

PATH OF THE DEATHLESS (BOOK 2 COMPLETED)

2 Return

And, to celebrate the grand victory won by the Yellowstone Republic over the Necrotech Legions and the impending marriage of his heir, Pathbearer-Adept Adam Arrow, Pathbearer–Master Lord Roland Arrow of Blackedge has declared the grandest Festival of the Eclipse yet.

This year, the festival will run from the heights of Starhawk’s Perch down to Minhall Avenue. Food, beverage, and pleasure will flow as merry waters from the greatest Pathbearer guarding our town and kingdom to the lowliest Pathless toiling tirelessly in determined service.

Chosen as guest-chef for this year’s grand feast is Georges Archambault of the Swan-Eating Toad. In recognition for his years of redemptive service and to shed a light on the plight of the downtrodden, Lord Roland Arrow has decided to reward Georges Archambault with this great privilege!

Let all citizens of the Republic hold him in our esteem and remember that there is no depth of darkness that one can sink to beyond the redemption of light!

Praise be the Yellowstone Republic, and eternally may the flame endure!

-Blackedge Town Paper

2

Return

“—at?” Tran said, stumbling back and away from Shiv. Shiv started laughing, sticking out his tongue slick with vampiric ichor and showing the black blood between his teeth. Getting teleported always felt all kinds of uncomfortable, with how much spatial weirdness was happening, but at least the process was quick. Quick enough for Shiv to mess with Tran a bit before life returned to its usual state of disappointment.

“I did drink several Potions of Resist Vampirism beforehand,” Shiv added, nodding sagely. “Forgot to mention that.”

The other members of Tran’s team were halfway through drawing the weapons or readying a spell before they stopped. Tran sputtered and cursed,

his face raw-red with annoyance. “Godsdammit, Shiv. What the hell kind of joke was that?”

“Funny one,” Shiv chuckled. “Should have seen your face.”

For all her animosity toward him earlier, Alice had the dignity to laugh. “Little shit...”

Shiv grinned. Tran’s frown deepened.

“I see you’re as unpleasant as ever, Omenborn,” the team’s Jump Mage said. She regarded Shiv through narrowed eyes. Lesser Dimensionals of fire, ice, earth, water, and air danced around her body, forming something of a protective aegis. She was, like the typical Jump Mage, clad in a ridiculous amount of armor—most of it seemingly made from tungsten. A narrow slot in her cone-shaped helmet revealed the face of an *elf*. Gaunt features. Pointed ears. Large, purple eyes. She really fit the stereotype, which was made all the more awkward as she wasn’t a natural-born elf. No, Heather Hawgrave was a race-shift. Got that change through some Blessing or another.

Finally, on the top of her helmet was the pointed wizard’s hat of brilliant blue she earned by graduating as an Adept-Tier Pathbearer from Phoenix Academy.

Must be nice having parents that could bestow a Path on you and give you a functional future, Shiv grumbled internally.

“Heather. The hat still looks stupid with your armor.”

She huffed and looked away.

The chamber they were in was layered in moving sigils and interwoven streams of *magic-stuff*. Shiv didn’t know what they were meant for exactly, but he’d been in this chamber enough times to know their general purpose.

Spatial magic was a risky thing. It let people get in places where they weren’t supposed to. Worse, it allowed dangerous *things* getting released in the midst of dense crowds. Even in times of peace after the war between Yellowstone and the Necros from the Abyss had concluded, Blackedge was still a tripwire town—with all the risks a tripwire town presented.

Shiv remembered no less than ten instances of teleportation-based mass casualty events. A plague being dumped into the middle of the town. An assassin-build mithril automaton going on a rampage, ripping through the town’s magi before it detonated itself near the Slayers Guild.

The teleportation anchors inside the guild hall were designed to change that. It was like a focal point for all Jump Mages—or a trap they couldn't avoid. It was also so complicated with its spatial weaving that anyone who tried teleporting here without knowing the exact "formula" usually ended up in a death trap.

The rest of the spellwork lining the inside of the chamber were things associated with purifying diseases, containing blasts, analyzing people, and then flash-frying them should they fail to be vetted. Convenient, neat, and something the veterans of the Abyss War kept griping about not having during their day.

