I'll focus on building that up as well."

"Everyone loves a doting healer." Adam held up a finger. "Remember that. And everyone's going to be screaming for you when they make a stupid mistake. Don't be surprised if they blame some of their silly mistakes on you. Anyway, was that all?"

"My final course is Stealth-114. Runs Dawnsday, Twosday, Thorsday, and Passday. Right before midnight."

"Ah, that's a good one as well. You'll probably enjoy that. Considering it is graded and who it's graded by, it will have you jumping out of bushes and terrifying your classmates like they're small slave children wandering through the woods."

Shiv glared at Adam. "Look, I did that because you suggested it to me, and I regret it every single day."

The Gate Lord did everything he could to avoid cracking up. "They're probably still talking about the bloody Skintaker back in Weave."

Shiv covered his face, but he couldn't help but chuckle a little. "Did scare the shit out of those slavers too, though."

"It did, didn't it? Good times... So, that's all you have for now?"

"Yeah," Shiv said. "This will be a start. I think I might take on one or two more over the week in case it's not enough."

"It probably is more than enough. If I have one more recommendation, it would be to take a basic Biomancy course on top of Medic-301."

"Yeah, I'm considering that too," Shiv said, "but Helix would likely drive me insane with his unending complaints about how shit or wrong the Academy Biomancer is."

A beat followed. Adam blinked as he grimaced. "Yes, I can see that. I can see that very clearly. Maybe just don't take him to those classes."

"Then he'll drive me insane when I get back."

"Can we just kill him?" Adam asked.

"Adam Arrow, genuinely suggesting murder as a problem solution?" Shiv whispered, awestruck. "Finally. I've been waiting for so long."

"Well, when it's an orc we're talking about... Yes."

Shiv snorted. "Yeah, maybe after he does something stupid. Anyway, when I finish with the academy stuff, I'll come back here, and we can try helping Irons with finding Melissa. Otherwise, priorities are whatever you need to get done, my personal education, and self-improvement. And right, shit, we still need to talk to the Dragon Brokers at some point."

"On our terms," Adam said. "We have enough conniving bastards coming after us already. We need to control what we can."

"Of course." The Deathless then cast his psionic magic into Adam's mind. "Cullywier is also bound to me. We can call him at any time, but I don't know if he's listening in on us and informing the Dragon Brokers. We need to assume that's the case."

"Bloody hells," Adam groaned internally. "All right, we'll deal with that too. Actually, you said he's a fairy, right? What's a fairy doing with a criminal organization?"

"Seems to be a banished fairy," Shiv explained. "He can't go back to the Fairwoods because he had a kid with a human or something. That's what I got."

"A child with a human? Is that even possible?"

"Well, that's what it sounded like when I spoke to him the first time. I offered to set him free, but he didn't seem to care much about that either."

"Broken Moon, it's just one mystery after another, isn't it?" Adam rubbed at his face as if he could wipe away some of the frustration. "Alright, we'll deal with them too. We need to figure out a plan for the Slippgate. We can't let anyone else hold it. Not the Neath, not the orcs, not the Ascendants."

"Yeah, I got a few thoughts about that. Uva is tied to the Outside. She has the Starhawk with her. If we can use that to our advantage somehow, maybe we can end this fight before it even begins. But Adam, there's one more thing. The headmaster of the academy... You know he's probably a Seeker too, right?"

"What?" Adam said, alarmed. "Hades Hymn? A Seeker?"

"Yeah, his magic, it's kind of weird. And I think I felt it before. At Gate Theborn."

Chapter 222 (II) Academia [II]

A stressful second passed between them. And then Adam slapped his forehead. "That explains so many things. How he just suddenly appears in places. How he knows so many people across the world. How he always felt so... oily to me!" A choked sound of discomfort radiated out of Adam. "Oh, gods. Does the Auroral Council know? Wait, are they deliberately funding his efforts?"

"With every answer more questions, huh, Adam?" Shiv said.

The Gate Lord's scowl deepened. "Seems to be the case." Unwelcome thoughts slid across from his mind. "Well, I think we might need to talk with the Educator as well. She has insights into the Neath, the Dragon Brokers, and into what Udraal might be doing now."

"Yeah, maybe leave that to me," Shiv said.

"You're certain?" Adam asked. "Because every time you two talk, it's like you're about to tear each other apart."

"It's because we want to tear each other apart," Shiv said. "I don't like her, and she doesn't like me, but I think I'm getting an understanding of her." A beat passed. "Or maybe she's just lying to me. That's also possible. But if she annoys me that much, you're probably going to end up trying to kill her before long."

A snort escaped Adam. "That's how low your opinion of my patience is when it comes to dealing with assholes, bastards, and other annoying types?"

"Yeah," Shiv nodded. "You're kind of a prickly pear yourself, Adam."

"I'm getting better," Adam said, folding his arms.

"I didn't say you weren't. I just said you're prickly. She just might make you pop. If we talk to her, let's talk to her together. How about that?"

"Might be the wisest idea. Also, Solzimort."

"What about him?" Shiv asked.

"I lost track of him. I think he said something about going underground to take a brief nap. But we still don't actually know what his deal is. He could be doing anything."

"Right, shit, who knows?" Shiv hissed internally. Despite that, he didn't feel overly worried about the Hydra. There were still quite a few unknowns regarding Solzimort, especially why he had such a child-like personality and how he'd managed to become a Legend regardless.

"Alright, just keep an eye out for him," Shiv said. "Of all the problems we have, I don't think he's going to be one of them. Not a big one, anyway."

"I hope you're right. Oh, and Shiv," Adam said, "when you go back into the Academy, be sure to keep yourself reserved. You did a good job earlier."

"With what?" Shiv asked.

"With not tearing those poor Old Brunswick boys limb from limb, and murdering Magnolia. It was very conscientious on your part, and I need you to keep doing that. Listen, you're probably going to find some of the students at the academy quite annoying."

"I can handle it," Shiv said. "I mean, I managed to put up with you when we were in Weave."

"Yes, worse than that. You're going to run into know-it-alls. You're going to run into arrogant Adepts. People we can crush like bugs now, and who will be constantly trying to provoke you into violence. They will be insufferable, and some of them will be noble as well. Whatever you do, don't smash them, and don't assume that you can just get cute with your Chronomancy either.

"Some of them will have wards integrated into their equipment, courtesy of their parents, and when those slam into your Shapeless Tides, it's going to cause some questions. Questions like, How did my child turn up unconscious face-down in a dumpster? Why were all their clothes missing? Why can't they remember who slapped them? And why did their temporal wardings register a massive hit the moment they encountered that strange, crippled boy? 'What was his name? Marcus Unblood?'"

"Yeah, yeah, I get it!" Shiv held up his hands. "I'll be sure to be subtle."

"Subtle," Adam said again.

"Subtle," Shiv echoed. "And if I need to hurt someone, I'll try to be very quiet about it."

"Preferably, you don't hurt anyone."

"Realistically, the System's not going to give us much of a choice, Adam."

"I know that, which is why we need to try even harder. Look, if you run into something that doesn't need to devolve into violence, just do what you did today. Evade, escape, and maybe find Irons. Speaking of which..." Adam began shaping a Veilpiercer. "It's time for me to visit the captain and see what he has on Melissa's disappearance." He briefly paused before he fired a shot. "Shiv, do you, against all odds, have a Deductive Reasoning skill?"

"Yes, I did. Got one recently," Shiv said.

A rough breath escaped from the Gate Lord. "And how high is its level?"

"Eight, after our talk with Magnolia."

"Right. Well, it's better than nothing, but still practically nothing. You're probably going to have to break into a few places at some point. When you're doing that, I think it's best that you don't have your Perfect Semblance active. Better to be caught as the Deathless than lose your cover. Tonight, however, that's not a concern. Tonight, we do some housekeeping and pray the System doesn't throw anything especially nasty at us."

Shiv snorted humorlessly. "Well, then you better hurry up and fire that shot before we get to Irons and find out he's been Udrael this entire time."

"Don't even joke about that, Shiv," Adam almost whimpered.

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For once, the System proved itself merciful, and Captain Irons simply handed over a few piles of documentation and evidence without further fanfare instead of hatching a Legendary lunatic from his skin. As they went through everything Melissa had collated, Shiv had to admit that the girl was a pretty damn good Investigator. Her notes were extraordinarily detailed, and each packet of evidence was separated to contain illustrations, stolen transcripts, magical recordings, and notebooks filled with theories regarding the so-called black orphanages that he himself guessed Daughter typically frequented.

There were over 10,000 different orphanages all across the capital, and in a staggering feat of effort, Melissa had recorded every one and eliminated all those she doubted to be one such black orphanage. That made Adam and Shiv's work far easier, though there were still major challenges to surmount. There were about 89 orphanages left over. They were circled and illustrated with further detail, with their dates of establishment and total number of orphans listed by the side. Most of them had their own packets, but Melissa hadn't finished her investigation before she went missing.

She'd sketched a route between each of the suspected black orphanages, and there was apparently a scheme that had specific "problem children" shuttled between establishments. They would also go

missing along the way sometimes, and that filled his chest with a cold foreboding. Melissa started this because she was looking for her own little sister. Considering what Daughter did to her hosts, how she casually used and spent them in combat, Shiv really didn't think highly of Melissa or her sister's odds by this point.

A weary breath escaped Shiv. "Still, we should try to find out what happened to her and maybe put a stop to it somehow. Good fucking gods. How long has this been happening?"

"From Melissa's documentation? At least 80 years," Adam answered. "The earliest establishment, the earliest black orphanage, was supposedly just established 100 years ago."

Then there was the trail leading to Flamecrown Castle. That was the place Irons had been trying to infiltrate when everything went to hell. The captain barely escaped with his own life, and that was mainly because Shiv had wounded Daughter using his Vitae at the perfect moment.

Irons was on the trail of one Hero-Matron Dorothy Diego. Why? Among the many pictures and recordings Melissa had managed to gather, a number showed Dorothy conversing with an unknown individual shrouded in black after midnight, with several photos displaying an exchange taking place. The individual handed her a scroll sealed by magic, and the matron offered a scared-looking girl who looked at her several times and didn't seem to want to go with the strange person.

Attached to the illustrations was a magical recording. It resembled an automaton's vox speaker, connected to a crystallized piece of mana. There was a button at the bottom, and as Adam pressed it, both Shiv and the Gate Lord flinched.

"No, no matron! I'll—I'll be a good girl. I'll be a good girl. Don't give me to him. Please, please. I want to stay. No. I'll pray for you. I'll pray! Please don't. Don't."

A scuffle was heard thereafter. The girl attempted to get away, Shiv guessed. Then the unmistakable sound of a blunt object striking a skull followed, and then there was the sharp snap of snapping bone.

Adam looked away. Shiv felt a black rage well up inside of him.

"You utter idiot," a low, feminine growl followed from the vox. "Put away the baton. She's still alive. Bring her to one of the Biomancers. Then have their mind wiped after. When you're done with this, find another job. Have your Master-Inquisitor reassign you. You're not suited for this. An action of panic? We cannot panic. Not once. We are servants, and this, though foul, is an important duty. Now, pick her up and be away with you. Be quick. The wound is deep, and the Deadly despises ruined vessels. You, wait, what's that?"

Suddenly, there was the sound of harsh breathing, footsteps, and a loud cry for someone to stop.

Adam and Shiv looked at each other, and neither of them spoke.

"I think I had enough of that for one night," Adam finally said.

"I don't know," Shiv replied. "I think I want to make a house call. See what this Hero-Matron's all about."

A vicious glint filled the Gate Lord's eyes, but then he tempered it down in time to get through the rest of the details. "Irons said she was missing earlier when I was in his office. And also that the Inquisition is doing everything they can to mask her involvement and protect her from harm."

"So, what do you think our angle is?" Shiv asked. "If my Marcus identity gets burned, I could take the semblance of one of these problem girls, if they're the dead one, slip in somehow."

"I don't think that's entirely reliable," Adam said. "However," he flipped back through the illustrations and pointed at the shrouded man, "we know that this one is part of the Inquisition. As with practically everything foul and underhanded happening in the Republic, they have their fingers in it. I think we're better off snatching one of them and having a conversation than swinging blind in one of these orphanages. Melissa did write something about the frequency of pickups. We could potentially intercept one of these days."

"Yeah, I'm looking forward to that," Shiv growled.

Adam hesitated for a moment. "Maybe you shouldn't focus on that. I'll see if I can get Gone or Kura to help me."

"You're worried that I might cause a mess," Shiv said, almost offended.

"No, I'm worried the System might escalate any one of our attempts to help into a full-blown battle near an orphanage. The other Legends, they're favored too, but they're not like you, and they're not like me, at least not yet. If we're going to keep this as subtle as possible, we want someone with minimal profile and maximum speed."

"Hence Gone," Shiv said.

"Hence Gone," Adam agreed.

"And they should take Whisper with them too," Shiv suggested.

