

PATH OF THE DEATHLESS (BOOK 2 COMPLETED)

5 (I) Path

It is said that the first Pathbearers after the Integration earned their Paths by entering and closing dimensional gates.

The world's mana density was far lower then, and as such, there were many places in the world that remained devoid of magic and Paths, leaving the ones who lived there to struggle with the old world's demise.

Now, mana—and the System's influence, by extension—has consumed the entirety of post-Integration Earth, and one might earn a Path through deed, gift, or fortune.

Prove yourself. Live to embody an ideal. And step beyond your mortality.

The new world is hard. But we can be harder yet.

-Encyclopedia Apocalyptia

5 (I)

Path

Name: Tanner “Shiv” Lowe

Age: 18

Race: Human

Path:

Deathless

Feats [1/1]: He Who Rises From Ash Eternal

Skills:

Physicality 20 (Common)

Cooking 18 (Common)

Toughness 17 (Common)

Knife Proficiency 17 (Common)

Grappling Proficiency 17 (Common)

Reflexes 17 (Common)

Stealth 16 (Common)

Marksmanship 11 (Common)

Baking 9 (Common)

Intimidation 3 (Common)

Striking Proficiency 9 (Common)

Barter 8 (Common)

Alchemy 2 (Common)

Engineering 1 (Common)

Vitality Drain 1 (Legendary)

Revenant 1 (Unique)

Blessings:

None

Curses:

None

For a good few moments, Shiv just stared at the notification screen. He wasn't sure how he managed to stare, exactly, considering most of his body was little more than crimson soup covering Adam's armor, but stare he did, gawk he did, and feel he did.

After so long, after trying so many things, risking his life on so many hunts and facing so many threats, Shiv finally had a Path.

And all he had to do was die, apparently.

He noticed his curse was gone too, and it didn't take much effort for him to put things together. It seemed it was his Curse stopping him from obtaining a Path—or that a Path was contained in the Curse. How and why, he didn't know, but he had a Path now and... Well, this opened all sorts of other questions, like if his parents' ritual was actually a failure, how Roland Arrow was going to react, and most importantly, how could he still be *here*, considering he was dead?

He was *dead*. Shiv knew he was dead. He felt himself die. His body was gone. He tried to move and—well, with each passing second, he felt himself growing fainter and lighter. The world was slowly going gray around him, and he felt his own presence *lessen*. Shiv heard Georges screaming his name, saw the shell-shocked Adam catch a brutal kick to the chest that sent him flying past the rear garden and tearing through the cobblestones leading to his family castle.

More than that, he could *sense* certain things around him. They had a *warmth*. A warmth he lacked. He was getting colder at an alarming speed, and it was a kind of cold that he couldn't describe. It was like the dying of an inner flame, and a reactive dread clenched his heart.

Still, without a body—

Shiv moved a hand. A *hand*? He “looked” at his “arm” and found himself staring through an almost entirely translucent outline of himself. *Broken Moon*... he tried to mutter. Yet, no words came. No sounds traveled. He could move, but he couldn't speak. This was just... *strange*.

“Pay attention, Young Lord,” the raven-helmed stranger tutted. Adam rose from the cobblestones with a look of absolute fury on his face. A line of red marks marred the Young Lord's right cheek, and his forehead was beginning to swell. Unlike his face, his armor hadn't even taken a scratch despite the

direct kick. Adam certainly took the hit far better than Shiv did. “Oh. There it is. Anger. Rage. Was he someone to you?”

“No,” Adam snarled. “I *hated* him. But he deserved better than this. He deserved better than you.”

“*Deserve?*” the raven laughed. “The only things we deserve are the things we can keep. And your father has kept you in his nest for too long. But then again, you’re the last thing he really has to lose.”

The sounds of battle echoed off from the side, and a feminine cry of pain broke Adam’s focus again. “Isabella!” he cried. That proved to be a mistake.

The raven appeared before Adam and drove a shortsword at the Young Lord’s leg. To Shiv’s surprise, the blade snapped with a deafening crack, and Adam responded by headbutting his enemy. The raven-helmed stranger let out a hiss of pain, and Adam released two arrows right into his chest. Before they could impact, however, the raven burst apart into a spray of black feathers. The arrows struck open air, and mocking applause sounded as the feathers converged back together a few steps away from Adam. The stranger appeared amused. “That hurt. Quite the armor you have. Your father must’ve closed a Legendary Gate to obtain something like that for you. Why, the blade I broke on you was Master-Tier, after all. With enough effort, it should punch through even Heroic armor.”

