

PATH OF THE DEATHLESS (BOOK 2 COMPLETED)

12 (I) Misconception

50. 100. 200. 500

These are the numbers you should know, for they are the numbers you will know as a Pathbearer. They are the standard level thresholds for achieving Adept, Master, Heroic, and Legendary status for your skills.

For those of you who reach these numbers for your skills, they will evolve to become something greater at the next tier, provided that they are not already of a higher tier quality (see the Skills Tiers chapter for more details).

Upon exceeding these thresholds, your skill will transform based on your experiences. For example, at level 50 an Initiate Marksmanship Skill might become the Adept-Tier Quickshooter—or, in extremely rare cases and should one routinely achieve incredible feats of accuracy from afar—the Master-Tier Horizon Sniper Skill, such as what was achieved by Master Roland Arrow of Blackedge.

Gaining a Skill Evolution multiple tiers in advance of your level threshold is a sign that you have driven yourself hard and have gone beyond your limits time and time again. In extreme cases, there are even those who have gone from an Initiate Skill to Legendary—but the effort behind this progression is usually equally legendary, and not something that can be easily replicated.

Should you achieve a higher tier skill far in advance of its designated leveling threshold, know that you might not be able to evolve it again when it reaches its expected threshold without pushing it substantially further. Still, the benefits to an early spike in power remain.

Should you gain or evolve an existing skill into a Heroic Skill when your average skill level is only fifty or lower, you will find yourself capable of standing against someone who should be, at least skill to skill, your better.

Do whatever you can to gain an edge. The world will not be merciful. So you must be greater to survive the cruelty.

-The Paths of Ascension, Essential Reading at Phoenix Academy of The Yellowstone Republic

Misconception

Shiv turned himself into a walking mass of tumors. He did it over and over again until he dropped dead. He did it well over twenty times while he “*rested*.” The agony was exquisite, the suffering novel, the experience fun.

He started with trying to heal small cuts. He sliced himself with his kitchen knife over and over, then tried to close the cut. He discovered that the damage of a cut was more complex than he imagined. It was just skin and some meat, but all the vessels beneath... Even the skin had so many layers. The meat was muscle and tendon, and all that architecture worked in tandem as well. Now, the good part about healing was that it was *simple*. Shiv used enough Potions of Lesser Regeneration to know they basically supercharged the body’s natural healing to handle wounds. The bad part of these potions—and not knowing what he was doing with Biomancy—was that when you supercharged your biology, it had a tendency to mutate.

Mutations usually meant cancers.

And thus, that was how Shiv started his repeated cancer spiral—by trying to heal a small cut on his arm. He tried several different variations: trying to accelerate his regeneration as much as he could, healing slow and steady, transplanting flesh from a healthy section of his body to the damaged part as a patch. Only the last part did something other than cause a bunch of cancers, but it still hurt, and it left the area less than functional. The bleeding got

plugged up fine, but random fatty tissue and tendons didn't mix well, and Shiv found himself trying to rebuild connections between bones, nerves, and sinews.

This resulted in—as expected—even more cancers.

It made Shiv remember something a Biomancer said to him once after one of his trips down into the ruins. *“The question isn't ‘why cancer,’ but actually ‘why not always cancer.’ The body is a strange thing, and though it's complex, it's almost not exactly smart. If you want a perfect, immortal, self-healing organism, that's going to take a Legendary level of Biomancy at the least along with decades of deep research. That, or you can become a vampire. They don't really get cancers—their blood works in strange ways that keep their body in a perpetual, stable state.”*

Suddenly, Shiv found himself envying the damned high vampire. If that was true, the felling bastard had an unfair advantage. Being able to warp your flesh whatever way you want without all the little bits inside just breaking apart or turning into tumors was *ridiculously* unfair. As Shiv resurrected again, he crawled back ashore and brought in his new haul of shrimps as well. He was slowly emptying out this section of the lake and would likely need to move a bit further up.

So far, he had a bit more of a practical understanding of his body. He kind of knew what connected to where in certain places and what some organs

generally did. What he couldn't do was rapidly regenerate wounds or actively adapt his body in the middle of combat. Still. All the practice and dying paid off. With the focus he applied and his willingness to butcher himself using Biomancy over and over again, his mana field expanded further, with its power and radius extending by increasing amounts each time.