After a brief series of symbols passed through Shiv and the others, confirming they weren't Abyssally Tainted or carrying any actual plagues on them, they were ordered to proceed through several decontamination fields and told to pass through a final checkpoint before they could secure their release.

Shiv dropped most of what he had left in a carrier bin that went through its own set of magic scans. All he had left after his little hunt was a knife and the scavenged leathers. Everything else was used and spent. Before he followed the others into the checkpoint, he gazed at his own reflection in the mirror.

The person that greeted him filled him with unease. He was a little too pale. A bit taller than most people, and quite a bit bigger due to his maxed out Physicality. Beneath his short crop of messy black hair, he studied pitch-black eyes devoid of any irises or pupils and sighed.

Omenborn. Pathless. Whatever his parents were trying to do with that miserable ritual of theirs, it just made him seem like he was someone suffering from the initial stages of the Abyssal Taint. That kept most people away from him. For some, it kept them just far away enough that they could start throwing things at him. That was always a delight.

“Please step through the final checkpoint. Thank you.” The magical speaker outside the clerk’s room returned Shiv to focus. He did as the speaker asked and entered the next room. Once again, he and Slayer Team stood before a bored looking clerk who eyed them all with a sigh.

“So. Omenborn. Did you finally find what you were looking for?” Stanley Ivanchovic muttered. He stamped a series of confirmations into a form and finished verifying the group for release back into town.

“No. I didn’t manage to find any of those dirty he-tai cartoon magazines you like so much this time, either. Sorry.”

Stanley's face turned beet-red. "Dammit, Shiv, don't say that shit in front of other people. They don't need to know that."

"Everyone knows," Tran muttered.

"Yeah, because he keeps telling everyone," Stanley sneered.

Shiv eyed a half-open dirty mag hiding under a messy pile of files and shared a look with Tran. Both he and the Pathbearer shared a faint smirk. After a few stamps and a signature, Stanley looked them all over and coughed. "You're all cleared. But... Shiv, you might want to wait a minute to head through."

"Why?" Shiv asked. "What's wrong? Has Lord Arrow finally decided to finish me off?"

"No. But his son just got back. With his bride-to-be from the capital."

"Adam Arrow is back?" Alice said, her voice high with excitement. "Oh, wow. I thought he wasn't to return for another eight months. Didn't Phoenix Academy just finish their regionals?"

“Yeah,” Stanley chuckled. “And the Young Lord is a bit of a monster. He smashed through everyone. Even took on half a team by himself. He broke through to Adept by the end, too, for multiple of his skills apparently! He finished his Graduation Trials early and is back with his beloved to prepare. He’s even preparing to get married during the Festival of the Eclipse in a few days! It’s wild!”

Tran’s eyes grew wide. “Adept? Already?”

“Yep. And not just one skill. The kid is a beast. He’s got his father’s archery and his mother’s Divine—ah.” Stanley trailed off as he winced at Shiv. “So... on that note, maybe...”

“Just let us out,” Shiv said. “I have a shift to get to at the Swan-Eating Toad. I gotta get there before Chef Georges skins Seymour alive for being too slow with the potatoes again—after letting Georges scream at me first.”

Stanley hesitated. “Alright. But it’s your funeral, Omenborn. Try to keep to the shadows. You’re good at that, right?”

“Yeah,” Shiv snorted. “I’m good at that.”

With everything cleared, Shiv got his dagger back and watched as a sealing sigil winked out over the door leading out of processing. A slight tension flooded his veins. It was like his muscles and bones were turning to lead. But he didn't stop walking, because Shiv played the cards he was dealt. Almost the entire world hated him. He was still Pathless. But he was still in his own corner.

He had to be.

Because there was no one else.

"So, hey, Tran, what if Young Adept Arrow decides to—you know, make the Omenborn here an 'accident,'" Alice asked without a care if Shiv heard her. "Like, the republic's got laws, but still... he's got cause—"

"He's got no cause," Tran almost snapped. He glared at the rookie in his team as he shook his head in disgust. "He *might* be able to get away with killing Shiv." That was a warning. Shiv knew that. "But he has no cause. The kid didn't ask for this. He's not his parents."