“Shut up!” Adam roared. He unleashed a salvo of arrows and kept firing. His hand turned to a blur as a stream of cerulean projectiles erupted from his bow. At the same time, two of his three magical hands shot forward to cut the raven down while the shield kept close to his head. Adam moved as he fought, accelerating faster than he ever did before as the fiery wings of a hawk materialized behind him.

The stranger, meanwhile, began deflecting Adam’s attacks with his *broken* blade. He casually stood in place as the Young Lord attacked him from all sides, unleashing larger arrows, teleporting arrows, multiplying arrows, explosive arrows, and many more. The two manifested arms bearing swords barely got within arm's reach of the raven before they were shattered.

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Shiv couldn’t even see the blow that did that. By this point, though, he was dealing with his own problem: His near-invisible translucence was rapidly becoming *nonexistent*. The tips of his fingers were vanishing, and Shiv knew that if he didn’t do something soon, he might somehow die a second time—and not remain thereafter.

Okay, okay, so... He shook himself free from his stunned disbelief and tried to “walk” toward the raven-helmed stranger. To his surprise, he moved through the world as if he were gliding through everything.

Shiv shuddered as one of his newest skills gained a level. *Revenant? Unique?* He had never heard of a Unique-Tier Skill before. Then again, he also didn’t think someone could linger after death. Still, it wasn’t hard to guess that Revenant was the reason why he was still here, and pairing that with the other skill...

Vitality Drain... Legendary... Shiv couldn’t process any of this. Years of being condemned to Pathlessness, and suddenly he had a Unique and a Legendary Skill. It was like a debt owed to him by life was finally coming due.

Now, if there was only a way he could get a detailed description for what these skills did. Well, he could guess so far. Revenant likely meant not dying or staying after death somehow. Vitality Drain had something to do with drawing life force away? Shiv remembered Tran chewing out one of his older teammates about letting the rest of them get hit with a Vitality Erosion curse. Something to do with their life force.

A coldness was working its way to Shiv’s core. He didn’t have long before it got to be too much. He was fading as fast as he could move. But what was he supposed to do when he reached the raven-helmed stranger? He could barely put pressure on the floor—he was weightless. Shiv felt at his own body for his

daggers, but he was little more than a faint silhouette drifting through the world.

Then, he felt it again. The *warmth*. As he got closer to vanishing entirely, fires began to appear around him. Fires stored within the cores of every living person around Shiv. They were all of different levels of brightness and intensity, with some being faint flickers while others crackled like campfires. Adam Arrow's fire was quite bright—like a large bonfire, but next to the raven, he was nothing. Shiv's killer glowed hotter than a burning building—and Shiv had been trapped in more than one of those during his time hunting lesser vampires.

And Shiv wanted that fire—he *needed* that fire. He couldn't survive the cold without it. With a silent cry, he reached into the raven-helmed stranger's flame with his now entirely absent hand—and he *felt* something. A flash passed between them. A surge of heat coursed from the raven into the Shiv, and immediately, he felt *heavier*, like part of his body was returning. The faintness of his silhouette shifted until he was slowly becoming like a shadow imprinted on the world.

Vitality Drain > 2

Shiv could see his limbs again. He was still featureless, like a black mass, but he had the general shape of a person. The feeling of the fires grew duller, but

this close to the raven-helmed stranger, he could still sense the heat, still pull it into himself. Shiv was like a leech. Just touching the flame sent it surging into himself.

Better yet, it had an effect on the raven as well.

“What—” The raven shivered as if he had just been shocked. His momentary lapse in focus caused him to fail a parry, and a series of arrows slammed and shattered against his chest, sending him sprawling across the ground. Shiv, meanwhile, was left in place, and he found himself rapidly fading again without the raven-helmed stranger’s warmth.

The raven drove both his broken shortsword and his intact longsword into the soil, dragging himself to a halt. Parts of his coat were burning, and the corner of his helmet was dented, but aside from that, the man seemed more annoyed than hurt.

This is bullshit, Shiv thought to himself as he rushed to catch the raven. Any of those arrows would have obliterated Shiv a hundred times over. Damned Pathbearer. The former Pathless paused. He remembered he was a Pathbearer now. *Great. Now I’m insulting myself too.*

As he drew close to the raven-helmed stranger, the enemy's head snapped to attention as he finally noticed Shiv. The former Omenborn's nonexistent heart skipped a beat. The enemy could see him.

"What is this? A specter? Are you dabbling in Necromancy now, Young Lord? Where did you learn this? What would your father think?"