Biomancy > 15

The level gains really dropped off after the fifteenth death. Didn't get anything over the last few attempts. Only one more level with this last one. I think I've either squeezed all I could get from dying to cancer or need to wait. Still, the growth he experienced was inhuman, considering he just got the skill a little while ago. Even if it was slowing down because he was used to dying of cancer, he could spike the skill with other deaths. If he figured out something about how to make diseases, maybe he could infect himself over and over and die that way. Maybe that would advance multiple skills. *I need to get an education. Or a book.*

Another issue with leveling this way was how narrow it was. It didn't help with his Toughness because he wasn't dying due to a lack of it. No other skills were being pressed either. He resolved to keep testing his Biomancy in the meantime—using himself as a training dummy in the process. A bigger, stronger mana field would be helpful regardless. Soon, he might even be able to pop someone like the high vampire did. *That'll be fun.*

He looked at the stone dagger he left in the alcove after telling Valor he intended to take a nap. Valor bid him farewell, but Shiv suspected the person inside the dagger knew he was up to something. Frankly, Valor knew a lot. If they were a Legendary Pathbearer before they got sealed in the dagger, they might know a great deal about Biomancy, too.

If you come across this story on Amazon, it's taken without permission from the author. Report it.

Shiv always intended to pick their mind, but he wanted to do some of his own learning first. Shiv always learned better by doing. It was how he was. Most people didn't want to teach him anyway, and Georges wasn't someone that liked to explain overmuch between finding new and creative ways to insult you first. That made Shiv pause. Maybe he was apprehensive about asking because he'd been punished for trying to do that his entire life.

Well. You gotta break a bad habit at some point.

He exerted his improved Biomancy field and directed it at his many bodies before entering the alcove. Shiv made a downward pressing motion with his hand to direct his intent, and the field danced around him, shaping a spell-pattern. He felt the bodies turn to paste, hearing the bones crunch apart before dissolving into powder. Shiv smirked. Magic was bullshit—but now some of that bullshit was his to use in combat.

“Shiv?

What was that sound?”

“I crushed some shrimp outside with my Biomancy. I was experimenting.”

“That didn’t sound like shrimp, that sounded like around two dozen bodies being ground to paste.”

Shiv just stared at the dagger. Sometimes, he wondered if Valor could see his surroundings after all. “Uh, no. Definitely just shrimp, Valor. I’m pretty sure you’d hear fighting if there were twenty bodies I could turn to paste. *If* I could turn twenty bodies to paste. I just got Biomancy. Not nearly that strong yet.”

A sigh came from the dagger. *“Forgive me, my paranoia has taken hold. The sounds of bodies breaking are very distinct, though. Biomancy is a very neat and focused ability, and so the noises it makes when it warps the flesh are hard to forget.”*

The Deathless opened and closed his mouth. “Valor, you seem to know a lot of noises relating to bodily harm.”

“It comes with experience and age.”

“Are you a Biomancer?”

“Hm. I would not consider myself as such, for I know of people who devoted themselves to the art. Their commitment and understanding dwarfs mine by far. But I do have the skill, though even now it languishes at the summit of Master Tier.”

And now Shiv was glaring at the dagger. “Languishes. At Master Tier. Valor, your words could give a Slayer an aneurysm. I know people who would weep if they made it to Adept.”

“Ah. Forgive me. I suppose it sounded boastful. But we all live from our own perspectives, our own rates of growth and struggles.”

“Yeah. Tell me about it. Anyway, I was wondering... if you would be willing to explain some things about biology to me. I was experimenting on a shrimp to see if I could heal it so I could use the technique on myself, but I just kept giving it cancers.”

“Oh. You’ve encountered the hard problem of lesser regeneration.”

“There’s a name for this?”

“Yes. Everyone who dabbles in Biomancy learns of this. Some even think that cancer is the default state of life, and that evolution is mostly a chain of aberrations continuing on to the very present.”

Shiv didn’t know nearly enough about biology to disagree, so he just grunted. *“Anyhow, this is a difficult issue to overcome most times. Biomancers dedicate years of study to their craft, testing their techniques on cadavers and elderly animals, most times. If they are ethical. The Vampire Elders from the Court of the First Blood used to test on living slaves but eventually outlawed it as well.”*

“They did?” Shiv was surprised. He didn’t expect vampires to care.

