

PATH OF THE DEATHLESS (BOOK 2 COMPLETED)

1 Pathless

Path

Noun

*A Path is a System-born metaphysical archetype that represents a fundamental truth of existence. Obtaining a Path unlocks an individual's ability to gain empowerment through **Path Skills**, wield true **Magic**, receive **Blessings**, and achieve recognized **Feats** of power or renown.*

*Paths are not inherent; they must be either **earned** by performing a truly great deed or **bestowed** upon an individual by a powerful entity (such as a deity, an ancient spirit, or a comparable power). Without a Path, one is barred from ascension and apotheosis, and bound to the limits of mortality (See: **Pathless**).*

Once a Path is accepted, it cannot be surrendered or rejected.

-Encyclopedia Apocalyptia

1

Pathless

Toughness > 17

Setting himself on fire using his own fire bomb wasn't exactly part of the plan, but so long as the lesser vampire burned too, Shiv was fine with the pain.

The creature thrashed and shrieked, its cries of pain loud enough that it felt like spikes drilling into Shiv's ears. He didn't care. He came here for a single goal—to finally hit that “hundredth lesser vampire slain” milestone and earn himself a Path worth walking.

The monster swung at him, unnaturally long limbs ending with obsidian nails the length of short swords. Shiv barely threw himself under the blow, tucking into a roll and arriving behind the beast. Its mottled, gray skin flared white-hot and spat brilliant embers when kissed by the flame. In the light, he could see just how ugly the creature was. The underside of its jaw was split open and

wide, revealing a bladed tongue and rows of teeth—something akin to a shark in terms of appearance.

More than that, though, he was heartened by its cries of pain.

Rather than trying to kill him, the creature twisted and turned, trying to flee. A mistake. In an instant, Shiv slammed his body into the lesser vampire, driving his shoulder into the back of its knee. A heavy pain spread across his shoulder and down his arm. It felt like slamming himself against a metal post. That was the problem with being Pathless; you only got Common-Tier Skills. That included Physicality, which made you as strong as humanly possible at its highest level. For a *mundane* human. Thing is, mundane humans weren't very strong.

So, Shiv made do with leverage. He pulled hard and even hooked one of his legs ahead of the lesser vampire, sweeping it off its feet and launching it face-first into a sprawl. It let out a wail of displeasure—but that was choked off as he landed hard on its back, dagger drawn to finish this miserable hunt.

His blade fell in a blur. He thrust between the creature's massive ribcage—so thick the bones bulged through its skin. The lesser vampire struggled and kicked with every stab. It was a massive, gangly thing, but that just gave Shiv the advantage up close. Kind of. He'd still die if it got a good hit on him, but at least it had an awkward time reaching its chest. The flames dancing across its

body burned Shiv as well, but unlike the monster, he wasn't one to give up on his prey. Every wound he left sent black blood spraying out. He worked and carved, looking for the monster's heart, trying to keep it steady, only for it to leap up and launch him into—and through the ceiling.

Physicality > 20 [Skill Limit Reached]

A series of pops ran through Shiv's body as he bit back a groan of pain. He might have busted a rib or all of them. Wonderful. At least he got the highest level of Physicality out of this. The highest level of Physicality a Pathless could reach, anyway.

Shiv caught himself before he could fall back down through the hole he just made. He was very quick for a Pathless human. The lesser vampire was far faster. By the time he found himself staring down at the monster, it was looking up at him, fangs bared, ready for another leap.

"Shi—" Shiv threw himself to the side. He rolled over to his left, tumbling over debris and dust as the lesser vampire shot up through the opening it made in the floor beside him and slammed its skull into the wall. It bounced off thereafter with a groan of discomfort, and then it was on him again, claws extended, shooting through the air.

Shiv was halfway to his feet when he found himself dropping to avoid certain death. The lesser vampire's claws slashed past less than an inch from his head. Before he could react, it slammed its legs down into the rotted floorboards, halting itself in place before rearing back to finish Shiv off. He did the only thing he could think of: stab; struggle; fight.

He drove his dagger right under the thing's chest, and more black ichor spilled over him. The blow went deep. The beast shuddered and took a step back. Shiv found himself pulled back to his feet by the monster's momentum—and he didn't waste it. He pushed deeper with his blade—seeking the *popping* that would signal the piercing of its heart. So long as that organ remained intact, the lesser vampire would keep healing.

It swung its claws at him, but he was too close to its body, and its arms were too long. It tried biting him, but before it could open its jaws and swallow his head, *he* bit the vampire first, sinking his teeth into its throat and trying not to swallow.