A look of wariness crawled across the Gate Lord's face, but the Deathless kept pushing his idea. "Yeah, I know orphans and orcs don't go together, but Whisper can keep himself controlled in most cases. And he's usually pretty hard to spot as well. If things go wrong, he can pull the others into his dimensional veil, and we can extract them without getting noticed."

"Right, right," Adam said. "Now then, I think we both lingered on this long enough. We should do something else. I'm going to chat with our crafters and see if I can figure out any of the slipgate mechanics myself. I doubt it, but maybe learning more about the basics can give me some ideas for the future."

"Alright, I'm going to go visit Helix. Time for me to start harvesting more cancer from my body."

"Lovely." Adam snorted. "And just like that, it feels like we're back to old times."

Shiv grunted in agreement. "You know, I really miss it."

"Miss what? Weave?"

"No, all of it. The Abyss was bad in places. Godsdamn First Blood was a nightmare. But the wilderness was something special. I was free for a while, Adam. And we have people who care about us there. The Composer is... She isn't perfect. She's not nearly the most powerful goddess, but..."

"I know," Adam said, understanding what he was getting at. "When I needed her, she answered. She came to me. She didn't need to, but..." The Gate Lord sighed as stress and worry warred across his face. "The world isn't what I thought. It shouldn't be this way. The Ascendants shouldn't be this way. The Republic shouldn't be this way. I... I want to run too. I want to be done with this, but I don't think I can. I don't blame you if you just decide to flee entirely after we finish saving Blackedge. When I get everyone there over to Gate Piety, I won't blame you if you and Uva just want to go."

"Adam."

"Yes?"

"Shut the fuck up. I'm just saying I miss things. I miss the peace. I miss the people. I'm not saying I want to run away and leave your ass to fight this hopeless war alone. Besides, I don't think it's up to me. Udrael's planning something, as are the Ascendants and the other nations. Everyone's always doing something. The world won't stop spinning just because I turn away from it. I think fleeing and hiding is just a fantasy."

"It doesn't all need to be your battle, Shiv," Adam said quietly.

"Maybe not, but not leaving your ass alone to deal with this. I don't give a shit about the Republic, Adam. I give a shit about you."

Adam blinked. Shiv folded his arms. And then unfolded them. Then he shuffled in place. They both coughed.

"I'm gonna go do cancer things," Shiv said, unsure how to end the conversation.

"Yes, you go and enjoy that."

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As soon as Shiv departed the slipgate chamber, he found Helix waiting there with his arms folded and what looked to be a naked clone of Shiv by his side. The orc held onto "Not-Shiv" via a flesh-made leash implanted directly into the base of its skull.

The Deathless blinked. "What the fuck is that?"

"Oh, this? It's my sloppily made homunculus. I based it on your blood code." The orc Biomancer shook the leash as he grinned at his so-called pupil. "Have you selected your classes yet? Any Biomancy courses?"

"A medical one," Shiv replied, but his gaze was mainly locked to his uncanny replica. "You gonna explain why you made a fucked-up version of me or...?"

"Oh, it's simple. I'm going to give it a series of diseases, viruses, plagues, and maladies, and you're going to figure out what I'm doing. And when you get good enough at identification, you're going to start learning how to cure the homunculus. Your human academy might be a soft and easy time, but I will not grant you that, I assure you. When I am done, your enemies will open their own throats rather than face the touch of your Biomancy." And slowly, creepily, the orc began to laugh. "Only to realize it was all for naught, because you managed to restart their brain and remove all the damage, condemning them to torment regardless."

A few seconds passed. Shiv looked between the orc Biomancer and the unresponsive homunculus. Then he simply shrugged. "Sure, why not, I got a few hours. Let's get started."

Chapter 223 (I) Academia [III]

Good evening, Hero-Ranger Clarissa.

Tonight, I'd like to play a game with you. You spent your life stealthily making plagues and biophages, assassinating those that most deemed untouchable, indestructible. I applaud you for that, and recognize that your moniker of the Crimson Mask Maiden is well-earned.

And—wait, no, no, no! Stop! Stop trying to stop your blood flow. No, no, don't give yourself an aneurysm. And why are you grinning! Stop it! The entire point of this exercise is that I was going to infect you with your own poisons and find out if you could save yourself!

I've declared you my Vaketh-Bakal—it's a great honor! Stop attempting suicide, stop it—it's supposed to be the other way around, the other way around! THIS IS SUPPOSED TO BE AN IRONIC THING WHERE I STRIKE YOU WITH YOUR OWN BIOMANCY AND YOU TRY TO STAY ALIVE BUT DIE PROVING ME—STOOPPPP!

STOP! YOU'RE TAKING THE MEANING AND POIGNANCY OUT OF THIS! I DEMAND THAT YOU STOP!  
NOOO—

-Helix to Hero-Ranger Glory Clarissa

223 (I)

Academia [III]

There was something disconcerting about watching a grotesque parody of yourself die time and time again. The homunculus was Shiv in general appearance, but fundamentally held none of his attitude or his power. It was, effectively, as if an extremely simple animal was trapped in a body made to mirror his own. So simple an animal was the homunculus that it barely responded to pain. It only shivered and let out faint rasps as it suffered a variety of boils, bleeds, hemorrhages, strokes, heart attacks, and tumors.

Time after time, the homunculus died before Shiv, and time after time, he was made to decipher why it had died, what the cause was, and how to potentially fix it. It took little more than a wave on the part of the orc Biomancer to revive the homunculus, and they practiced in a secluded corner of the coliseum's maze.

Helix didn't give him any information for free. Instead, he instructed Shiv to look through his own materials, use the Odes as a compass, and come to his own conclusion.

The purpose behind this exercise was to get the Deathless used to using his Biomancy as more than a blunt weapon. Though he could absorb organic objects into his Aegis of Assimilation, it was meant to be something far more than that. While technically a monster skill, it held far more potential when used alongside a learned mind, being able to draw different biological organs and compositions together to make its wielder an alchemist of the flesh.

As he wrapped his mana hydra around the homunculus, Shiv watched as a complex array of microspells poked into existence before him. There were still far too many components to keep track of, but he was grasping the larger aspects more easily than before. Biology was dynamic; it was a system in play, and every few seconds, bits of the body would die and regenerate. Such was the interplay between living matter and entropy.

However, sections of the rendered homunculus were easy to track. Some organs and bits of architecture had consistent patterns. Bones were easily distinguished, as were the heart, the brain, and the stomach. Shiv still had a hard time sorting between the liver and the kidneys, but the lungs eventually became clear to him as well. And they weren't static, either. There were small spells gliding between the larger ones, and every time something catastrophic happened, it was like watching a symphony of destruction.

Aegis of Assimilation 116 > 118

A heart attack would result in a sudden calamity for the entire body. The small microspells that passed through the other major sections, blood, as Shiv deduced by now, simply stopped flowing in certain areas. And then, the rest of the body would collapse in tandem. The brain would start to die quickly when oxygen ceased. Without the brain, the other components of the body also began to fail.

Shiv dove into the Odes, experiencing all manner of heart diseases, heart attacks, and strokes. Even so, he had a hard time figuring out what Helix specifically did to induce such deep trauma.

"So, there's no plaque," Shiv said, staring down at the unmoving body of the homunculus.

"Incorrect," Helix retorted. He pointed at the corpse. A spiraling spell pattern manifested within its unmoving frame, and its dense forest of arteries came alight before Shiv's very eyes. "There is a great deal of soft plaque lining the homunculus's blood traffic, but you are right. It's not quite hard yet, or at least it shouldn't be hard enough to induce a sudden blockage or burst."

Psycho-Cartography: He's hinting at something. It probably is something to do with the arteries, then...

Shiv frowned and he focused on the circulatory system even harder. It took him a while to distinguish the congested arteries from the clearer pathways, but soon, he managed, and it was there that he noticed a strange series of spell shapes unlike any of the others. They were smaller than most microspells, seeming like bits of sediment, where everything else had a more unique shape.

They resembled grains of sand lining the inside of blood vessels, but there were differences between the different grains as well. Some of them were faint, soft as Helix described, but others, as they passed through certain organs, would grow brighter, turn thicker.

Shiv's eyes widened as the blood crossed through the left ventricle of the heart.

Farsight 81 > 82

"What the hells is this?" Shiv muttered to himself, and as he leaned in, he saw Helix grinning widely, his orcish teeth pointed and sharp, pleased that his disciple had finally discovered his trick.

The left ventricle seemed clean, but Shiv examined the structures nearby, and that's when he saw another strange pattern induced into the pulmonary artery. It was an odd ring shape, and it distorted

every blood particle that passed through its expanse. It was subtle, seeding each microspell symbolizing blood with one of those grains, and every time full circulation was completed, the grains grew thicker.

"You put a plaque-building spell inside a heart?" Shiv asked, sounding surprised.

Helix snapped his fingers. "You finally see. Remarkable, isn't it? You don't really need that much to slay someone, Insul. You just need to find the most delicate part of them and fill it up, or manipulate it in some way. Think of how difficult it is for you to overcome some adversaries. Think of that brutish Vulteg you fought earlier. We all were slamming into it over and over again, trying to crack it open like a can, and it just wouldn't break."

Shiv hummed in thought. That was true. Urri had been near-indestructible with his Toughness and Magical Resistance fused together. "Not sure how this would finish him off, though," Shiv said. "You couldn't get through the resistance at all, even with your Biomancy."

Helix tutted. "Ah, but that's because you threw me directly into a combat situation. There are more subtle ways to induce heart failure. Not all spells need to be inflicted directly upon your enemies. In fact, I recommend that you don't use your spells so directly, that you don't use your mana like a lashing limb. The body is a complicated set of reactions. If you make someone ingest, say, a hypercaloric consumable, and the system cannot process it, the insulin will react most cataclysmically, and thus," Helix gestured at his homunculus once more, "death. And there are many ways to reach a state of heart failure."

"Right, right," Shiv said. "How common is heart failure, anyway?"

"For whom? Humans? Extremely high. Your bodies are inefficient, poorly designed. In fact, if you remain Pathless after you hit the age of, well, let's say, 30 or so, there's really not that much point to you. Your resilience plunges, and your organs start decaying far too fast. It's pitiful."

And that took Shiv for a loop. "Not that much point to us. What the hells do you mean? Even if you're Pathless, with a good Biomancer, you can—"

"Ah, you see there? With a good Biomancer," Helix said, smirking. "With a good Biomancer, you can guide the body's natural stupidity and reactivity to make sure that you live with as much health and dignity and for as long as you so desire. But without one... Well, have you ever been to a low mana threshold world?"

"Not really? But I kinda get your point. Low mana world people are fragile, is that it? So what? Lacking mana means the body deteriorates and fails to manage itself properly?"

"Only for creatures of evolution." Helix grinned. "Some of us are sculpted for higher purposes."

Shiv sneered. "You orcs are oh so special, aren't you?"

"Oh, yes, we're far better at exporting our entropy. We don't age like you do, after all. Anyhow, there are still some leftover biological architecture problems. Even when humans become Pathbearers, you, for instance, are at higher risk of developing several types of cancer and heart disease due to your size alone. And then there is your diet."

"What about my diet?" Shiv asked.

"Not yours specifically. Humanity's. You're omnivorous, willing to eat anything, from vegetables to meat to even more exotic things." Helix chuckled. "And this is usually the folly of your species: death by diet. Many Vanguards have a propensity for highly caloric substances."

And with that, Shiv finally understood what Helix was getting at. "So it probably would have been easier to assassinate Urri if you'd managed to modify something and made him eat it. Is that what you're saying?"

"Indeed. Most Pathbearers don't need to eat much at all, but many still do, out of pleasure and taste. These are weaknesses, Insul, especially if you don't examine everything you put in your mouth. Right now, you should be perfectly aware of everything you decide to imbibe. What effects it might have on your body, how it binds itself to your most delicate cells. The proteins wish to dance, Insul, and you should be aware of how the waltz unfolds."

Practical Metabiology 44 > 46

And with that, Shiv felt another two levels descend upon his Practical Metabiology Skill. "Forty-six," Shiv said, "not that far from an evolution."

"Yes, but you are far from a well-studied Biomancer," Helix replied, wagging a clawed finger. "You need constant and unceasing practice to make up for all the time you lost."

"You know, as much as I'd like to spend all day and night performing twisted experiments on my lookalike with you, I still have classes to get to, and other shit I need to get done. Sun's almost up, and I think I should survey the terrain a bit so I have a general feeling of the campus layout."

At first, Helix seemed offended. But the expression didn't linger. Seconds passed, and the orc grew thoughtful. "This might be good as well. You can encounter other students and individuals, organic materials too. You can interface with them using your Aegis. Yes... I have homework for you. You are to

tell me what latent health risks the people you encounter have, what existing ailments they suffer from, if any, and how you might best go about collapsing their biological architecture. Since I will be accompanying you within your cape, you must be prepared to respond to my questions most promptly."

Shiv snorted. "Alright. Can't say I'll do that well, but—"

"Oh no, it's going to go disastrously. You're going to be like a blind man trying to perform surgery on an animal you've never encountered before." Helix giggled. "But that's how it always begins. For you, anyway. If you were to perform manual surgery on anyone, I expect them to die screaming, unless you're performing throat surgery, in which case there's going to be a lot of wiggling followed by nothing at all."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Helix."