“Yes. It was an act of pointless cruelty, and though vampires are often cruel, most of the time they do things for purpose. Tormenting a perfectly good slave to death for practice achievable through dead bodies or other means is wasteful. And if there is anything that the elders there abhor, it is waste.”

“That... makes sense.” And it made the vampires seem more like an actual organization rather than a loose collective of monsters. This was a terrifying thought to Shiv, as he had assumed them to be just really powerful but brutal beasts. Now, it seemed they could be that, but also thinking people who decided things based on policy and preference.

“If you do wish to learn the finer details around Biomancy and even medicine, I can give you advice. But you will have to explain what you are doing in detail. More importantly, you will need to purchase several books in Weave—several rather costly books at that. The Basics of Biology and Anatomy cannot be overlooked. Then you’ll need the Core Medicae. Probably the Odes of Blood and Flesh if you have a strong stomach. That last one is an especially vile book. I would describe it more as a tool for suffering but... it will teach you more about the body and pain than anything else.”

“That sounds intriguing. But how does a book do that to someone? Is it just very hard to read?”

“No. All copies are enchanted with an investiture of Psychomancy that transports the reader into the role of a number of torture victims in the book.”

That sounded... *horrific*. But Shiv was intrigued. “Mind magic really is something. Wait, is there a way I can quickly attune to mind magic? Or defend against it? Like with a Magical Resistance.”

“The former might be easier than the latter for you. As you are already attuned to one magical skill, it shows that you are interested and curious about concepts. You delve into the nature of the world and study. Facing more mind mages is one option. Exposure to mind mages over a period of time and learning about the skill through them increases your chances of getting it. You can also delve deep into psychology and trauma. That one takes much longer though.”

“Why is getting a Magical Resistance Skill harder, though?

“Because it requires you to hate magic to some extent. Or fear it immensely. Just as most magic requires you to have an open mind, Magical Resistance requires you to truly and desperately wish for it to not affect you. And that is quite hard when one is already a mage to some extent.”

Shiv thought of the fire weaver he faced earlier. The spider managed it—so could he. “Alright. Well. Looks like I have a lot to look forward to in Weave. Money is going to be a bit of a problem though. I—” Shiv almost started talking about how he didn’t have much mithril, but thought that the people down here might run on another economic system. “I’m pretty poor.”

“I might be able to help you there. The Composer should be willing to offer you a bit of a stipend for your services if you manage to deliver me successfully.”

“How much?” Shiv asked, curious to learn this place's currency and how much he might be able to make.

“The Weaveresses usually handle money matters for her, and they’re notoriously stingy, but ultimately, you might be able to expect something north of ten thousand shards.”

Shards. Ten thousand. Shiv remembered the former and thought the latter sounded impressive. Ten thousand mithril would be a ridiculous sum of money for him. His annual wage as a chef was barely a thousand. “Alright. I’ll try to remember those books. I’m going to pack up now and break camp.”

“Already? It’s barely been a few hours. You hardly rested.”

Shiv actually hadn’t slept at all. He still felt fine, though. His mental exhaustion from earlier was almost entirely gone, and his body—thanks to his increased Physicality—was even stronger than it was before. Even as a Pathless, Shiv took care to keep his body in peak condition. He needed to if he was going to face threats far stronger and faster than himself; a single mistake was fatal.

And now he learned just how right he was—without preparation and ambushes, he died over and over in so many different ways.

The world was a lethal place.

12 (II)

Misconception

Shiv left the river behind. He filled some of his pouches with all the shrimp he killed, and also noted he still had some jerky. He could eat those on the way in a few hours.

The valley he walked ran long and had a slope to it. There were mushrooms of all colors growing everywhere, and Shiv collected some of them too, including some mendules. He noted the walls of the valley were veined with nightglass, and he caught glimpses of his own reflection. The man who stared back at him was ragged and wild-looking. His chef's outfit was hanging from his body in tatters, revealing a physique that put even his considerable build from a day ago to shame. He was about as muscular as Adam Arrow now, if he were to compare it to anything.

"I would need chems and potions to achieve this as a Pathless," he muttered.