“Yet,” Heather said with a dismissive attitude. “The curse in him is still ripe, though. Lord Arrow is beyond kind for letting him live, if you ask me. His biggest problem.”

Shiv smiled grimly as his insides churned with long-dulled resentment. On some level, he knew why others feared him. The curse he carried could mean anything. Even the experts that Lord Roland Arrow brought over from the capital weren’t sure what Shiv’s fate was to be. Most of them couldn’t detect any changes to his body or soul, aside from the pale pigmentation and the black eyes. That just left him even more alienated. No one wants to live next to a potential bomb, after all.

“Lord Roland Arrow’s biggest problem is that he is indecisive,” Shiv grunted. He could feel the Slayer Team looking at him. “He can’t stop fearing me for what I am, for what my parents did. Fine. But he’s too good of a man to just kill me, while he’s also not kind enough to exile me and let me live. He’s not damned by a flaw—he’s damned by his own virtue.” A bitter smile passed over Shiv’s face. “If I were him, I wouldn’t take the risk.”

And that was the ugly truth of it.

Most of the Slayers fell silent and pretended Shiv didn’t say anything. Tran was the only one that had the decency to show his discomfort. And that was always the problem with Tran: He was a good, open-minded guy among

shortsighted power-grubbers. Maybe he knew what it was like to be like Shiv, to be alienated on a level few could understand.

With the pointless talking done, Shiv opened the door and stepped out. Only to nearly run into someone else. The hallway leading into the main lobby of the Slayers Guild was packed full of people of all Paths and races. Slayers and Journalists alike mingled in this space. All of them had their eyes pointed forward, clamoring for a look at the returning Young Lord.

Shiv didn't bother. He immediately started gliding his way through the crowd.

"Hey, Shiv," Tran called out. Shiv looked behind him for a beat. The Pathbearer opened his mouth and shrugged. "Just go see a Bio if you can, okay? Some cancers—they're hard to notice without magic. And it can be too late if you wait too long."

The boy just nodded, and kept on moving.

As he made his way down the Guild Hall, Shiv kept himself small and unassuming—as well as someone of his stature could—while avoiding eye contact to not draw anyone's attention. Most people were inattentive and ignorant if you didn't give them something to look at. That helped him most days. The dagger helped him some others. Shiv raised his head. An artistic

mural depicting Lord Roland Arrow and his team of “Eclipsebreakers” facing off against swarms of abyssal horrors decorated the ceiling.

Roland Arrow and his wife were in the fullest detail among his companions. The former was a lean but well-built man with sharp features, sky-blue eyes, and hair spun from gold. In his hand was the greatbow “Startear.” Legend had it he obtained the weapon by closing a gate on his own. Legends didn’t do Lord Roland Arrow justice. His wife, meanwhile, served double duty and more as his team’s Jump Mage, Diviner, and all-round spellcaster. Her flame-red hair was the only thing Shiv felt comfortable looking at.

There were four other people in their team. All of them were deceased now. But of the four, only two had their faces scratched out entirely. Only two were entirely disfigured and struck from the mural, leaving marred absences that ruined the rest of the work.

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Shiv didn’t know what his parents really looked like. He expected it to stay that way for the rest of his life.

Shiv didn't want to look at Adam Arrow. He really didn't. But, like his father, the boy had a presence most couldn't deny. As Shiv crept between two Slayers, he glimpsed a flash of blood-red hair, of a young man slightly shorter than himself but even stronger of build. There was a girl next to him. Shiv didn't see much of her, only that she was holding a craftsman's hammer. A flick of sky-blue eyes slashed into the crowd, but Shiv was already gone. And he even got something out of this.

Stealth 15 > 16

As the Omenborn slipped out through the grand doorway leading out of the guild at the same time a few people were coming in, he let out a breath he didn't know he was holding, and some of the weight inside him lightened. He kept his head low as he made his way down the steps and looked out over the dense rows of bunker-shaped buildings dotting the lower sections of town. At the center of a residential cluster, he spotted where he needed to go by the massive statue in its corner. A statue depicting a toad swallowing a swan.

The fresh, afternoon air caressed Shiv's skin while the sun was approaching the bend of the horizon. Not quite dinner yet. If he ran, there might be more than enough time to—

"So. You're still alive," a calm but hard voice called out.