"Confidence is to be earned and taken from success. And you can start by fixing the homunculus."

Shiv stared down at the unmoving body. "You know, I don't really know what you did before. You kind of just waved your hand. It got back up."

"It's a homunculus, Insul. Its body is far simpler than yours. Revive it. Go."

"Wait." Shiv wrapped a mana hydra around his armor as well. And only then did he notice the special ingredient Helix had infused within the Homunculus. There was a faint static that ran as an undercurrent between all the cells. Bioelectricity. "It can regenerate."

"Yes. As soon as you clear up the mess in the organs, it will get back up again. You'll probably have to fix part of the brain damage induced by the oxygen deficiency. But everything else should be resolvable through your capable hands."

"All right," Shiv said. He let his mana hydra sink even deeper into the body. And he focused mainly on the arteries. He pulled at the plaque, trying to remove it gently now. And—

His thoughts trailed off as everything inside the homunculus became untangled. Blood sprayed out, hitting all the walls and floor as Shiv accidentally unlatched all arteries from the corpse. Organs were wrenched free as well, sliding out from expanding wounds like glistening balloons of mutilated tissue.

"Ah," Helix said, suppressing his disappointment. "Oh well, you'll get better at focusing on the blood instead of, well, the things that hold the blood."

Shiv turned away from the twitching corpse and stared at the orc Biomancer. "Is it gonna be able to regenerate from that?"

"By itself? No. Its insides are on the outside, Insul. You ripped some of the brain matter out as well. There's a limit to this. However, I can always regrow a new one. Assimilate the body. It'll be a good draft reference for when you need to make your own homunculus down the line. For now, please try developing a softer touch. It will be most helpful for your art. Not everything needs to be torn and crushed. Sometimes, a poisoned seed is the most sublime—"

"The other orcs hit you a lot, don't they?" Shiv asked, unable to keep his intrusive question contained.

Helix sputtered. "Wha—what? Why would you say—No, no. I am respected. Highly."

The moment dragged. Helix's outrage was a bit too much. Shiv laughed. "Yeah, they definitely bully the shit out of you. You're enjoying this a lot. I'm the only one who plays along with you, aren't I? Even the other orc Biomancers don't take you seriously."

Psycho-Cartography: Don't go too far. His feelings will actually get hurt. And he's the kind to pout and withhold his knowledge in response.

"N-no!" Helix came just short of stomping his feet. "I am respected!"

Psycho-Cartography: Anyone who needs to claim they are respected out loud is lying to themselves.

Shiv just kept laughing. "It's okay, Helix. You're a pretty good Biomancer. Not a great teacher, but your self-importance and outrage tickle me enough to make up for your personality."

"And what's wrong with my personality, huh?" Helix all but whined.

"Nothing. Except for the fact that you like to hear yourself talk too much. And you constantly mutter behind people's backs like a teenage girl. Anyway. Get in my cape and get your snide comments ready. Let's go on a walk."

"I—" Helix was about to refuse.

Shiv intercepted his refusal with a pre-prepared threat. "If you don't go, I'll grab Mortar, and we'll just shit-talk you all the way."

"Nyah!" Helix snarled.

Psycho-Cartography: I do think we have him by the metaphorical balls. But he might be enjoying this little game too.

Chapter 223 (II) Academia [III]

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Shiv and Helix spent a little while longer reviewing their Biomancy, but after that, the Deathless decided that he wanted to survey the campus grounds. Though it displeased Helix that Shiv wasn't devoting every spare second he had toward the art of manipulating biology, he was assuaged enough that his whining was kept within acceptable parameters.

Shiv departed from the coliseum and returned to his dorm room alongside Helix. To Shiv's surprise, the other orcs, fugitives, and the Educator were nowhere to be seen when he departed. He would have gone looking if he had more time, but there was already too much on his plate. Right then, he simply wanted a few seconds to know what Phoenix Academy actually looked like before everything went to shit again.

Shiv scoured his surroundings before leaving his dorm. He swept the rooms to his left and right using his various magical fields and confirmed most of the other students were sleeping. He also managed to find

the ogre student's dorm room. It was, in fact, larger than Shiv's, and he shared the chamber with several other unique Pathbearers. Some of them were absolutely tiny, the size of rats.

Probably because they are rats, Shiv thought to himself.

There were also two of what Shiv felt to be reptiles built roughly like humans. Their biologies were dramatically different from that of a human's or even an elf's, and the blood of the lizard Pathbearers ran cold. Shiv wasn't sure what kind of arrangement had so many different kinds of students living together in the same room, but the academy was clearly an accepting and accommodating place.

Wonder if they'd be willing to take an Umbral or a Weaveress someday if the Light-Curse gets resolved. Shiv paused at that thought. Yeah, more than the Light-Curse needs to be put away for that to happen. Ascendants need to be put down too.

Slowly, Shiv crept out. He peeked his head out of the room and looked left and right. None of the old Brunswick boys were waiting to jump him, and there was no hint of campus security either. Even so, Shiv didn't feel entirely safe, so he retreated back into his room and pulled out his frying pan. "Alright, let's see what else you can do for me when we need to keep things subtle."

He focused on the shadows nearby and carved a slice of it away. He kept doing that until his pan felt considerably heavier than before, and then he summoned the fire. But he cut the fire off as he decided that he wanted to test another ingredient first. "Alright, so you're all about cooking and cutting things that usually shouldn't be cooked or cut. What happens if I mix in water with the darkness? Actually, what happens if I mix in Chronomancy?"

And Shiv did just that. He first peeled a bit of his Hydromancy away, filling the pan with the source of magical water. It didn't do anything to the darkness, and it was accepted as just another component it

could fry. He added a hint of gold in that as well, and then, the insides of the pan churned with new radiance.

Shiv stared into that pitch black depth as splashes of time, water, and shadow began to mingle together. It was hard to tell what kind of effect he would get when this was done, but he was looking forward to it. I wonder just how many things I could mix together. How weird stuff can get.

He channeled a steady stream of fire into the pan, and its lid manifested thereafter. It took three minutes for him to fully cook this new meal, and when it was done, he saw for the first time that he had made some kind of soup. A film of black oil drifted atop, and its fragrance was that of salty tang, but then came a hit of pungence that nearly made Shiv recoil.

"What felling shit is that?" He pinched his nose. It didn't smell particularly bad, just too damned strong, and he traced the taste back to the dense threads of gold inside the substance. That was the Chronomancy. It almost seemed like noodles. It also smelled like oil, but what it was something else entirely.

The magic had been transformed, mingled within the darkness. And from it came a new flavor.

Maybe I should name it. Shivium? No, that's for metal or something. Uh... Better spend a bit longer thinking about this.

After a few moments of searching, he found a cup in the room and poured the soup in. For several seconds thereafter, Shiv examined his new meal. He thought back to what Helix had to say earlier and decided to scan it using his Biomancy. When he washed his mana hydra through its expanse, however, he detected nothing. It was, in fact, an absence within his field, and even his Pyromancy couldn't sense the heat radiating from its top.

"I can still see the steam rising," Shiv muttered, confused. Something wasn't adding up here.

"What are you mumbling about?" Helix asked, popping his head out from the back of Shiv's cape. "I expected... What is that? When did you make it?"

Shiv held up his frying pan in answer to the orc's question.

"Ah, yes, your Legendary artifact. What an odd thing for the System to give you. Still, it's suitable. Never mind that. Are you actually planning on drinking it?"

"Probably," Shiv said.

"Are you mad?" Helix waved a hand, and a flare of red mana manifested. After a few seconds, the orc let out a groan of frustration. "I can't tell what it is, either. Absolutely do not put that down your—"

Shiv picked up the glass and drained it. Before Helix could say anything, Shiv used one of his spare mana hydras to nudge the orc back into his cape, just in case he found himself displaced after Shiv's transformation. Helix let out an indignant squawk, but didn't resist otherwise.

A few seconds passed. Shiv looked down at his hands, expecting to transform. But he didn't. He didn't become a splash of shadow. He didn't meld into the darkness. Shiv remained himself. However, his shadow on the ground, cast by the warm ceiling light, began to quiver like it was a pool of water. And it called out to him. It called out to his Hydromancy and his Chronomancy, resonating with a similar frequency.

Swallowing, Shiv crouched and sank a finger into his own shadow—and felt it submerge. It was like a pond just beneath him. More importantly, it was a pond that left his hand encased in gold. A second later, the university's ward swept by and ripped his Chronomantic protections free. But for a moment, he felt his Strider of the Unbending Path amplified.

Taking in a breath, Shiv dropped into the darkness, and it splashed around him. The moment it did, the world slowed. His Chronomancy was magnified, and though he could see the waves cast by the academy, the wards ripped through his room without ever touching him. He could feel billowing waves of pressure displace the shadows above him. It splashed about as if a missile streaking across water. But other than that, Shiv remained untouched.

Dodge 33 > 34

Shiv kicked and swam with the thrust of his Shapeless Tides. He emerged, and as soon as he did, he felt his Strider of the Unbending Path begin to dissipate around him. It was evaporating as if water coming free from his body. And then the next wave cast by the counter-Chromomantic wards fell upon him like a rough towel. It scrubbed him bare, and time resumed once more.

"Alright, so, a mixed effect between all three," Shiv noted. "The shadows become like water, and there are additional Chronomantic benefits as well. Well, it's more of a Chronomantic pond that resides in every bit of darkness. Is it every bit of darkness?" Shiv looked down at his own shadow, and then he looked out at the surrounding shadows. They all seemed fluid, but he wanted to know for sure. He dove into the darkness that lined the entrance hallway leading just beyond the door of his room. The world went still once more. The wards passed over him and spared him of any devastation.

Shiv swam outside, but he quickly discovered the limits of his newest boost. He wasn't in a moving shadow. Instead, he could simply traverse from dark patch to dark patch. The moment he got to the light, the world became as if a boundary, an edge. He could pull himself up, but he couldn't spread the blackness anymore. Then he took a chance. He triggered his Creeping Void, and as sprawling miasma

filled the hall, Shiv felt his boundary get blown open. Suddenly, he was moving again, and a rumble of laughter escaped from him.

He slipped out of his room that way, never bothering to open the door, never walking down the hall. Instead, he glided through darkness until he reached the outside. The fragments of the broken moon drifted high above, casting a pale glow upon the world below. It was like a smattering of dappled moonlight kissing the land, projected as if from a shattered spotlight. And because of it, there were places where the darkness was stronger, where the darkness was overwhelming.

Shiv stuck to patches of shadow. He glided through the night, and deep in the stygian waters made by the Last Morsel, he had all the time in the world.

The Creeping Void 117 > 119

He swam up along the sides of a building, climbing eight stories before he got to the top. He emerged from a patch of darkness and surveyed his surroundings. There were still students racing even into this late hour. The sun would be coming up in a while, but that didn't seem to deter them. They painted two streaks in the air, one barely leading, trailing a ribbon of red behind them. The other was a slow bolt of lightning. It carved and twisted through the air, and with every attempt at acceleration, flashes followed, painting two silhouettes. The first was an automaton, large and decked with multiple thrusters.

The second seemed an elven woman, riding upon a broomstick, sporting a large, pointed hat. Quite a stereotypical getup for a mage, he thought to himself. But there was a smile on his face. It was kind of charming to see people living their lives, practicing their talents. There was a sublime pleasure in beholding other Pathbearers simply being who they were.

The two racing students crossed through another ringed tower, and they looped around, making another pass. In the distance, the large walls wrapping around the exterior of the academy shrouded much of the neighborhood nearby. Yet, the presence of the Yellowstone Supervolcano and Flamecrown Castle, for that matter, was undeniable, unavoidable. Flamecrown was a raging beacon, spearing deep into the guts of night, its three spires casting thousands of burning magma threads across the land. It felt ominous to Shiv, like an effigy manifested at the whim of a cruel god, casting condemnation upon the world below.

He used his Farsight to zoom in as much as he could. Something caught his eye, and he zoomed in on that specific point. There was a person. At the very top of Flamecrown Castle, he saw someone hovering there, the form of a woman, dressed in long, billowing black.

Is that—

The watching form of his grandmother vanished in a burst of darkness, and Shiv felt a coldness seep into his stomach. She was watching. And she was probably one of the few reasons why he and the rest of his not-so-merry band were still hidden. But she wasn't even the worst of his problems—somewhere further out in the darkness were Udraal and the Tarrasque, and Shiv couldn't help but have visions of fighting the colossal monstrosity on campus.

Shaking his dark mood off, Shiv moved away from the Carrot dorm and made a run for one of the floating towers instead. When no one was watching, he launched himself up along its side and glided up its dark edge. He felt like one of those fish pawing their way up a waterfall, and he managed to get to the very top in a few short seconds.

Upon arriving there, he took a seat upon the open ring at its apex, and he surveyed the entirety of the campus for the first time. Phoenix Academy was constructed in layers. The outer walls stretched wide, going past the horizon. Damn, is this place felling big.