Good thing I took all those Potions of Resist Vampirism earlier. This would be an awfully stupid thing to do otherwise. On top of being desperate. The monster gagged and twitched. Its cries whistled out through its torn throat, and its blood tasted fouler than the bitterest potion Shiv ever consumed. It stomped forward, pulling Shiv off his feet again, but he kept a hold on his dagger. And he kept driving the blade deeper.

Until he felt it.

The shudder that ran up his arm. The *popping* of the lesser vampire's heart.

At once, the creature shuddered and lost its step. Shiv barely dove out of the way before it toppled over. It landed on its face while he slammed into the wall with his busted ribs. White spots appeared in Shiv's vision as he almost lost his lunch and breakfast. He clawed his way up along the walls as he wheezed, wheeling on the lesser vampire in case it wanted to show him a final burst of fury.

But as he turned, he found it still lying there, twitching, whimpering, barely able to pull itself along the ground. After a few more tries, it just stopped, its breaths coming fast and desperate, the flames on its body burning brighter. Shiv wasn't doing that great himself on the not-burning part, but something about vampires made them more vulnerable to fire. In the light, he could see its bat-like face contorting in misery, blood-red eyes wide with terror.

It was dying. It was dying, and there was nothing it could do to stop it.

Yeah. Just about everyone got that look before the end.

Comparatively, the look on Shiv's face was just the opposite. His burned features were contorted between a grimace and a grin of triumph. One hundred lesser vampires slain as a Pathless over the course of three years. If that wasn't a major deed, he didn't know what counted. His heart pounded fast as excitement took the place of adrenaline.

The System had to give him something for this. It had to. He wondered if he would get the Path of the Slayer for all the monster-killing he'd been doing. Or maybe Shadow, from how much effort he put into stalking the creatures. Maybe Assassin, considering his use of traps and subterfuge—wouldn't be his first choice, but he could make it work.

He just needed a Path. A good one. One meant for combat. That way, he could leave his miserable town and actually live his own life. Be his own person. Earn a reputation unsullied by his parents.

Be somebody—*anybody*, instead of the Pathless he currently was.

So, as boy and lesser vampire both burned, the former waited with a smile on his face while the latter wailed in animalistic laments against its impending death. But after a few moments, the smile faded on Shiv's face, replaced by a confused frown.

He pulled up his current status with a thought.

Name: Tanner “Shiv” Lowe

Age: 18

Race: Human

Path:

None

Feats [0/0]:

None

Skills:

Physicality 20 (Common) [Skill Limit Reached]

Cooking 18 (Common)

Toughness 17 (Common)

Knife Proficiency 17 (Common)

Grappling Proficiency 17 (Common)

Reflexes 16 (Common)

Stealth 15 (Common)

Marksmanship 11 (Common)

Baking 9 (Common)

Intimidation 9 (Common)

Striking Proficiency 9 (Common)

Barter 8 (Common)

Alchemy 2 (Common)

Engineering 1 (Common)

This tale has been pilfered from NovelBin. If found on Amazon, kindly file a report.

Blessings:

None

Curses:

Omenborn - A dark ritual was performed at your birth. You radiate menace and inflict unease on those around you, and someday, the darkness inside you will bear fruit.

The lesser vampire was beginning to smell like a burning pit of waste now. It gave a final, pitiful cry as it ceased its struggles.

“Maybe it's because you're not dead yet...” Shiv said, keeping the embers of hope burning inside him while his skin turned black outside.

Yet, even as the beast went still, its face lost in an expression of despair, nothing came.

No Path.

No Blessing.

Not even a Feat.

One hundred lesser vampires killed over three years as a Pathless. From the time he was fifteen. All those days of preparation, sleepless nights stalking the creatures through the wastes of the old city, hunting them, learning how to mask his scent, avoiding greater dangers...

For nothing.

Well, maybe not nothing, but a few levels of progress for some Common Skills weren't going to change his future. He was still as lost as before, still just a—

The wall beside him blew apart. A sudden surge of power washed past his body as what felt like a massive hand peeled a good portion of the building open like it was a can. Shiv staggered back as dust went flying around him, choking his lungs as he was exposed to the outside. Then came the tell-tale clench of a teleportation spell nearby. Pressure clamped down hard on his body as three figures materialized around him. Before he could react, he suddenly felt himself pressed against the wall with a gauntlet of cold metal wrapped around his neck.

Shiv almost started struggling before he realized that he knew this gauntlet—that he knew this cold. He'd felt this hand around his neck several times over the past few years. As the dust cleared, he found himself staring at a warrior encased in heavy, ice-coated armor. He held Shiv in place with his left—his

grasp impossibly strong—while a massive frozen hammer hovered by his side.

“Floor clear,” another warrior called out. This one was new—Shiv hadn’t seen her before. She wore plain, steel armor. Sword and shield combo. As she continued scanning her surroundings, the last of their team—a large, bronze-shelled automaton draped in a cloak of rustling wind—hovered down through the hole in the ground made by Shiv, and examined the floors below.