"Admiring your own Physicality?" Valor asked.

"Yeah. Everything comes easier to the Pathbearers, doesn't it?"

“At first. And then everything eventually gets so much harder that most never see it done.”

“See what done?”

“Their Path. They don’t keep walking it. They get tired and worn down and just settle. And then, eventually, something happens to them, and so they pass from the world without knowing who they might have become.”

Something in the dagger’s words ignited a new fear in Shiv. He wanted to see who he would eventually become. “Yeah. That won’t be me. I’ll either have to be cut down on the way, or I’ll make it to the top.”

“Everyone says that at the start. We will see if your determination remains in a hundred years.”

That was a long time. Shiv wondered if he would be well past Master by then. *No. I’m going to go even further. And not nearly take that long.* However strong Roland Arrow was right now, Shiv wanted to be stronger by a magnitude. And someday—maybe even someday soon—he was going to do something Roland couldn’t, and then he was going to rub it in the man’s face.

And this desire crystallized itself inside Shiv. He pushed on harder, with the wind washing over his back and the compass pointing forward. Whatever new dangers lurked beyond his sight, whatever challenges, he would embrace them. He would die facing them. He would rise again and again to prove himself more than worthy. Until they were challenges to him no longer, and then he would move on to the next mountain to climb.

With this, Shiv’s journey settled into a routine. Over the course of the next few days, he ventured downward, emerging from the valley to find himself in a dense marsh. With Valor’s help, he managed to avoid the worst of the sizzleblooms that sprayed acid at those who came too close. Shiv was curious

if the acid could still melt through him, but he decided not to risk his equipment. The spear still had more than a little life left in it.

Crossing through the marsh, Shiv was almost ambushed by a strange monkey-looking creature that had lashing tendrils where its head should have been. After disabling it with his Biomancy, he inspected its body with clinical focus—and sought out Valor's guidance to help him learn what he could. He almost managed to close the wounds he made on the strange monkey too—but as with his previous attempts, things ended with cancer.

The shrimp tasted rather good with some of the new mushrooms he got, too. That was another highlight.

Cooking > 21

By what felt like the third day, Shiv encountered a large group of lesser vampires clawing through an area thick with bioluminescent bushes. He sensed them with his Biomancy, but they remained unaware of him. What followed was another kind of training—the sort he did over the past three years when he was trying to earn a Path the hard way. Shiv stalked the lesser vampires through the foliage, hunting them with his spear and new daggers. With his expanding mana field, he kept track of exactly where they were—and also was prepared to kill them with it at any moment.

Ultimately, that wasn't necessary. His increased awareness of their movement patterns did help him advance his stealth as he slew them though, and quite substantially as well.

Stealth > 21

Knife Proficiency > 19

Spear Proficiency > 4

“And those were all lesser vampires, you say?” Valor asked as Shiv cleaned the tip of his spear. At his feet lay the last lesser vampire, heart pierced precisely from behind. Another benefit of Biomancy—it let him track exactly where his enemies’ organs were.

“Yeah,” Shiv said, grinning slightly at all the monsters he just killed. *Not so dangerous for me to face anymore. At all. I don’t even need fire for you felling bastards. Just my hands.* That was a good feeling: becoming so powerful that old obstacles ceased to be obstacles. He wanted to feel the same way about high vampires someday. *“There’s a lot of them here.”*

“Quite unusual for them to come this deep. We must be fast approaching Weave, and this place is guarded by the Arachnae Order. Any high vampire operating in the area risks capture—and what the Umbrals do to those of the First Blood is quite vicious.”

“Does it got something to do with breeding?”

“How did you know?”

“Something Nomos threatened me with when I spoke to her.”

“Oh. She does that with everyone. It was a habit of hers.”

“I just don’t know why that’s a bad thing.”

Valor paused. *“Shiv, it’s not about someone breeding with you—it’s about you being made a receptacle for breeding. You become a carrier for weaver eggs.”*

Shiv stopped cleaning his knife. “They... they put the eggs in me? The spiders?”

“Yes. Their young need to incubate in a person’s flesh. Well, not necessarily a person, but something intelligent. If you just put them in an animal, they cannot consume the organs needed for a full intellect and become feral.”