Little wonder that some people called it a small city unto itself. The dorms were stretched far and connected through trenches. They were like long-running barracks, and a good portion of the infrastructure was underground as well. But then there were the other facilities. Massive, cathedral-sized classrooms, what looked like something of a zoo or a forest to the southwest, and a mess of maze-like trenches past a glistening perimeter dense with dimensional mana.

As Shiv looked past that perimeter, his eyes narrowed. He saw writhing forms rush through the darkness.

Distantly, he heard animalistic shrieks as well, and they were cut off as someone yelled, "Shut up!"

The crackle of lightning sounded, and a few of those forms were smote from existence, bursting into smoke. Shiv looked past that glistening mana perimeter once more and realized the buildings there were even more fortified, and that the students there wore armor or had active spells flowing across their bodies.

What is that? Shiv wondered. Why is there a portion of the academy under attack? Is that normal? As he continued using his Farsight to observe the scene, he realized there was another threshold past the first one, and this one was even denser. He could barely see through it, and there were no buildings there either. There was just a collection of trenches, wards, and layer after layer of fortress walls. There, upon those walls, were students, and they were constantly firing at something, unleashing skill and silent artillery upon an unseen enemy. Past them was the gate at the heart of campus, and Shiv blinked.

He guessed that there were dimensionals slipping out from the gateway, that students were fighting some manner of primal elemental or something. No alarms were going off, and there was a distinct absence of any Prismatic Guard or militia activity in the area, so he guessed that this was just normal. Sections of the campus were designated combat zones, and it was simply that the place he occupied right now was calm and peaceful. Maybe I'm just where all the first years are supposed to be, Shiv thought to himself, first years or the non-martials.

Turning away from the gate, he swept the west and east some more. There were several gardens between neighboring dorms, and there, he saw a collection of statues. Even with his Farsight, it was a little bit hard to read the plaques lining their base, but a flicker of light came from the left, and Shiv found himself staring at one of the dorms.

Then a massive ball of flame erupted out of it, followed by a thunderous blast. For a beat, Shiv blinked, wondering if this, too, was a normal part of campus life along the second threshold. Then, as the alarm sounded, Shiv realized it probably wasn't. His pin blinked twice, and a pitched alarm sounded.

Warning! An alchemical explosion has taken place at Dragon Dorm. Students within the dorm, please shelter in place. Head to your bathroom and stay near a hydro dispenser. Other students, please do not approach the endangered area. Rescue personnel are on the way.

Shiv looked on for a moment as the flames quickly crawled up the sides of the curving building. They were eating through it at an alarming rate, and soon, the entire west end of the building was utterly consumed by a flickering conflagration. If they don't stop it soon, the entire structure might catch fire, and who knows how many students will...

Shiv sucked in a breath. But if I get involved, I might just expose myself. There are a lot of risks that... And then Shiv realized he had already launched himself off the top of the tower and was making a swan dive for the darkness below.

"Godsfuckingdammit," he muttered, "I just can't let shit go. Helix, we're going to go fight a fire. You want to give me a primer on how to properly treat burn victims without using my Aegis's Woundeater ability?"

"Burn victims, you say?" Helix said with giddy delight. "Tell me more. Is it an alchemical fire?"

"Seems to be."

"Oh, then this will be absolutely nightmarish. You're going to need to regrow some skin and lung tissue. Far more delicate work than just removing some plaque."

"Ah, shit," Shiv mumbled. "Well, looks like I'm sticking to crystallizing injuries for now."

And as he splashed into the blackness, time drew to a near-standstill as Shiv tore off across the darkness, wary of compromising his cover, yet unable to leave his fellow students to their fate.

Chapter 224 (I) Fire

I once assumed that strength was characterized by the things I could break, the lives I could take, the structures and nations I could collapse.

I once assumed that superior might was all that mattered, that it was the fate of the weaker to serve and be used.

For years, I have reigned over the Midwest of this great and primordial continent. I slew titans whose bodies blotted out the sky when they still walked the lands. I harvested their corpses and forged a mighty keep from their bones. I used their cores to fuel my little kingdom with wonder. And I cast ash and fire from the sky, drowning the horizon, boiling my enemies before they could ever encroach upon my realm. And past the periphery of it, I compelled grand and withering storms to arise. Storms that made the lands of my neighbors sallow and barren. Storms that forced their farmers to turn to me in mass.

This was my notion of power.

And all this became utterly meaningless when my youngest daughter grew sick.

I am an unkind man. Of this I am aware. I have denied it for years. But in my heart of hearts, I have known.

I am possessive with those I love, ruthless against those who I consider my enemies, or the ones that might very well be enemies someday. Every insult directed toward me is punished to the maximum extent of my brutality. Every prayer not in my name is considered sacrilege and rewarded by an obsidian spike driven through the naysayers' chests.

There were Biomancers aplenty on my land once. I sent them away. I killed those who wouldn't leave. For those who wielded powers beyond my knowledge wielded them without my consent. And thus did I justify their deaths as preemptive measures to protect me, to protect my children.

I can shatter mountains. I can slay monsters of legend. I can crush the will of peoples far and wide. And I can do nothing to spare my daughter of her fate.

I, the Dust King, Tyrant Lord of the Midwest, stand a Pathbearer above Pathbearers.

And I, the Dust King, am nothing.

I see it now. I see it clearly.

I will journey east. There are whispers of new gods, ones that call themselves the Ascendants. They may be pretenders; they would not be the first charlatans rising from the Abyss and claiming to possess divinity. But if there is just a chance—the slightest chance—that they might be able to understand what ails her, that they might be able to prevent her demise, then my throne, my kingdom, my life, all can be traded.

Everything.

I thought myself above ruin. I thought myself beyond the touch of decay. But now I see. What point is there in harnessing the potential of ruin if you cannot save what matters, even when you hold the earth?

-Last entry in the Dust King's journal

224 (I)

Fire

Shiv had no phobias related to fire; he just didn't much like hearing people burn to death. It reminded him of his unfortunate demise within the teleportation anchor at Passage. That was a death he would never forget. And right now, echoes of that death were being played back to him as countless students howled and brayed their pain, even through the resounding crackles of the rising flames.

From the outside, the dorms were made of sturdy materials. They were also reinforced in interesting ways, not only through concrete and metal, but also through magic circulating its inner supports thanks to the mithril rods lodged there. Some of those mithril rods were exposed now, their mana spilling out into the world like blood from a slit throat. And to make matters worse, Shiv noticed how some of the spell patterns seemed corrupted.

He wasn't a studied mage, but he'd been in enough battles now to notice specific shapes and colors, namely the shape and color of Pyromancy.

"This isn't an alchemical fire," Shiv sent to Helix telepathically. They were fast approaching the burning dorm, flowing from shadow to shadow like a shark closing in on wounded prey. As Shiv grew closer, he could see chains of bright orange mana snaking through the mutilated husk of the structure.

"No, it is not." Helix beheld the scene through Shiv's eyes. A low chuckle escaped the orc. "Someone has altered the wards sustaining the building. I don't see any hint of Hydromancy either. That means that it was likely removed. Someone is deliberately trying to cause a mass casualty event."

A crushing wave of counter-Chronomancy scythed over the shadows protecting Shiv from the heart of the campus. The Deathless grunted. He could still see a great many vitality signatures glinting within the blazing structure, but even with time at a near standstill, some were on the verge of winking out. He also noticed how the glass was melting; how the metal and stone were pooling into slag right after. The heat was extreme. The students inside weren't going to last long amidst these temperatures. He needed to act quickly.

The first order of business would be to use his Shapeless Tides to shred the mithril supports. He would sweep the building using his Biomancy field and rip whatever injuries he could away from the wounded. He'd get Helix to help him while he was doing that, but to choke the rest of the flames into submission from a distance needed someone with far greater Pyromancy than what Shiv possessed.

Candles was the obvious candidate, but Shiv didn't know where he was—there was no time to go screaming for help, either. Every second mattered, and Shiv needed to act now.

Shiv exploded out from a patch of shadows cast by the dancing flames lighting the top of the dorm, and he ripped his Perfect Semblance off. As he tossed his mask into his cape and as his body returned to its baseline state. His helmet slammed back down around his face, shrouding him from any unseen observers. Best to be caught as the Deathless than the weak and vulnerable Marcus Unblood if he was going to be fighting magical fires.

The temporal wards came again, but Shiv ignored them as he focused on the blaze above all else. He moved fast, his vectors flaring to life, accelerating him forward.

He slammed into the side of the building, yet held his kinetic might back. Instead of barreling through the entire structure, he clung to the exposed supports, ignoring the lashing tongues of fire that licked at his body. Overflow Tides surged out of him and began shredding through the mana that circulated within the mithril. Soon, bits of flame sputtered out around Shiv, as if all the oxygen sustaining them had been severed.

Inertial Overdrive 179 > 180

At the same time, Shiv's mana hydra slashed out. He washed his Biomancy field over bodies, crystallizing wound after wound at record speed. His strain climbed, but it was only a paltry thing for now. Many burns, collapsed lungs, melted eyes, boils, and contusions flooded the insides of his Aegis.

But though Shiv's Shapeless Tides traveled fast and gutted an entire section of the blaze, it seemed like the entire interior of the dorm was on the verge of collapse.

Just then, the academy's Chronomantic wards smashed into him. It was like a falling tsunami slamming into the surface of an ironclad fortress. Shiv didn't budge. The wards had more power, yet his Chronomancy endured even as pieces of it were ripped away. The soup his Last Morsel had made was a hell of a booster for his magic.

I need to get in the habit of eating mana or something. Maybe I should just start mixing all my available mana types to boost myself.

He began focusing, splitting his attention between the building itself and the traveling conflagration. I need to get rid of the mithril supports before I do anything else. They're still actively stoking the flames, and I don't have any way to overwrite them. After the supports are gone, I'll need to use what's left of my Overflow Tides to keep the building standing until all the kids get out.

His Chronomancy was about to succumb. Shiv ignored it. It would give him enough time to execute his actions.

Leviathan of the Shapeless Tide wasn't just far more powerful than Gravitic Wrestler; it was also much more dexterous. It gave Shiv a vague tactile sense of everything he was touching. And right now, as his tides ripped through rogue streams of Pyromancy, he could feel just how fragile the building was. It was like a tower eroded at its base. The top was getting too heavy, the middle too brittle; it was going to collapse in several directions.

Worse yet, it seemed the brittleness was spreading—and unnaturally fast too. Probably not just Pyromancy crawling through the building, then. Probably some kind of Geomancy spell as well. Why the hells would someone do this? Am I dealing with another escapee from the Rubix Well here?

His temporal shell finally broke. At the same time, Shiv gritted his teeth and pulled back. His Overflow Tides suddenly inverted in direction. Every single mithril support beam was wrenched free from its place and sent straight down into the foundations of the building. A deafening scream of shattering structural supports, ripping walls, and collapsing floors followed.

Strider of the Unbending Path 164 > 165

The dorm, shaped like a frozen avalanche, began to crumble. But though it shivered, though parts of it bent and deformed, it remained standing. As a rushing flood of vectors cleaved across every meter of its surface, Shiv's mind wailed with strain. A headache was beginning to build, and he found himself nearly overwhelmed.

Holding it up was no effort at all, but there were still flames blowing, ripping through rooms along the interior, still sections of mithril that he hadn't managed to gut. A series of life signs vanished before Shiv's Vitaemancy, and the rage inside him grew hotter than the flames without. He didn't know these students; he didn't know why they were burning, but he was offended by their deaths. He took their passing as an insult. There he was, a Legend, unable to spare a few Adepts from their final end.

He wasn't going to accept this.

"Helix!" Shiv called out.

The orc instantly appeared, popping out halfway from Shiv's cape. They were both bathed in a dense layer of smoke, and the Deathless began pumping out his Creeping Void in a small radius as well. That would keep them from getting noticed in case any on-campus security or the Prismatic Guard teleported in. Shiv felt a flash of Biomancy mana singe his field and realized Helix was casting as well.

"This is a calculated attack, as we assumed," the orc said, sounding more fascinated than horrified. "And the Pyromancy here, well, this is a surprise... It's not a pure Pyromancy spell."

"What do you mean?" Shiv asked.

"I mean, it is partially entwined with a bit of Geomancy and Biomancy as well. It combusted practically every bit of matter in the building. Everything the flames touch, they swallow immediately. If it's a solid, it's a hyperconductor for the flames. Quite a brutal thing to shape upon a group of hapless students. Wasteful too. Again, just poison the food. This is so much wasted power."

Just then, Shiv felt the squeezing pressure of a teleportation. He saw the shapes of beret-wearing milita blinking in behind him and grunted. "We're going in deeper," he said. He didn't wait for Helix to respond. He began to step forward, harnessing more Overflow Tides to rip a path open before him.