A few seconds later, a similar confirmation as the first came from the automaton. “Floors cleared! Nest cleared! Broken Moon... the kid’s done it again. He’s killed them all.”

A long, suffering sigh came from the man holding Shiv. He gestured with his offhand and suddenly, a gust of cold washed over the Pathless boy. At once, the flames eating him died with a hiss, and that was when his wounds started stinging something bad. “Hello, Shiv. Decided to take another trip into the ruins, did we?”

“Yeah,” Shiv said, trying to hide just how much pain he was in. “Decided to complete my hundredth kill after all.”

The ice-armored warrior reached with his free hand and flipped his visor up. Jeffery Tran was an Adept-Tier Pathbearer reassigned to Shiv's little frontline town from the capital a little over four years ago. That was the main reason Shiv found him a bit too clean and pretty. Gleaming eyes. Trimmed mustache. Sculpted cheekbones... All that pomp and circumstance was a bit too much for a tripwire town like Blackedge. Which raised the question of what someone like him did to get exiled from the capital.

Still, Tran was one of the handful of people in their town of fifty thousand who didn't treat Shiv like he was about to hatch a demon, so he took what he could get.

"So," Tran said, eyeing the still-burning lesser vampire in disgust as he sniffed. "Did you finally get the Path you wanted?"

Something twisted inside Shiv. It was an ugly feeling—an ugly pain. For a moment, he found himself envying the dead vampire. At least their problems were over. But the boy swallowed the bitterness and dealt with it. He always dealt with it. "No. Just a few Skill improvements."

Tran did a double-take. "That's it?"

"Yeah?"

“Blessings?”

“Nope.”

Tran hesitated. “Curses?”

“Still just the one.”

“Well. That’s something.”

“Yep. I’m ever so thankful for having only one knife in my gut. There’s always room for more.”

“So, this is the one you guys keep talking about? The *Pathless Omenborn*?”

The steel-armored rookie of the group came by to study Shiv like he was some kind of circus animal. Shiv eyed her suspiciously and found himself guessing at what her Tier was. She deferred to Tran but didn’t seem overly afraid of him. Maybe she was High Initiate? Hard to tell. He wished he had

one of those *Analyze* Skills some people had, but as with everything nice in life, that was only for the Pathbearers. And someone with a good Path at that.

It would also be nice if detailed information surrounding the Paths wasn't so restricted. All skills fell into a Tier. He knew from personal experience that Common was the ceiling for a Pathless. After that came Initiate, and then Adept. The Master Tier likely came after that, but that was the extent of his knowledge.

As far as he could put together, a Pathbearer was ranked based on their highest-Tier skill, though he'd heard mixed things on how that worked from different people.

Frankly, he probably knew a lot less than most people, considering what his parents did.

"Pathless Omenborn," Shiv deadpanned, keeping the sourness out of his voice. "That's what you call me?"

Tran had the decency to look embarrassed. "*I* don't call you that. But..."

“Yeah. I know. Slayers and Pathbearers like gossip. Just like everyone else. Now. Can you let me go? I can’t feel my back anymore and I’m pretty sure most of my ribs are cracked.”

The Adept-Tier Pathbearer did as Shiv asked. As the hand was pulled away, Shiv took a step forward and barely stopped himself from toppling over. His vision spun. His abdomen was a nest of agony. His skin felt like it was still on fire—

“Damn, kid, you’re a mess,” Tran said. “Alice. Healing.”

“What? On him?” the rookie said, sounding uncertain.

Tran narrowed his eyes. “Did that sound like a statement or a request?”

The rookie on Tran’s team—Alice—sighed. She reached into a satchel hanging by her hip and pulled out a Lesser Healing Potion that seemed a bit too big for the bag’s size. “Hey. What’s your Physicality, kid?”

“At the limit,” Shiv muttered, trying to hide just how much pain he was in.

“Twenty? Taint me, that’s high for a Pathless. Well. You probably won’t get cancer from this, but it’s best to check in with a real Biomancer back in town.” She paused. “If you got the gleam for it. The Bio isn’t cheap. Neither is my potion.” She turned to glare at Tran, but he just ignored her.

Her reminding him that he was still just a shitty mortal somehow hurt worse than the burns and the broken bones. He took a swig from the Lesser Healing Potion, forcing it down in one gulp. Immediately, he felt it spreading out from his insides, washing through his veins and supercharging his natural regeneration.

He was going to be ravenously hungry soon as a consequence. This was going to be a pain on his spending. But that was the point of harvesting the lesser vampires for parts. Well. Usually. Now that the *actual Slayers* were here, he couldn’t do that because of “Guild rules and regulations about unlicensed sales of organs.” All excuses for the Pathbearers to hoard the good stuff, really.