“Oh. Broken Moon, that’s gross.”

“Broken Moon indeed. Wait, Shiv, did you meet a surfer at some point? That’s a very Yellowstone Republic-centric curse.”

Ah, shit. “Yeah. Uh, funny story there: a surfer is the reason I’m down here. I kind of got thrown.”

“A surfer cast you down into the Umbral Depths. Well, that’s... New Albion must be getting sloppy for their agents to be so brazen down here.”

Find this and other great novels on the author's preferred platform. Support original creators!

Shiv took a chance and pressed for more information. “I don’t think it’s them. The surfer said something about an attack—something to do with the Necrotech Legions invading the surface again.” A long silence followed. Shiv could hear his heart pump—could feel it in vivid detail. “Valor?”

“That can’t be... They’re not ready. The last war—their treaty with the Auroral Council still stands. Why would they break it now?”

“I think he wasn’t lying. I—I saw that giant serpent—Vicar Sullain—rise up toward the chasm myself. There were others following him.”

Valor’s tone turned severe. *“This isn’t good, Shiv. This isn’t good at all. We must make haste and seek the Composer. She needs to know about this—and inform the rest of the Necrotechs. They will likely not be happy that one of their excommunicated priests is about to start another miserable war in the name of the Great One.”*

Shiv’s mind was reeling. Excommunicated priest? “The vicar isn’t a member of the legions?”

“No. He hasn’t been since he tried breaking the peace treaty between the legions and the Auroral Council.”

“There’s a *peace treaty*? Between the Republic and the *Necrotechs*? What, but—”

“I—yes, all the Five Faiths signed it with the surfacers representatives in attendance. This was—Shiv. Be honest with me, where do you hail from?”

The Deathless went quiet as he cursed himself for letting too much slip. There was just too much that was surprising to him. All his life, he knew the Abyss as a place where the monsters were spawned from, where the legions hid, with their armies preparing to butcher and enslave those on the land. There were tales of Slayers getting lost in the dark and facing indescribable horrors. He was supposed to be in a realm of absolute nightmares, but... it really wasn’t.

It was incredibly lethal and harsh, but it was more like venturing through an extremely hostile wilderness rather than a land meant to break the human spirit.

“Shiv. I am not affiliated with any of the Five Faiths. You are not in danger, I do not judge you. But I want to know—”

“Blackedge,” Shiv muttered. The lie was broken. He couldn’t keep it up anymore. No sense in trying. Time to rip the knife out and see the damage.

“Blackedge? Of the Yellowstone Republic?” Valor paused for a beat. “The one ruled by Roland Arrow.”

“Yeah. That one. I’m... The Umbrals weren’t very happy to see me, and well, all I know about the Abyss is that there are monsters down here. Or there were supposed to be just monsters. I don’t know anything about the Five Faiths or all this other stuff. I thought it was just the Necrotechs and their armies of undead slaves.”

“First off—and this is a word of grave caution—never call a Risen ‘undead.’ That is a slur, and it will end with you dueling someone.”

“It is?”

“Second, they treat slavers worse than the Composer does. The Necrotech Legions are firm adherents to the Eternal Gospel of the Great One. To forcibly bind any being capable of thought is a grave sin that will see you slated for rehabilitation.”

“But... the un—the Risen... How does that—”

“Becoming Risen is a thing of great honor. It represents someone growing to a place of honor and maturity, and that they are ready to ascend beyond being just a creature of the body; to embrace higher rationality.”

"They're like... skeletons," Shiv muttered.

"No. That is a constructed form, and it is not always in the shape of a skeleton. The ritual of the Dichotomously-Linked Soul is something only a seasoned Master has any hope of attempting, and it will bind parts of you into a prepared construct. After that, you can exist in multiple places and multiple forms at the same time. The reason why most Risen are skeletons is symbolic and religious: It is meant to be a statement of defiance against death."

"Death?" Shiv blinked.

"Yes. The Great Enemy. The darkness that awaits."

"I... You sound really passionate about them."

"Because they used to be my people, Shiv. In my heart, they still are, even if most of them have lost their way. We could have—it is important for you to understand, right now, that everything you have learned is a lie. Everything you think you know and that the Republic has told you is a half-truth at best and propaganda regardless."