As he snapped through bars of reinforced metal and shredded through collapsing walls, the Deathless crashed into the first dorm room, positioned along the westmost exterior of the building. There, he winced as he saw two charred bodies flash-fried into their beds. The only reason he could tell that the things they lay upon were beds at all was that the general shape of the frames had been preserved. The bathroom was a charred mess, and the rest of the space was indistinguishable as well. Many students had likely died without ever knowing what killed them. Shiv shook his head and pressed on. Sometimes you just had no chance at all. The world wanted you to die, and there was nothing you could do about it.

Not unless you were powerful enough of a Pathbearer.

Not unless you fed from death like it was a refreshing nectar.

As he continued tearing through room after room, Shiv never took his hand away from the walls. He kept his grip on one surface at all times, and he also channeled his Shapeless Tides through his feet, spreading them out along the base of the building. He could hear coughing, and as he whipped a head of his mana hydra in the direction of the sound, he realized there was someone still alive that he hadn't noticed because of just how faint their vitality signature was. Shiv assimilated their injuries into his Aegis, and he made his way toward them.

Backhanding the wall into dust, he found himself looking down at a boy whose armor was half-melted around his body. He couldn't make out any of the student's details because he was covered entirely in soot and ash. This one had been both fortunate and smart enough to survive the initial explosion and then throw himself in the large tub within his bathroom. That probably kept him alive longer than most of his peers who lived in the perimeter dorms wrapping around the west side of the building.

Shiv reached down and called for Helix to move the boy into his cape. The orc made some kind of sarcastic response as he grabbed the boy, mocking his lacking constitution, but Shiv wasn't listening. He had too many things to focus on at once.

He received a message from Adam just then, but he didn't have time to read it. Shiv had intended to send Adam something, but when he got into the flow of fighting the fire, keeping the building from collapsing, and mending the injuries of the students, it all became a bit too much.

Multi-Tasking 38 > 40

Shiv pressed on. Now, he used his Pyromancy as well. It wasn't very powerful, but it still gave him a sense of where the fire magic was most active. And he followed that down into the dorm's basement.

He dropped through an opening burned into the ground and clawed a long gash along the right walls so he could keep pumping more tides through the building. Doing so, he briefly suffered a lapse in concentration, and the section of the upper floors crashed inward. He grunted and halted in place. He focused more on keeping the building together. "Godsdamn it! Godsdamn Multi-Tasking! Come on!"

He poured his anger into his Multi-Tasking Skill using his Feat and felt his mind surge from one thought to another, working much faster than normally.

Multi-Tasking 40 > 41

He reached blindly upward using his mana hydra, but Helix tutted at him. "You're still swinging it like a limb. Use it with flexibility. Thread your field through from floor to floor."

"Bit hard to do when I'm trying to focus on eight different things at once," Shiv snapped mentally. "You could offer some help."

"Why do you think most of the children in this building are still alive, Insul?" Helix asked with a faint sneer in his voice. "Who do you think is keeping their blood flowing, keeping their organs working, keeping their brains functional? With the fire this intense and the building filled with Initiates and a few Adepts, most of whom lack any kind of respectable Magical Resistance or Toughness, a rather suspicious amount of survivors still remain, wouldn't you say?"

Instead of feeling pleased, Shiv simply clenched his jaw tighter. "So, any chance you're going to heal them completely?"

"That would deplete the point of this exercise."

"Exercise?!" Shiv nearly shouted.

"It is indeed a training opportunity. You're observing a great many burns and crystalizing flame-based wounds you can study later. And on top of that, you need more focus: you're going in the wrong direction."

"Fuck!" Shiv hissed.

He stopped talking to Helix and focused more on his Pyromancy. A section of the space behind him caved in, and Shiv tried to recover as a few of his Overflow Tides snaked in that direction of the instability. But then another section of the building began groaning, and he had to redirect his tides once more.

It's like trying to hold a cup of shattered glass together, Shiv snarled to himself. Just keeps breaking over and over again. Another three vitality signatures winked out, and that cut his complaining short.

He was about to advance toward where the Pyromancy mana seemed the thickest. But then a massive blast enveloped the bottom of the dorm. A surging beam of flame shot through the wall directly to Shiv's left, and it came so fast and abruptly that he barely responded in time. He swung his arm up on reflex, and some of his Innate Tides surged upward at an angle. He backhanded a blast away from him and tore through the supports on his left, leaving a molten chasm where steel and concrete used to exist.

Inertial Overdrive 180 > 181

Pyromancy 18 > 19

Multi-Tasking 41 > 42

That was deliberate, Shiv realized instantly. The bastard responsible is still here.

The sudden ambush, paired with Shiv's split focus caused another cascading collapse. He felt more deaths around him. His Vitaemancy tasted every demise like it was a hit of coldness splashing upon his being, and Shiv's frustration reached new heights. A mesh of pain pulsated within his skull, and his Multi-Tasking was driven to the limit.

The Deathless moved in the direction of the attack now, and he saw a glistening signature. Their life was strong and unaffected by the flame. There was also another signature not far away from them. It seemed like the stronger one was chasing the weaker, and they were both heading in Shiv's direction. He felt a tugging sensation in his gut. Whoever these two signatures were, they were likely connected to the fire.

Shiv didn't know the layout of the building. He didn't care either way. Unlike the other students, he barreled through walls, ripped through metal as if it was tissue, and when he blasted through a final threshold of heat-weakened cement, Shiv laid eyes on the culprit behind the mass murder for the first time.

Chapter 224 (II) Fire

Fire

Dense fingers of smoke curled around his eyes, but with a wave of his hand, he cleaved an opening into the obfuscation.

He was inside a study of some kind. There was a glass wall to his left, a burning door to his right, and in front of him, lying upon the pieces of a splintered table, was a weakly groaning girl with a horrific set of burns trailing down her lower back and left leg.

Just a few steps away from her stood a tall, thin figure who was breathing heavily, breaking chunks of frost off his body with his hands.

His features were hidden by a molten mask, and it gleamed brightly, as if it had just been pulled out of a forge. The rest of the man's body was shrouded by smoke and ash as well, and a trilling chain of spell patterns connected him to the exposed metal supports jutting out from the ceiling of the room. He coiled the pattern around his finger as if a man tightening a chain, turning it into a ball, and with a sudden rush of power, the room grew brighter as well.

"You stupid little bitch," the man hissed. "If only you'd stayed—" His words came to a halt as he finally noticed the intruder for the first time, and as soon as he did, Shiv's body flashed white as the Hidden World Quest notification activated.

"You start this fire?" Shiv grunted.

"Who the hells—"

"I asked you: Did you start this fire?" Shiv said calmly, his urge to commit extreme violence hidden.

A slight chain of fear flowed from the man to Shiv, and he seemed surprised. It didn't last. He slashed out with a cutting gesture, and a wave of splitting heat whipped through the air, the spell tearing across the room in a fraction of a fraction of a second.

It might as well have been crawling through mud when it came to Shiv. His Inertial Overdrive Skill roared with a violent fervor. Shiv didn't bother dodging. He shattered the spell with a jab, and then he was on the Pyromancer.

The man flinched back, stunned that his magic had been undone so casually, and barely able to react to the Deathless's sudden encroachment. He pulled out a saber from thin air, the blade manifesting in a surge of Pyromancy. The denseness of the man's field revealed itself right then, and it shaped itself into a layer of molten plate around his body.

Ah, Heroic-Tier, Shiv thought derisively. I'm so felling scared. What am I going to even do with you?

The man aimed an arcing cut at Shiv. He barely got to move his arm before Shiv drove a descending elbow down on his left shoulder. A loud snap echoed through the room, and the Pyromancer screamed. His molten armor burst apart in a spray of ash and shattering alloy. His fire-forged sword fell from his hand and dissipated. He tried to shape another blade using the molten substance of his armor, but then Shiv slammed his left hand on the back of the man's head and established a collar tie.

A blast of force and clashing mana rippled through the room as Shiv clubbed the back of the Pyromancer's head. The spell chain connecting the man to the mana flowing through the building sputtered out, and the Deathless focused his tides. He bade them to collapse inward around the man's head, and the Pyromancer's helmet shattered like rotten wood greeted by a falling axe.

Revealed beneath the blazing alloy was a man Shiv didn't recognize. He screamed as pieces of glinting metal embedded themselves into his flesh. The scream was cut off as Shiv slammed a knee into his testicles, bursting both. He bent down to vomit. Shiv spiked his head through the ground, offering him the bliss of unconsciousness instead.

As the Pyromancer went still in the rubble, every flame engulfed in the building suddenly cut out. Thereafter, all that remained were rising waves of dust and steam. Shiv looked about, trying to sense if any fire still lingered. None did.

He swept his mana hydra through the building once more. He froze time, waiting, using every moment he could to heal even more people. But the moment he did, a few more vitality signatures winked out. A thought passed through Shiv's mind, an enticing thought, for him to put his foot down and simply pulp the man's skull. He decided against it. He wanted to know why someone would burn down an entire dorm and, more importantly, why he was trying to kill this girl specifically.

Looks like we got someone else we need to interrogate, he thought to himself. He directed his Aegis of Assimilation and coiled a hydra head around the man's body. He fused a layer of flesh around the Pyromancer, sculpting him within a cocoon. The biomass was harvested from Shiv's homunculus, and it likely wouldn't stand up to a sudden surge of Heroic-Tier Pyromancy, but Shiv would leave the man in Helix's charge.

In the meantime, he had a building to keep standing, at least until all the students were evacuated. As another wave of counter-Chronomancy arrived, Shiv deactivated his temporal shell and reached out using his Biomancy. He ripped the wounds away from the downed girl nearby, and he slammed both hands into the wall to his right. He didn't need to focus on the fire anymore, but the smoke was also lethal.

Shiv closed his eyes, ignored the world, ignored all sounds, all senses, even Helix's complaining. He directed his vectors, sent them swimming all the way up to the very top of the building, passing through broken strips of rebar, melted matter, and the shaking, coughing bodies of students. Then, with a sudden twist of kinetic energy, they activated. They ripped the floor of the dorm room asunder, allowing the blackness choking the air to billow free up into the night sky.

Multi-Tasking 42 > 43

With that feat, he earned another level in Multi-Tasking and reduced the number of fatalities that were to follow. But many had already perished. A heaviness fell upon Shiv. This entire thing had been a senseless slaughter.

A groan sounded from the downed girl, and Shiv quickly reached down and tossed the Pyromancer into his cape.

"Watch him while you keep the students alive," Shiv barked. "If he does anything, knock him out. Do not kill him. We're going to have to talk to him in a minute. He's the one that started the fire."

"Oh, good, a Hero." Helix chuckled from within the cape. "Another volunteer for our lessons."

The Deathless reached into his cape with his free hand and pulled out his Mask of Stolen Paths again. He slammed it on his head after his helmet unlatched itself, and his Perfect Semblance triggered just in time for the coughing girl to lift her head. She looked up, blinking through the blurry haze of dissipating smoke. She didn't see Shiv. Instead, in his place stood one Marcus Unblood, who seemed as uncertain and terrified as she did.

Marcus leaned hard against the walls, and his legs were quivering. He didn't know if he was putting up too much of an act, but it was best to exaggerate in times like these, to make up for deficiencies in his skill.

Acting 16 > 17

"Ah, what... what happened?" The girl rubbed at her face. Despite the fire, her hair and body seemed mostly untouched. Waves of strange cold radiated out from her, and she seemed like a spot of snow amidst a garden claimed by soot. Her skin, her hair, even her lips were unnaturally pale. She was of whiteness that stung Shiv's eyes to look at. She was beyond albino. If you had to compare her to something, it would be the pieces of the broken moon drifting in the sky above. She reminded him a bit of Uva.

"There was a fire," Shiv stammered, playing up Marcus's shock. "A big fire engulfed your dorm, and I saw you... You fell over, and I pulled you here, so that you didn't get burned. Wouldn't—w-wouldn't get burned."

She blinked at him, and her eyes flashed brightly, the color of an all-encompassing winter. Something about that made Shiv think of... Andra. The coldness in the room grew exponentially. A wave of visible Cryomancy erupted from the girl, and sprawling tendrils of ice began to coil through the flame-eaten space.

She looked around, her breath hitching, her heart rate accelerating. "Where... where is he? He was..."

"Where's who?" Shiv said, playing dumb. "There was no one following me. I didn't see anyone. There was someone... He probably got swallowed by the flames. It was... it was pretty bad."

The girl stared at him, and there was a flicker in her eyes; confusion, a hint of disbelief.

Not that good at this, am I? Shiv thought to himself.

But then the girl shook herself and rose from the floor. The ceiling above her groaned, and part of it broke apart, metal and concrete buckling under the dorm's succumbing weight.

"We need to get out of here," she said. "This is... The building's going to come down."

"The notification says we're to shelter in place."

"We can't!" the girl cried aloud. "He's still after me! I need to... We both need to leave before he finds us!"

"Who?" Shiv almost shouted. "Listen, you're clearly in shock. Let's just... Let's just wait for campus security to arrive. They'll be here any moment."

The girl tried to get up, but she groaned and nearly fell over. "I don't have any time! I can't stay—they found me! And we can't trust them! They're compromised!"