Shiv froze at the bottom of the steps, and finally a few of the people streaming into the Guild Hall noticed him. They immediately did the typical thing and started backing away. A tired sigh escaped Shiv as he turned to face the one person he didn't want to run into. But it might've been his hubris to expect an Adept-Tier Pathbearer to not have an ascended awareness skill.

"Young Lord Adam," Shiv said, greeting the Town Lord's son. "You're an Adept now?"

Young Lord Adam Arrow glared down at Shiv. His face was almost entirely a copy of his father's, but his hair? That belonged to his mother. A mother that was murdered by Shiv's parents. Adam would have had a sister too, for that matter, but she never made it out of the womb.

There were people crowding behind the young lord. Most of their chatter praising him and proclaiming his greatness turned to muttered breaths of horror and curses directed toward Shiv.

"Omenborn. Omenborn."

A few of the Slayers licked their lips, as if eager to see a fight. Except it wouldn't be much of a fight. Not between an Adept-Tier Pathbearer and some mortal.

A few seconds passed as the woman Shiv assumed to be Adam's fiancée came to a halt behind him. She looked... *plainer* than Shiv expected. Short, black hair, and wide, brown eyes, with features that leaned toward the cuter side of things. Still, Shiv didn't miss the way she clenched her hammer tighter, or the strange techno-mechanical armor she was wearing.

Two Pathbearers against a lone mortal was even less of a fight.

"Did you earn a Path yet? I'm assuming you just came back from another attempt. Did killing vermin and stray dogs finally get the System to recognize you?"

Slight laughter and mockery followed. Shiv hated the crowd much more than he ever did Adam Arrow. Adam, he understood to some extent. Didn't forgive, but understood. The Young Lord bore a wound that wouldn't stop bleeding. Just like Shiv. Only a shame there was no real revenge to take, only humiliation to inflict.

“Nope,” Shiv said. And that was all there was to it. What else was he supposed to say? There were no winning options here. Not physically. Not psychologically. But if they were expecting Shiv to give them an emotional breakdown for entertainment, they were sorely mistaken.

Slowly, Young Lord Adam Arrow nodded as a look of hateful satisfaction twisted his features. “Good.”

And that was all he had to say before he turned and went back inside the Guild Hall. A few more leering faces and hissed slurs followed Shiv, but most of the attention was back with Adam—the hero triumphing over the monster like in all the stories.

Except Shiv wasn’t the monster. He was just the thing they left behind. The monsters were dead. And there was never making what they did right.

The Omenborn noticed his right hand was shaking and barely held back a snarl. He needed to get better control over himself. It didn’t matter what he felt. If he gave them a reason, they would finish him off. They would be right about him. And that, more than anything, was unacceptable.

So, he kept his mask of indifference on and played the cards he was dealt.

Shiv found Seymour predictably crying in the back alley leading into the kitchen of the Swan-Eating Toad. The small goblin was sniffing while smoking three different brands of cigarettes at the same time. He even took his spectacles off. Chef Georges must have really let him have it today.

“Too many onions again today?” Shiv asked.

Seymour jumped with a yelp and turned to glare at Shiv. The goblin snatched his glasses off the top of the dumpster and put them back on, doing his best to pretend he wasn’t crying. “When are you going to get a new joke?”

“When are you going to stop crying?”

“You’re an asshole, Shiv,” Seymour snapped.

“Get better at cutting. It’s not Georges’s fault you’re terrible at your job. How is he, today?”

“Pissed.”

“I was asking for something specific. It’s not Georges if he isn’t pissed.”

Seymour shrugged. “Well, you know, with all the orders coming in and the festival coming up and Modatha leaving Blackedge...”

“Yeah,” Shiv grunted. Short-staffed. Underpaid. Overstressed. Being a chef was worse than active combat in a number of ways. For one, if you lost a fight, you died, and it wasn’t your problem anymore. Screw up a dish, and you got a two-hour dissertation on why your parents were failed abortions and them not killing themselves was a great sin to the world.

Problem with that speech when it came to Shiv was he might just agree with it.

“I better go in and get changed before he finally makes the rest of the staff quit.”