"I was starting to feel that way when the high vampire started talking to me," Shiv mused to himself. He grimaced. "Listen. I'm sorry I lied—"

"No. It was wise. You couldn't trust me. I cannot blame you for this action. Especially when there are so many here that would likely try and kill you. And not even through any fault of your own. Any surfer found here is usually thought of as an agent of New Albion because of their penchant for inducing civil wars and regime change."

“They... do that.”

“Yes. The Stolen Throne is ruled by an absolute wretch of a woman, and I pray that one day I will get to drive my dagger through her heart for good, instead of just murdering another double.”

Shiv’s head was starting to swell. First he learned that everything he knew was probably a lie, and now there was all this about New Albion. From what little he heard about New Albion on the surface, they seemed to just be some kind of merchant empire that was beneath Yellowstone’s notice.

“Valor. I think I’m going to need to take an early break today.”

“I do not blame you. Find a safe place to rest. There’s a lot I need to explain to you, and not nearly enough time for you to learn everything. You are in graver danger than you might think.”

“I’ve been—” Shiv caught himself before he could give away his final secret—about his Path. “Attacked several times. I’m pretty aware of how much danger I’m in.”

“No. No, you are not. If you have witnessed the vicar attacking Blackedge, and that there is a battle joined, then your presence before the Composer is of equal importance as mine. And if anyone among Sullain’s faction knows you are still alive, they will stop at nothing to cut you down before you can get there.”

For some reason, Shiv thought about the raven-helmed stranger. He was likely the only one aside from Adam Arrow and Georges who knew of Shiv’s abilities right now. And he didn’t seem like he was from the Abyss... Something about him—his mannerisms—was just... It didn’t fit.

Shiv groaned. “Taint me. I—”

The world trembled. The sound of a massive explosion boomed in the distance as a gust of heavy wind rustled the surrounding vegetation. Shiv paused as the tremoring continued, and a faint light spilled through the canopy, dappling shadows over him like the rays of a rising sun.

“Shiv? What’s happening out there? I heard a blast.”

“Yeah,” Shiv swallowed. “Me too. I think—”

Then the real *blastwave* hit him. The weight of a mountain smashed into his body at the speed of a tsunami, and the air itself combusted. Shiv felt his body dissolve into ash in an instant, along with most of his equipment. Only his kitchen knife and Valor’s stone dagger endured, and the former was rapidly turning white-hot.

Shiv had no words for what he just experienced. That explosion was absolutely apocalyptic and came out of nowhere. There was nothing he could have done to anticipate or survive that. Faintly, he could hear Valor shouting his name as he looked around. The lesser vampires were gone. The vegetation was gone. The ground itself was turning into glass. Then suddenly, the flames inverted, rushing back across the land to a single point at the edge of the horizon.

There, high in the air, hovered an enormous beast. Shiv thought it was the size of a small mountain, and it extended four stone-colored wings as an impossible amount of fire converged into a single sphere that drew in all light hovering above its outstretched, clawed hand. Its neck was long, and its features were lizard-like. Most fascinating of all were its eyes—they gleamed like massive gems in the dark. After a while, as the darkness faded, Shiv realized the dragon might actually be wearing a dense layer of rock as armor, and draped over their shoulder was a wicked greataxe that seemed to be made from bone.

Is that... a high dragon? It kind of looks like one from the bestiary.

With powerful wing beats, it hovered before a wound it made within a mountain. There, Shiv saw a large, pulsating doorway that resembled a gap left on the surface of reality, composed of spiderwebs.

“Composer! Come out! My name was Sir-Legend Marikos Valdemar of the Descenders Union! I have shamed my Order. I have disgraced my creed. I have killed the innocent. And now I strike a doorway to your sacred home. Come out! Come out and strike me down! Come out and end my shame! Come out! Give me a death I don’t deserve. Come out! Come out!”

And then, impossibly, the massive dragon began to sob.

Shiv looked on, barely noticing how he was getting colder or how Valor was crying out for him. But he did notice one other thing: His Skill Evolution had finally arrived—and it came with another skill besides.

Skill Evolution: Toughness (Initiate) > Diamond Shell (Adept)

Diamond Shell > 53

New Skill Gained: Foreshadowing 1 (Adept)