"Who's compromised?" Shiv's curiosity was piqued. Just his luck that he managed to stumble at first into another conspiracy. He thought about his Non-Sequitur skill, how it didn't give him any vision for this. Now, you're being real selective, aren't you, System?

Then he paused as he considered the possibility that this wasn't his strife or quest, that he might have ended up stumbling into this girl simply by pure coincidence, or because she was also favored in a way. That seemed just as likely as anything else by this point.

Just then, he saw more life signatures blinking out all around. For a moment, Shiv felt dismayed; he thought they were dying. But with the rapid pace they were vanishing, and then suddenly reappearing in the far distance of his Vitaemancy's awareness, he realized they were being teleported out. The Deathless paused, and played the role of terrified, shell-shocked student in anticipation of the Jump Mages' arrival.

Not three seconds later, a crushing pressure filled the room, and three heavily armed Pathbearers suddenly appeared. A wave of water crashed down, hammering both Shiv and the mystery girl, who nearly dropped to the ground from the pressure. Then they were grabbed, and Shiv barely cut his Shapeless Tides in time for the next jump.

"We got him!" one of the academy militia members cried out. "Go, go, go!"

And not a second after, the building began crumbling down, everything inside it folding inward without Shiv holding it up, who felt himself get swallowed and pulled along a narrow spatial tunnel. A few moments later, he burst back into existence and was flung out onto a lawn. Here, hundreds of students gasped and wept. Most of them were still clad in their nightwear, and others were wrapped only in towels.

A sizable contingent of the student body and a few hundred Poly-Magi hovered in the air. A massive spell was being shaped. The coiling strands of a complex Hydromancy spell turned and twisted, forming the shape of a large storm cloud. A second after, a concentrated deluge followed, blasting only the badly incinerated Dragon Dorm. It was too late to do anything, and as the rain fell, the structure succumbed entirely, crashing down in a massive cloud of dust and debris. It reminded him of a picture he'd seen in a book once: the bleached bones of a long-decayed whale, lying dead against a cliffside.

He looked on, speechless and dissatisfied, as the crumbling structure cast a final plume of dust and ash high up into the air, clashing against the falling pour of rain. He felt members from the campus militia pull at him, their berets poking into his peripheral vision, their questions incessant. Someone offered him a jug of water. Shiv took it and poured it over his head rather than drinking it. Couldn't anyway, with his helmet closed.

A snuffle sounded to his left, and he slowly turned, seeing the all-white girl clutching the sides of her head. She was crying and shaking. She ignored the academy militia's attempts to pull her away. On her lips was a repeated phrase: "It's all my fault... It's all my fault..."

Shiv wanted to ask her what was her fault, but he decided against it. Not right now, not when she was still unstable, and not when other people could hear them.

A blaring sound filled the air, and a moment later, a telepathic broadcast swept across the campus.

Attention all students of Phoenix Academy. Please avoid the Dragon Dorm. We repeat: please avoid the Dragon Dorm. The crisis is still considered to be ongoing. Surviving students of the Dragon Dorm, please proceed to your nearest aid station. Students with Biomancy and or surgical expertise, please make yourselves known. Repeat: please make yourselves known.

"Never a crisis without an opportunity," Shiv muttered to himself. Looks like I'm about to get an early peek into what Medic-301 is like.

#### Chapter 225 (I) First-Aid

That which doesn't kill you might leave you crippled mentally, ruined behaviorally, and permanently scarred physically. Any Pathbearer stupid enough to think that surviving in and of itself is strengthening has not been adequately traumatized.

You can recover and surpass who you were before a severe injury or a mental wound, but it takes an act of significant reinforcement. You have to work to rebuild yourself. And that is my greatest complaint about our medical system thus far.

Too often do we, as Biomancers, fill in the gaps where the body has suffered a lack. We relink broken bones, we restore missing skin, we pour flesh into gaping wounds, and then we send our patients on their way. But what of their minds? What of their damaged psyches?

I understand that Psychomancy is an extremely dangerous lure. I am fully aware of the dangers it presents to a whole and cohesive public. However, we are letting a great opportunity slip by us—the opportunity to rebuild the minds of our traumatized heroes. We don't need to use Psychomancy as a thing of vile, corruptive influence, but rather a palliative measure as well.

I put forth my proposal to open a new field of study, a study of psycho-positivity, to see not only the physically crippled restored to function, but also the mentally harmed returned to wholeness.

As healers, we've already sworn to take on the burdens of our patients, so I say let us do it completely. Let us make sure they're fully healed, rather than only halfway mended.

-Hero-Biomancer Javelina Van Erren

225 (I)

First-Aid

Hector Boulevard: You were barely gone for more than a few minutes. What the hells, Shiv?

Adam's message had been repeated for a third time, and Shiv bit back a sigh. He was about to reply when his current patient doubled over and heaved.

There was nothing coming out of her by this point. Still, her body shook and spasmed. He pulled her hair back to make sure that she wouldn't get any sour spittle in its strands. He didn't know her name, didn't know her year, didn't know her Path, didn't know anything about her. All he knew was that he was in charge of her well-being alongside two other volunteers, and that they were to keep an eye on her condition and inform an actual practicing Biomancer if anything went wrong.

Thus far, she appeared fine physically, aside from the constant coughing and vomiting. Shiv knew there were no internal injuries left; he or Helix had peeled them away from her. But where her body remained whole, her mind was a splintered mess.

From what he could gather, she had a roommate, another girl known as Alicia Van Korwin. Alicia was awake when the fire burst into their room. Alicia was a good enough Pyromancer to hold back the flames for a second, allowing Shiv's currently nameless patient to try and escape into their shared shower. But Alicia wasn't that good of a Pyromancer; Alicia didn't make it into the tub herself. Shiv's

patient got to see what was left of her roommate seared into the floorboards when the Jump Mages came to get her.

The two volunteers to Shiv's left and right were both automata. They were both humanoid models that possessed a chassis of reinforced titanium, making them a great deal more durable than most organic students were out of armor.

"It wasn't your fault," the left automaton, its head shaped like the spade of a playing card, said. It brought down a hand to pat the girl on the shoulder, but she barely registered his touch. The other one kept offering her a glass of water, but she simply shook her head as she kept wheezing.

"We were... We were supposed to go to the Small Temples district this morning for a research project... We made plans... We made plans... We made plans..." She repeated that over and over again, as if her mind was caught in a loop.

Shiv looked down at the girl as Psycho-Cartography triggered.

Psycho-Cartography: She is in no state to answer any questions or compose her own thoughts. She's still stuck at a point before the fire. She refuses to move past the trauma right now because denial is most minds' main weapon against sudden and brutal changes.

Is there anything I can do to help her right now? Shiv asked.

Psycho-Cartography: As we have assured her physical well-being, it's best to give her some room to process her loss. The more effective way to treat her is with Psychomancy. With mind magic, you can delve directly into her mind and find the worst of the damage. But that requires a psychotherapist, and

as Uva told us several times before, even she is not suitable for such a task. Being a healer of the mind is as delicate a matter as being a Biomancer specializing in mending minute bodily details.

Shiv grimaced as the shaken girl continued muttering about her plans and classes, talking about how she would hate getting docked for being absent.

So, what, I'm just going to be waiting right now?

Psycho-Cartography: Unless you wish to dedicate a substantial portion of your time to finding out more details about this girl so we can have a complete psychological template of her, yes, you will be waiting.

The nameless girl heaved violently again, and she curled in on herself like a dying spider. Nearby, a loud scream erupted. The automata with Shiv looked in another direction. He didn't. A human student from the dorms was having a psychotic break. Shiv knew that the boy had been holding it in for a while. And as soon as the boy cried out, several other students were swallowed by an atmosphere of hysterics as well.

The tent they were under was cooled by magic and staffed by volunteers working alongside the academy's militia. Members of the militia here wore white berets, and on the side of the hut, there was an insignia of a serpent coiled around a staff. He observed them as much as he watched his own patients.

They wielded their Biomancy as if it were currents of soothing water. They didn't slam it into their patients' bodies; rather, they wrapped it around the wounded and traumatized. The militia Biomancers let their mana sink into the flesh, suffusing gently and scanning the organic architectures of each victim in vivid detail.

As Shiv studied their mana, he also noticed the consistency in the spell shapes they conjured all across the gathered victims. There were some slight variations between their workings, but ultimately, their patterns all mirrored each other: a layer of intricately woven circles made up of countless microspells surrounding a geometric square that radiated with a sheen of dense mana. The square usually ended up embedded within the chest of the patient, and there, it would pulse outward, lighting the rest of the body up. He didn't know if he could memorize the entire spell, but he might be able to shape the square without much difficulty.

Memorization 14 > 15

He began to use it on his current patient, pretending the spell was coming from one of the nearby Biomancers casting many spells at once. He knew she wasn't injured, but this would be good practice for him. He focused his will and slowly mimicked the spells he watched the other healers cast. The square materialized on the surface of one of his mana hydras, but then nearly burst apart as the amount of magic it drew in spiked to ridiculous heights. The Deathless frowned and disentangled the spell shape before something could go wrong.

He regarded the other Biomancers once more and tried to figure out what he was missing. After watching one cast a few more times, he started again. They begin shaping the spell from the outside. The circles and other patterns need to be finished before the square. It's not just some kind of pulsating foundation meant to flood the body with Biomancy; it's also a stabilizer for the spell as a whole. On its own, it'll just keep outputting more mana without any spell patterns that balance it out.

Skill Gained: Magical Theory 1 (Initiate)

He took his time with this attempt, mimicking each pattern in vivid detail. As he worked, a hissed whisper slid into his mind. "You missed a chain," Helix near-snapped.

Shiv observed his forming spell and realized the orc was right. He begrudgingly applied a fix and added a sequence of interwoven symbols he didn't fully understand the meaning of.

Helix hummed aloud in the back of Shiv's mind as he continued probing his work. "This is meant to scan the lungs for any particulates or cancers: a complex diagnosis spell, something that will illuminate the body from the inside out and reveal any maladies it has. It is a well-made spell, I must admit. Whoever came up with it has keen insight into magical theory and a good grasp of their intent."

"A compliment, from you?" Shiv sent telepathically as he worked on finishing the mana construct. "Must be dealing with quite a Biomancer."

"As good as one can expect from a short-lived ape," Helix declared. "Of course, I wouldn't do things this way. This is still away from the true roots of the body's biology by a degree of separation. I would simply go for the blood code and order the body to modulate itself, because that's what the body wants to do, to read over itself. Right now, all the Biomancers are taking up far too much of the burden, and that is not necessary when you can recruit every single cell in the body to fight."

With the final tentative gathering of Biomancy mana, Shiv's spell was complete. It quivered in certain places, and a few patterns winked out. He struggled not to grimace, but then Helix let out a laugh.

Practical Metabiology 46 > 48

Multi-Tasking 43 > 46

Helix tutted. "Wow, look at that. It's stable. Barely. Probably on the verge of collapsing in a few minutes, but still stable. More than I could expect for someone so untrained and without any grounding in proper magical theory."

"So this is good?" Shiv asked.

"Oh, no, it's terrible. Looking upon it fills my stomach with bile. But 'good' is relative."

"So, functional shit," Shiv interpreted.

The orc snorted haughtily. "If you wish to be proud of such a thing."

A smile slowly crept over Shiv's face. Everything was like working in the kitchen to some extent. You started by pursuing that beautiful goal of moving beyond incompetence, making sure your dish wasn't shit, making sure your potatoes were properly diced. And after that, when your baseline was in the 'not shit' category, then you climbed to greatness.

Shiv swelled on these thoughts as he pressed his spell into his patient. Her insides lit up, and her veins, organs, bones, and more were all illuminated in sequence by pulsing surges of crimson mana. She didn't notice at all; she was bent over the bucket again, spitting strings of saliva from her mouth. Her insides radiated with a flaring sheen of brightness, and as he looked over her, she seemed fine. Just as he... wait.

His Awareness snapped to a specific part of her body. There was something stuck in her chest.

The spell was washing through her over and over again. It illuminated each of her internal systems. He managed to peer through her flesh and saw something lodged in her left lung. It was small. He would have missed it without Farsight, but it was there, stuck in the branching blood vessels. "What the hell is that?" he muttered to himself. Helix didn't mention this on purpose.

The two automata helping him leaned in as well. They observed the foreign contaminant revealed by the spell. "It seems that something is in the bloodstream, and that's swirling on the side..." The spade-faced automaton stopped talking, but its fellow bot carried on: "It seems like the vessel's on the verge of rupturing."

The Deathless considered being bold, using his Biomancy field to reach in and pinch out whatever that thing was. But then he recalled how he utterly mangled his homunculus, and with that as a lesson in humility, he sought out a properly trained Biomancer instead.

He called out to a nearby healer wearing her white beret—she seemed to be an older student, and had a floral tattoo descending from her right eye. It glowed with the texture of a focus crystal, and Shiv watched as said eye came alight with magical power, Biomancy flooding her iris.