“Itha, this tainted chicken is so felling raw that if it gets any rawer, the bloody bird will come back to *bloody life* and fly off!”

Chef Georges shouted every single word in the face of the sobbing elf girl, who just looked on, shell-shocked.

The rest of the staff were standing in various corners of the kitchen, facing the walls. Shiv shook his head. Someone ruined the chicken again. Shiv sniffed. And burned the goat too. Not good. Not good at all. Time to draw the beast’s attention.

Shiv entered the kitchen with a casual stride, outfit already on, knives spinning in both hands as he stormed toward his favorite victims: the potatoes. He winced as he saw what he had to work with.

Seymour really botched his job today, he thought. *Damn.*

“Chef. I’m back. Didn’t quite manage to kill myself this time. I’ll start on the potatoes.”

Georges waved Shiv off as he prepared to do his standard “throw plate of bad food against the wall next to the newbie’s head to break their spirit” technique when he froze, did a double-take, and narrowed his eyes at Shiv.

Here we go, Shiv said, twirling his knives and focusing on his task. Well, whatever happened here, it wouldn’t be worse than Adam Arrow.

“Everyone back to work. Don’t shit things up this time. Shiv. Stop. I want to talk with you outside.”

Shiv froze. His heart dropped. Oh, no. This was worse than Adam Arrow. Worse by a lot. Georges didn’t communicate with calm and measured tones unless something terrible was coming. The Omenborn gritted his teeth. Well, now that his desperate attempt at a Path failed, he couldn’t afford to lose this job. Nowhere else would take him. Nowhere near as decent. And Georges put up with quite a few of his absences...

“Shiv. Now.” The head chef’s voice brooked no argument.

Shiv put his knives down beside the mountain of unpeeled potatoes. “Yes, chef.” He glared at the potatoes. “I’ll be back for you bastards. No matter what.”

As he followed Georges outside, he made eye contact with Itha. The elf looked up at him with teary eyes and immediately twisted away, trying not to look at him. She was new. She would learn to ignore him at a distance like most of the others soon enough. That was if she managed to find the strength to stay. He gave her low odds of that.

Shiv and Georges emerged from the rear entrance of the kitchen. Seymour gave a terrified cry and sprinted back in. As the goblin vanished from sight, Shiv prepared to do whatever he could to keep this job. It was one of the few options he had left, after all. “Chef. I’ll work a month for free. I’ll do all the shit-work. I’ll—”

“Stop that. I’m not firing you.” Georges pulled out a smoke from his pocket and lit it with a gesture. Every now and again, Shiv found himself reminded that Georges was a Pathbearer too. Not a combat Pathbearer, but that didn’t stop the man from being able to use magic. “Smoke?”

“No. I got enough cancer bills as it goes.”

Georges shook his head. The chef's dense mane of dirty blonde hair bounced as he did. His face was red from shouting too much, from staying in the kitchen too much, from drinking too much, and from brawling with rowdy customers too much. "You should try out for comedy night, lad. You got a real talent there too."

"Yeah. People everywhere will come see me make jokes," Shiv deadpanned. "The *Omenborn delight*."

"Now, that sounds like a sex thing."

Shiv winced. "Does it?"

"Yeah."

"You think I could have any talent at that?"

"You—Piss off." Georges broke into a smirk as he tore the cigarette out from his mouth and chucked it at Shiv. The expensive *Griffon Desperado* brand smoke splattered into the nearby gutter. "I'm not firing you."

Shiv nodded. "Am I getting pay docked?"

"No. But I'm going to need you to work tomorrow. And the day after that as well."

The Omenborn shrugged. He expected this. The entire city was going to be getting ready for the festival anyway. Shiv knew he was going to be a part of that effort if he didn't die fighting lesser vampires. "Fine. But that's not what you came out to tell me."

"No," Georges said. "I talked to Lord Arrow yesterday."

"What a coincidence. I ran into his son earlier. He's back. He's getting married. He's an Adept too."

Georges grimaced. "Anything happen?"

"About the usual. He stared hatefully at me. Everyone else did the same thing. But he couldn't quite muster up the strength to kill me. He's his father's son."