As the automaton of the team emerged out of the hole in the ground like a feather, it greeted him. “*Omenborn.*”

“Glide,” Shiv replied. “Catch any new birds recently?” He stared through the massive section of the wall they tore out as he gazed out into the ruins of the

old city. Half-toppled rows of massive skyscrapers and dense complexes carpeted a rising growth of vegetation.

A few kilometers away, the rest of the dead kingdom of Lost Angeles vanished downward in a sheer drop, leading into the Abyss. A bit off to the periphery, an uprooted tectonic plate loomed, blocking Shiv's sight to the sea, the sky, and casting everything in shadow. He could also hear it blunting the crashing waves hammering against the land.

Just another problem to deal with on modern-day Earth.

Across the street, he spotted a woman staring at him from a window and recognized her from the floating dimensional entities dancing around her. And there was the most important member of this Slayer Team: the group's Jump Mage—the one that allowed teams of people to travel into and out of the ruins of the old world without sneaking aboard a transport lift or illegally paragliding off the side like Shiv often did.

High above, his town looked like a blade hanging in the air, looming over the darkness of the abyss and held aloft by layers and rings of complicated spellcraft. Jagged clumps of mithril lined its base, conducting the many spells keeping it afloat while hovering dimensional entities, guards, and automata patrolled its perimeter. Cords carrying massive transport platforms moved resources harvested from the deep Abyss back up to the town.

Shiv stared at Blackedge as his stomach churned. Back home, then. Back home as a failure. Back home as the Omenborn. Still trapped in that flying cage. Trapped by the deeds of his parents. Trapped like the Pathless he was.

Trapped.

All that killing over three years. For nothing.

Nothing at all.

“Tran,” Shiv asked. “Do you think the System might notice if I kill a thousand lesser vampires?”

“No. No, I really don’t. And I don’t know what you can do to change that. You’ve gone further than any other Pathless I know to earn something for yourself. And if it were up to me, I’d bestow a proper combat Path on you. I know you’re good for it. But the Town Lord and the capital... I don’t think

they'll take that risk with you. You know how it is. The world doesn't give a shit about what we want. And most of us aren't powerful enough to disagree."

And that was just it: Pathless weren't powerful. They couldn't go where they wanted. They couldn't live how they wanted. They couldn't be their own masters. If this didn't work—if he couldn't earn a proper Path for himself from the System itself—then his only other choices were to find a Pathbearer that might bestow a combat-oriented Path on him without forcing a Curse of Indenturement on him. And that wasn't likely in Blackedge.

"I think you should go talk to your chef, kid," Tran said. "He told me you have the talent. He told me—I think you should consider just... Being a cook isn't so bad, you know? It could give you options."

Shiv chuckled. "Georges is indentured to the Town Lord. My father and mother killed a lot of people with their ritual during my birth. You know that includes the Town Lord's wife. There's no life where I get a clean Path from anyone here without some nice little shackles fitted for my soul."

And that was the problem with bestowed Paths: They were modified to serve the benefits of the one offering rather than the one receiving.

There was no such thing as free power.

“We all got shackles, Shiv. But I think your road here is run. And I think you know it too.”

Shiv sighed. A beat followed. “So. Since I cleared out the nest—”

“Ha! No. We’re collecting that contract. It was our contract to begin with, anyway. You just decided to be a quest-thief. Come on, kid, I’m not giving you a cut of the mithril. What are you thinking?”

“What about—”

“I already harvested the ones below,” Glide said, speaking in their airy tones. *“The one on this floor is burned.”*

Shiv sighed more deeply. “I really came down here just to burn myself for nothing, didn’t I?”

“Life’s funny that way,” Alice deadpanned. “So. Hey, boss, since we’re done with the nest, and we got our hands on the little psycho, can we get out of

here before the Abyss spawns something strong enough to eat us all? This place is giving me the creeps.”

“Alice, you know that thing you’re doing right now?” Tran asked.

“Talking?”

“*Whining*. Knock it off. We barely did any work. Broken Moon, you rookies get worse every goddamn year.” Tran looked to the Jump Mage and made a quick gesture. A pocket of space opened around them, expanding outward in waves of pressure before folding inward, dragging them in. At the last moment, Tran turned and took a final look at the lesser vampire. He frowned. “Hey, Shiv?”

“Yeah?”

“What the hell did you do to that thing’s neck?”

“I bit it.”

Tran nodded. Then his eyes widened. “You did wh—”

The teleportation spell triggered and drew them in. In seconds, they were across, zipping up through a narrow spatial tunnel back up to Blackedge.