As she came over, she squinted at the problem from under black bangs. She took a step back, letting out a hissing breath. "Vascular swelling. Probably left over from smoke inhalation." She made the shape of a triangle with her hand, and a stream of Biomancy shot forth, flooding the girl's chest as it tunneled through to the source of the problem.

Shiv watched as the object stuck inside her was drawn out. It resembled a thick clump of sediment, a crystallized smear of ashes. After its extraction, the blood vessel seemed to settle into a restored state.

"That was incredibly dangerous," the militia Biomancer commented. She looked down at a set of tags wrapped around the girl's arm. Another member of the militia had branded her with a series of bracelets. One of them was green, color-coded for her current state of health, and the tag seemed to indicate who her primary physician was. "Damn it, Malcolm! Told you to scan the lungs more carefully. Second one you missed today."

She shook her head, but then gave Shiv an appreciative glance. "Sharp eye, volunteer. You're a Biomancer too?"

"I can't call myself that," he said. "I'm just a first-year. I haven't even started taking any classes yet."

"Ah. A late arrival. Well, this is very good work. If you hadn't caught this, her right lung might have filled with blood. We probably would have been able to save her in time, so it wouldn't have been a fatal matter, but the risk was still there. Also..."

She reached out and snatched the arm of another passing militia Biomancer—a goblin who was sprinting about, face masked with pouring sweat. She quickly whispered something to her comrade, and the goblin nodded before rushing off. "A senior healer is going to conduct a full suite of specialized lung scanning spells soon. That'll see if anyone else has crystallized fragments of ash inside of them."

The militia Biomancer let out a breath of discomfort. "My guess is yes. And that this isn't an alchemical fire."

Shiv's wariness climbed as he wondered if she suspected him; he wanted to hear her reasoning. "What? Why'd you say that?"

"Because crystallized ash usually requires an application of concentrated mana. This doesn't come from someone just breathing in an overwhelming lungful of smoke, but magically conjured smoke at that. It needs to fuse together from sheer mana density."

Shiv felt a reinvigorated urge to drag a certain prisoner out from his cape and beat the man to death, but he held himself back. Need to check my own lungs too, he realized. What kind of bastard dumps crystallized ash fragments in the lungs of a bunch of kids? He only had one target. Why the felling hells was he burning an entire building down?

The Deathless looked over his shoulder and stared across the large tent. About twenty meters away, that pale-skinned girl sat, being tended to by several Biomancers. She'd tried to leave earlier, but she was made to stay and placed under watch. There were several heavily armed members of the academy militia surrounding her, keeping her separated from the other students. The red berets were not healers—they were a mix of Vanguards and Shadows or Thieves if Shiv were to guess.

With how promptly they were assigned to her, that tells me that this girl is special, and the academy knows that. More questions. Can't ask her directly, but—wait, what's that feeling?

A rattling sensation crawled over Shiv's soul, and he realized his Chronomancy field was feeling a matching mana frequency nearby. His eyes widened as he saw a golden silhouette zip through the mess of students in the large tent, diving for the pale-skinned girl with a thin blade in hand.

Chapter 225 (II) First-Aid

First-Aid

Shiv sneered. He halted time. His Inertial Overdrive roared with pleasure and yearned to discharge as Shiv flung himself into the air with his Shapeless Tides. The explosiveness of his momentum shredded his ligaments and unlatched his muscles from his bones. Shiv felt one of his lungs collapse as well. Really need to deal with the problem of moving too fast before my Toughness Skill matches my speed... Better get Multi-Tasking to evolve soon.

He ignored his wounds and spiked himself down on the unknown Chronomancer. The academy's temporal wards smashed down to crush both of them. They never got the chance. Shiv wrapped his still-working right hand around the neck of his adversary and tore them back just as they were about to plunge their blade into the pale-skinned girl's back. Golden mana burst out from the ruined silhouette, showering the Deathless as he cast himself a second back in time.

Shiv blinked back to his original position and dismissed his temporal shell before he found his Chronomancy field ground to dust. Time resumed, and though the tent was awash with wailing students in every direction, littered with moving bodies and flowing Biomancy, a single scream rose above the others. Shiv's head snapped in the direction of his enemy—he knew that cry. That was the howl of someone suffering the full extent of extreme mana strain.

A tall elven student toppled over. Before he went down, vanishing behind a wall of twisting bodies, Shiv saw a white beret fall from the student's head, and a faint glint of Chronomancy bleed off his body.

Shiv licked his lips. Got you.

The militia Biomancer that had come to help Shiv was startled by the sudden cry, as were many others nearby, and she barely responded when Shiv tapped her arm. "I think I just saw someone faint. I need to go check. I'll be back soon."

The Deathless tore off into the crowd before she could stop him. He slipped past and pushed his way through waves of crashing bodies, and he used his Vitaemancy to track his victim-to-be. There were a great deal of life signatures around him, but only one was doubled over the ground in spiritual agony. Only one glowed slightly brighter than most others here.

Assassin. Another one. Someone really felling wants that girl dead.

The Chronomancer was nowhere near the pale-skinned girl. Somehow, he'd cast his Chronomancy field at her from over eight meters away. Despite this, when Shiv caught a glimpse of her face between the gaps in the crowd, she was looking in the direction of the Chronomancer—and there was a naked look of suspicion and fear.

Damn. Girl's got the senses of a hawk. Maybe a Chronomancy Skill herself too. Who is she?

Shiv ducked down and moved quickly. He looked down at the shadows cast by the bodies of the other students and scoffed as he realized the boost offered by the Last Morsel had elapsed. Right. We're sneaking the old-fashioned way.

He used other students for cover and opportunistically snatched up a fallen white beret. By the time he got to the downed elven Chronomancer, there was a crowd forming around him. To Shiv's luck, it seemed like they were just volunteers and other students. The militia had not closed in yet.

"Militia Biomancer," Shiv called aloud, pointing at his beret. "Out of the way. He might be having a seizure. Give him some air."

If nothing else, the students of Phoenix Academy were conscientious. A way opened up before Shiv, and several students who hadn't noticed were pulled aside by their fellows. The Deathless advanced, keeping his head low and moving fast. He saw several other militia Biomancers heading in his direction, but they had Low Adept-Tier Reflexes at best. By the time they got here, he would be long gone, and the Elven Chronomancer would be taking a walk with him.

Shiv reached down and yanked the assassin to his feet. With a vicious jab, he sank his fingers into the base of the man's back and gripped his spine. His leather vest was no impediment, spreading like tissue before the press of a blade. As the elf nearly screamed in pain, Shiv wrapped a mana hydra around him and constricted his airways. He choked instead, and Shiv quickly dragged the elf along.

Inertial Overdrive 181 > 182

"He's choking, he's choking!" Shiv called aloud. "Clear the way, clear the way!"

More students parted before him, but he speared past them before they could get a good look at who he was. The assassin tried to struggle free from Shiv's grasp, who tightened his fingers around the fracturing column of vertebrae within him and pulled his Psychomancy away from Helix, attaching it to his new victim instead.

"Hi. Cute Chronomancy Skill you got there. Start moving those legs."

The elf tried to turn and get a glimpse at Shiv. Shiv almost closed his hand entirely. The elf's spine split in two. His legs went slack, and his body spasmed. Shiv kept the elf's twitches of pain contained using his Aegis of Assimilation. The two of them stumbled between crowds of students, avoiding other members of the militia as an interrogation began.

"That was a piece of spine in your lower back," Shiv explained. "It's broken now. I can fix it. I can put you back together. But if you try to turn and look at me again, I'll reach into your brain. I'll pop one of the vessels there, and I'll leave you for dead. You understand me?"

A snarl of pain leaked over from the elf's mind, but instead of fear, as Shiv had expected, there came a flare of rage. "You have no idea what you just interrupted, you stupid—You have no idea who I represent. You just ended your life."

"Yeah, that's why I took you alive." Shiv yawned. "So you can tell me about who you work for. You, and your friend—the one that started the fire."

Just as quickly as the elf's rage came, it scattered, replaced by a cold, building dread.

"Now that's an appropriate emotion," Shiv said with a low chuckle. "Start talking, friend. Start with the girl. What's her name? Why are you guys going after her? And before you deny anything, I got our mutual friend stored away, so you keep that in mind."

"You have the Young Lord—Release him! You hold a member of House DeGraille prisoner!"

"Buddy, I don't even know what House DeGraille is," Shiv said flatly. "But you do, so you're going to start explaining things to me. Again, start with the girl."

Shiv twisted the broken pieces of spine, and the elf tried to scream again. Shiv pinched his vocal cords tighter with his Biomancy as a response. Blood poured down on the ground, but the Deathless caught it using another mana hydra head. He kept it contained within the wound, and while the elf screamed mentally, physically, he resembled little more than a man having something of a light seizure.

"Alright, alright, alright!" the elf howled. "I'll talk, I'll talk. You... you have no idea what you stumbled into. It's not too late for—"

"That's not what I want to hear," Shiv said. He began moving again, and the elf finally got on track.

"The girl... She's the bastard daughter of Hero-Inquisitor Simeon DeGraille. She was supposed to be dead! Slain! Somehow, she found her way to this school. The damned giants kept her alive..."

"So some noble is trying to kill his bastard daughter," Shiv said flatly. "And the way he decided to go about this is, what, hiring a sloppy assassin to do his work? You felling shits set an entire dorm on fire."

"That wasn't me. That was Alec DeGraille! Young Lord Alec DeGraille. He wasn't supposed to be here. He came to prove himself to his father, trying to regain his favor..."

"...by murdering his bastard sister," Shiv finished. He sighed, already tired of this noble house bullshit.

"To murder that bastard half-breed!" the assassin cried aloud. "She's not human! She has... She has giant's blood in her."

Giant's blood? And Shiv's suspicions began to blossom. He remembered feeling the girl's Cryomancy earlier, how it was like Andras's—like a Jotun's.

"So, humans and giants can crossbreed?" Shiv asked.

"It is not a breeding. It is a sculpting," the assassin snarled. "The Jotun are not born, they're molded from frost and the mingled blood of two—How do you not know this? Who are you?"

"Let's just say I've been missing for a while," Shiv replied. "But enough about me. You keep going. You're telling me that this Hero-Inquisitor sent you to assassinate this girl. But this whole thing got derailed because his idiot son decided the best way to go about killing his half-giant sister was to burn an entire dorm down."

"Yes," the assassin wheezed. A building current of fear flowed out from him and connected to Shiv. "Please, I beg of you, for the sake of your own life, you need to turn away. You need to let me go and finish my task. My life does not matter. Hero-Inquisitor DeGraille has a great many others that he can call upon. He will see the girl cut down before this comes to light. He cannot afford for the truth of her existence to be known to the rest of the Inquisition. You cannot stop him. He will get what he wants. He always does."

Somehow, Shiv didn't really feel that scared of some Hero-Inquisitor. Not after all the nightmares and monsters he'd faced. "Uh-huh. You know, if you're lying, I'll find out, right? Because I think I got young Lord Alec to talk with as well. In fact, I'll have a conversation with him right after this."

The Deathless paused as he observed his quarry. "So, I'm guessing you're probably an Interrogator. Someone working under the Hero-Inquisitor."

The elf flinched mentally. "Who I am—"

"—doesn't matter," Shiv finished for him. "Yeah, guys like you love saying that shit. You're scared. I can feel it. If I let you go, you're gonna try making another attempt on that girl's life, aren't you?"

Deductive Reasoning 8 > 9

"She's not a girl," the interrogator whimpered. "She's an abomination. A half-giant."

"Yeah, and?" Shiv said flatly.

"She serves the Shattered Court! She is an Avatar of the Crone! A crone-to-be! If she's not cut down, someday, she will become a Prophetess!"

"Neat; cool story; I'm sure all the kids who died because of this understand now," Shiv deadpanned. "I don't know much about the Jotun, and I think I'm gonna find out on my own time. Anyway, thanks for the conversation. You turned out to be helpful. But I don't think I'm going to let you stick around to finish things out."

"Wait, wait, wait, no!" the elven Chronomancer screeched.

Shiv reached into the elf's body using his Biomancy and focused on a specific organ. The blood vessels in the elf's lungs swelled. "Shame you ended up inhaling some smoke when you were pulling students out of the building. They'll remember you as a hero. If they can figure out who you are at all. You steal that pin? Ah, I'll let campus security figure that out."

As the blood vessels burst, the elven Chronomancer gagged. Shiv let him drop, but as he did, he mended the wounds he'd inflicted on the man's spine.

A thud came as he hit the grass, and as the assassin lay there, twitching and spasming, Shiv casually tossed the white beret over the succumbing elf's body.

Aegis of Assimilation 118 > 120

After that, the Deathless took a few left turns through the crowd, and as he felt the temporal wards pass over him again, he cast himself ten seconds back in time. From there, he found his way back to his original group and adopted the guise of a weary volunteer.

"Heatstroke," Shiv said with a cough, allowing him to sell his own physical weakness. "No big deal."

The militia Biomancer from earlier blinked at him. "I see. It was quite a scream for heatstroke."