Georges looked down at the ground as Shiv said that. “Well. I spoke to Lord Arrow. About you.”

“Ah, this’ll be bad,” Shiv said, feeling his stomach tighten again.

“You got a talent. For the knife. For paying attention in the kitchen. You don’t flinch when I yell. You don’t bend or break when things get bad. You’re like... You’re a bloody pillar, kid. You know that? A bloody pillar that I can always rely on when you’re not out there trying to get yourself killed. And you’ll be a good bloody cook if things go right.”

It took Shiv considerably more effort than he would have preferred to swallow the lump in his throat. He wasn’t used to compliments from anyone, and on the other end of the spectrum, Georges never gave any compliments, so this was likely a first for both of them. “If things go right?” Shiv asked.

“I asked Lord Arrow for permission to bestow you a Path,” Georges began carefully. “And he said *no*.”

That hit Shiv harder than he expected. “Huh.”

“You... You got to understand that he... He doesn’t... He’s not a bad man—”

“But that’s not the problem, is it?” Shiv said, clenching and unclenching his fists. His heart was pounding, and the world—it was shrinking to a pinprick. There was so much *frustration* and *anger* inside him, and it flared every time he was told no. None of this was his fault. He didn’t make his parents do what they did. He didn’t ask to be cursed. But these were his cards, and damn did the cards like to mock him. Shiv took a deep breath and kept himself composed. Like a pillar. He was a pillar. He played his hand. “He still can’t decide. He’s still afraid. But he also can’t let go. He’s not nearly bad enough to just kill me. And he’s not nearly noble enough to release me, to let go of this final act of vicarious revenge.”

“I was there. I saw what your parents did. I lived through their failed ritual.”

“Semi-failed,” Shiv said. “The curse is still here. And I know what they did. Everyone keeps telling me. Every year, the papers remind me on the anniversary of the massacre. So what do I do about that?”

Georges stared at Shiv for a moment. “I want you to be Sous Chef for the Festival.”

Shiv blinked. “What?”

“I want you to be Sous Chef for the Festival. In fact, I don’t want anyone else.”

“I—the others—”

“They’ll listen to you. They’ll do it if they want to keep working here. And they’ll do it because you’re a bloody nightmare with those knives. And at the end of the day, I want you to help me finish the courses specifically for Lord Roland Arrow and his family. And the cake for his son and his wife.”

More blinking. Shiv opened and closed his mouth. “I... I don’t know if this is a good idea, Georges. Lord Arrow won’t like this. I don’t even think he’ll allow it.”

“Good thing I won’t tell him until after,” Georges snorted.

Shiv’s mouth gaped at that. “You’re risking a lot—your indenturement contract... What if he punishes you for this?”

“That depends on how good the food we make for him is, doesn’t it?”

Shiv was at a loss for words. “I...”

“Listen. We can’t change the past. The Dawn knows we want to. But we can still do something about the future. If Lord Arrow eats our dish and doesn’t drop dead, he’ll be more likely to think that you aren’t a threat. He might include indenturement or a Curse of Everlasting Nonaggression, but I think we let him accept you as a Chef. I mean... a bloody chef, for crying out loud. What are you going to do with that? Feed him to death?”

Now, it was Shiv staring at Georges like Itha did earlier. “I—” His hand was shaking again.

“What?”

“Georges... I don’t know if I’m worth the risk.”

The Head Chef’s face took on an uncharacteristic look of pity. “Then, make yourself worth it. You can still do that.”

Somehow, Shiv managed to stop the shaking. “Okay. Okay...”

“I know it’s not your first choice of Path—”

“It might be my only option now,” Shiv said with a scoff. “It didn’t work. I killed a hundred of the lesser vamps. Didn’t get anything.”

Georges let out a wheeze. “Yeah, you want to know why?”

“Why?”

“Because there’s no Suicidal Mad Stubborn Bastard Path.”

Shiv laughed. His throat wasn’t used to that.

“Now,” Georges said, clapping his hands together. “We’re behind tonight, yeah, so I’m going to need you to go extra hard on the prep-work.”

The Omenborn licked his lips. “I think I can do that. I’m going to enjoy peeling all those potatoes.”

“And stop saying things like that. It’s bloody creepy.”