"Yeah, right?" Shiv chuckled. "Surprised me too. Anyway, where were we with her? Is she all right now?"

The nameless girl was back to muttering to herself, but she wasn't coughing so often anymore. The vomiting had ceased as well.

"We'll do another suite of scans on her soon," the Biomancer said. "But aside from what you found, I think she's going to be just fine." The girl eyed Shiv up and down. "Are you enrolled in 301?"

"Uh, yeah," Shiv replied. "Yeah, it seems like an interesting class."

"I think you would be a good fit for it." The militia Biomancer smiled brightly at him and extended her hand. "I'm Maxime Van Stormhalt."

Chapter 225 (III) First-Aid

First-Aid

Shiv froze. He stared down at her hand as if it were a snake being thrown in his face. Shiv coughed awkwardly and finally reached out to clasp her hand. They shook, and the Deathless winced internally. Stormhalt. Of course, just my fucking luck to run into someone from that family again.

"So, uh," Shiv swallowed awkwardly, "is the class gonna be a lot like this?"

"Sometimes less chaotic, sometimes more." Maxime chuckled. There was a twinkle in her eye. "I think if you can handle this, though, you probably will be able to handle the rest as well. Do you have a name, volunteer?"

"I, uh, I'm a first-year! I mean, Marcus Unblood," Shiv stammered.

Acting 17 > 18

"Unblood?" Maxime frowned slightly. "Oh, I'm very sorry to hear that."

It took Shiv a moment to register what she was trying to say. "Oh, yeah, that... uh, you know, we do the best with what we got, right?"

A surprising expression of sympathy crept over her features. "Indeed. And so you know, it's not all champagne and rainbows when you're on the other side. Nobility comes with its own problems."

"Nobility?" Shiv asked.

She nodded. "Let's just say, sometimes you wish you were an Unblood when you're born to certain families."

A loud cry came from another corner of the room, and through the clamour and din, Shiv heard someone howling for Maxime.

"Anyhow, it's good to meet you, Marcus. I hope to see you later tonight. I'll put in a good word with Hero-Biomancer Van Erren for you."

"Van Erren?" Shiv muttered. There was another family name he was familiar with. But she didn't explain anymore. Instead, Maxime was off, moving on to the next patient that needed her.

As Shiv looked on, watching as Maxime vanished in the crowd, he felt someone clap his shoulder. It was one of his fellow volunteers, the spade-faced automaton.

"Nice going, Marcus," the automaton said. "You got something that my scanners missed."

The other automaton, its head shaped like the clubs symbol of a playing card, gave a loud scoff. "Not a significant feat considering the quality of your scanners."

"Do you wish to finish our scuffle from earlier?" the spade-faced automaton asked. "Because I will be glad to educate you in offending me right now."

Its opposite rolled its head in place of its static eyes. "Please. Last time was a fluke."

The two automata sized each other up, and a low groan came from their patient. She lifted her head and stared at Shiv. Her mouth opened and closed several times, and then she whispered, "Water. Can I have some water?"

Psycho-Cartography: Somehow, I think this one might make a full recovery.

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It took two more hours before all the ailing students from the Dragon Dorm were properly shifted to the on-campus hospital. During that time, Shiv executed two more hidden Master-Tier assassins without the girl's knowing, and only relented his watch when the Headmaster himself suddenly materialized and spirited her away. Where Hades Hymn had taken the half-giant girl, Shiv wasn't sure, but one thing was increasingly obvious: He wasn't the only person with a mountain's worth of trouble hounding his ass at Phoenix Academy.

Despite the calamitous event, there was no follow-up notification regarding a suspension of classes or anything of the like.

The on-campus notifications were silent for now, but Shiv kept an eye out. In the meantime, he internally grumbled about how his sightseeing had been ruined again, and how it hadn't been his fault, as the System-favored, this time. Instead, he had a certain Heroic-Tier Inquisitor to blame.

After explaining things to Adam, Shiv found his way back to the coliseum, where Young Lord Alec DeGraille was woken up by a blast of ice-cold water to the face.

He returned to consciousness with a ragged cry, and as he looked around, blinking through bleary eyes, he saw Shiv again, stripped of his perfect semblance, standing before him as a visage of death. The fear chain between them grew stronger, and despite his best attempts, the Young Lord failed to mask his utter terror. Shiv grew larger, his magic grew stronger, and he glared down at the offender who'd killed so many.

Shape of Monstrosity 140 > 142

"Irons is on the way," Adam said from just behind Shiv. He, too, was glaring at the mass murderer, though there was a sense of tension in his body language.

"You wanna just hand him over?" Shiv asked.

"It would be the proper thing to do. A trial will be conducted, an investigation will be underway, and after that... After that, I suspect the Hero-Inquisitor's reputation will take a hit. He might get kicked out of his organization. Maybe."

"What are the odds of him actually being placed in a Rubix Well?"

Adam paused. He looked aside as if trying to calculate the chances.

"The law takes some time," Adam muttered. "The nobility are not immune to punishment."

"You ever read about a Hero-Inquisitor getting put in prison?" Shiv asked, tilting his head. "Because I haven't. And right now, with all the things that are happening around the capital..." The Deathless shrugged. "I'm not dealing with more bullshit assassination attempts, Adam. I'm handling this today. Before classes even begin. We have enough problems: We're not doing defense here."

"So, what are you thinking?" Adam asked.

"My father, he's a very important person!" the Young Lord cried aloud. He tried to summon his flames, but the moment he did, Shiv tugged on his fear chain and seized him by the throat. Young Lord Alec DeGraille gagged. Shiv stared at him as if he were a cockroach peering out from a crack in the wall. Shiv sent a rush of Shapeless Tides through the Young Lord's already mutilated Pyromancy field. Alec shrieked—and his cries only grew louder as Shiv inflicted him with Dread-Tainted, forcing him to experience Daughter's terror on top of his own.

"I think I'm going to be having a conversation with this one's father real soon."

Adam leaned in a bit closer to Shiv. "I don't know about this, Shiv. It's a lot of noise. Assassinating a Hero-Inquisitor..."

"Who said anything about assassinating?" Shiv replied flatly. "We don't need to kill him."

Adam blinked. "You're not going to kill him?"

Shiv laughed darkly. "I really, really want to. However, it would be nicer if he confessed, wouldn't it? To bring this thing to an end. And there's also another conversation I want to be a part of. One between him and his so-called half-daughter. I want to know why a dorm was burned down for this nonsense."

And with that, the Gate Lord's expression grew sour once more. Young Lord Alec DeGraille pawed at Shiv's face, trying to burn his way through Shiv's helmet. The flames he conjured were barely more than sparks, and Shiv ignored them altogether. Slowly, he drew his new "friend" closer and whispered into the Young Lord's right ear.

"Alright, Alec, I'm going to visit your father later. You're going to need to tell me where you guys are staying, how we're going to get there, and what kind of security you have around your house."

"I—" Alec gagged. "You... Let me go... You're going to wish that you were never born after what my family will do to you!"

"Nah, other way around," Shiv replied coldly. "And none of you are going to remember me, anyway. I'm not a very good Psychomancer. Not like a certain lady I know. But I'm good enough that I can find obvious things and crack them, and you don't have the Magical Resistance to stop me. Now. You can cooperate with a whole, intact body, or I'll find another means of persuading you. It's your choice."

Alec's eyes widened, but then he clenched his jaw, and he tried spitting at Shiv. The Deathless turned his head away, and the globule of saliva struck nothing but the wall.

"Alright, then." Shiv jabbed the Young Lord lightly in the stomach. Alec doubled over and heaved a puddle of undigested fish heads all over the floor. "You chose. This isn't going to be fun for you."

Shiv then spun on his heel and walked away from Alex. "Let's go," Shiv said, wrapping an arm around Adam's shoulder. "We probably don't want to hang around for this."

"I thought you were going to interrogate him," Adam said, looking back, uncertain about what they were doing.

"Oh, no, I'm not good at that. I don't like torturing people, Adam. Fighting them? Sure. Killing bastards? Hells yeah. Torturing people? I'd rather spend my time on something nicer. Thankfully, I don't need to do everything on my own."

And from Shiv's cape, Helix emerged, his Biomancy mana flaring around him. He looked down at his new plaything with a look of glee. "I hope you know some homework will come of this, Insul. I will leave his exterior untouched."

Shiv waved him off. "Just make it quick. Otherwise, I'll tell the other orcs, and they'll want to get in on the action too."

A collection of twisting wings stretched out from behind the orc. "Oh, we really can't have that now, can we?"

"W-wait!" Alec cried, his facade of courage crumbling.

"You chose," Shiv growled, not bothering to turn around. "You burned that dorm. You tried to kill that girl. And now the System has given you to me. Nothing is up to you anymore. Nothing."

"Please!" Alec wailed.

Shiv didn't hear the rest. Neither did Adam. They left that section of the maze and left Helix to his devices.

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When they next saw the Young Lord, his flesh was unblemished, and he was most cooperative.

The entire process took less than twenty minutes.

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"Gods damn it! Gods fucking damn it!" Hero-Inquisitor Simeon DeGraille slammed his fist down on his ebonwood desk over and over again, causing wards to flash each time. He vented his rage as he listened to the breaking notifications broadcast through the cube-shaped Diviner slotted into the center of his desk.

Apparently, someone had set fire to one of the dorms at the university. Apparently, there were 47 dead at the Dragon Dorm. And yet, his greatest shame wasn't among them.

It didn't take much deduction on his part to figure out who set the fire or why. Alec...

Simeon had told that stupid boy. He'd told him over and over again that he would handle this matter himself. Alec was already disfavored. Ever since the fiasco at the brothel—with the twins Alec burned to death—the Hero-Inquisitor knew his middle son was a lost cause.

But now, with this... The sheer amount of resources it would take the Hero-Inquisitor to wipe away the evidence would be nigh immeasurable.

And the girl was still alive! That damned useless fuckup couldn't even do one thing right.

But there's still Interrogator Sinjin, the Hero-Inquisitor reminded himself. He leaned back into his chair and let out a breath. Sinjin has never failed me. The moment Sinjin gets a chance, he'll use his Chronomancy and—

The Hero-Inquisitor's senses screamed. There was someone behind him. He could feel their presence with his Dimensionality and Awareness Skill Fusion.

Simeon turned. He shaped a lashing lance from a spark of electric—

Something struck him over the back of the head so hard he felt part of his neck break. Simeon let out a choked cry as his skull broke in several places. His vision swam, and an explosion of light left him briefly blinded. He tried to cry out and signal for help. But the Hero-Inquisitor found himself gagging, desperately trying to catch his breath, as something heavy slammed down on his chest.

He wasn't wearing his armor, so his sternum took the full brunt of the blow, and it turned to parting splinters. Blood filled his mouth, and Simeon's eyes rolled from the torment inflicted on him.

As his sight finally cleared, he found himself staring up at a skull-masked individual. And then the notification appeared in his eyes.

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, 11 months, and 5 days.

Oh, Ascendants... Simeon quailed internally.

"Hero-Inquisitor DeGraille," the figure said. "I'm not very pleased to make your acquaintance, and you're going to hate getting to know me much the same."

DeGrail tried to rise. He summoned his Aerokinetic powers, but as a slicing flood of mana vectors poured down from the Deathless's leg and ripped through the Hero-Inquisitor's Magical Resistance, an explosion of agony tore through him. His suffering was amplified a thousandfold as his remaining mana fields were shredded as well.

The Hero-Inquisitor briefly lost consciousness, but a second later, a blast of cold water struck him in the face, and he gagged, wrenched back into the waking world. "I—what—why—"

"Yeah," the Deathless growled viciously. "That's kind of what I wanted to know, too. Get up, Simeon. You're going on a walk with me. Don't worry, this won't take long—because I'm not putting up with that. I'm going to do everything I can to have a nice and quiet time at the academy, and if it means breaking every bastard noble in the city over my knee to do it, then I'll do so with pleasure."

And with that, the skull-helmeted monster reached out and seized Simeon by the throat. The Hero-Inquisitor tried pinching the ring on his finger—tried sending a distress signal to his eldest daughter and her fellow Interrogators—but found the Heroic-Tier item missing.

"None of that now, Inquisitor." the Deathless chuckled as he pulled Simeon close and tightened his grip. The Hero-Inquisitor groaned as he tried to push the monster away—but his strength... It was titanic. And with each heartbeat, the damned monster seemed to get even stronger.

The unmistakable sting of Psychomancy punched deep into Simeon's mind, and that's when true terror exploded inside him. His Magical Resistance—there was nothing left! Nothing of his mana fields...

"I know all about you. All your little tricks. We're going to be heading to your private anchor now. We'll finish our conversation there. And when everything's clear, you'll be confessing your sins publicly. I'll make sure of it."

And then, the Deathless shoved Simeon into his cape, where the Hero-Inquisitor found three orcs and a goblin waiting to bind him.

"Heh," one of the gray-skins laughed, bending over to get a good look at him. "This one looks tasty."

Simeon promptly wet himself for the first time in decades.