His words went unheard by Adam, who fired a continuous tide of arrows at the crow-helmed strangers attacking the other survivors. Shiv remembered Georges being among them just then and found himself glad to see each of the crows held back by the other martial Pathbearers and Adam's to-be-wife—Isabella, Shiv thought her name was.

"No matter," the raven muttered. He rose from his downed state, and the next thing Shiv knew, he had a blade thrust through him. "Begone, spirit. Into the soul cage you go." Shiv looked down and saw a crystalline dagger passing through his chest. He felt a tickling sensation as *something* pulled at him. Some of the shadows that composed Shiv curved toward the blade, but that was about all it did. The raven cocked his head and waved his dagger around as if it was supposed to do something. "What?"

Shiv responded by reaching into the raven-helmed stranger again and sapping his life force.

A cry of discomfort sounded from the mysterious killer, and he stabbed at Shiv using an assortment of other daggers—throwing strange glowing cubes and other baubles at him as well. “What even are you? You should be trapped by now. How are you... How are you sapping my vitality?” Shiv didn’t know, couldn’t reply, and even if he could, he wouldn’t. He just kept draining more of that wonderful warmth, and the heat entered Shiv like water flowed into a cup. The shadows were peeling off his body now. It was like Shiv was breaking out from a cocoon. He could feel the freshness of the air again, and the weight of having a body was beginning to return to him. At the same time, the raven’s eyes flashed behind his visor. “Deathless? What in the Broken Moon is a *Deathless*? There’s no such Path!”

Vitality Drain > 3

Then, with a final rush of fire, something inside Shiv was fully satisfied. A point of stability was reached. The remaining shadows melted off Shiv’s body like crust, and suddenly, he was in the world again, dressed in his chef’s attire, with both hands pressed against the raven-helmed stranger’s chest.

“What?” the raven gasped. His voice was high, and the low, mocking tone they took before turned into something weighed with genuine confusion. “I... How are you... I just killed you...”

“Shiv?” Shiv turned to see Adam staring at him, new arrows half-nocked, his jaw hanging open.

Shiv didn’t know what to say. He was also too full, and he couldn’t drain any more life force from the raven. Ultimately, he just shrugged—and then backhanded the raven-helmed stranger before spitting on them. “That’s for killing me, asshole.”

A full three seconds passed as the raven just stared at Shiv, unable to process what had just happened. Shiv, meanwhile, did his best not to scream, because he most definitely broke his wrist slapping the raven.

The pain didn’t last long, though, because the raven-helmed stranger decided to slap Shiv back. Which promptly turned his head into a puff of red mist. Again, Shiv felt himself die. Again, he remained in place after death, a faint silhouette of the person he was—almost invisible. Again, he could feel the warmth inside himself die, feel the cold rushing in.

Revenant > 2

Toughness > 19

Physicality > 21

Reflexes > 18

Shiv jolted as what felt like a series of explosions went off inside him. It was like the manner of his death was imprinted itself onto his very soul. As the raven-helmed stranger punted Shiv's body away, Shiv immediately reached into the man again and drew as much warmth as he could.

A loud cry rattled out from the raven's throat just as an arrow crashed into his face. The stranger's head snapped back as he cursed. Shiv managed to drain his vitality for a moment longer before the raven burst into feathers and started rushing toward Adam. Shiv chased after him, gliding far behind as the raven reformed next to the Young Lord.

"Enough with the Necromancy," the raven snarled at Adam. He brought two daggers down, but Adam somehow caught the descending blow. The resulting clash of strength caused the ground to crater beneath the two Pathbearers and sent tides of earth and rubble blasting outward. Sharp rocks and dirt speared through Shiv, and he found himself genuinely happy that he was just a Revenant right now. That would have cut him in half normally.

“What... are you even... talking about...” Adam snarled through gritted teeth. He was down on one knee, straining to keep the raven’s blades from getting any closer. Just then, two arms flashed out from his torso, and his bow reformed. He shot the raven right between the legs with a heavy arrow, and the raven-helmed stranger let out a cry of indignation. “Gah! Little bastard—” His voice turned into a genuine cry of pain as Shiv sank his hands into his back. This was then compounded when Adam launched arrow after arrow into the raven’s groin.

As Shiv drained and Adam struck, the raven twitched between them, his previous arrogance degenerating into genuine outrage. “Enough!” He ragdolled the Young Lord aside with a burst of strength. At the same time, Shiv materialized behind him, bursting out of a cocoon of shadows.

Slowly, the raven turned. He stared at Shiv. Shiv responded by slamming his foot into the man’s groin. The former Omenborn felt a few of his bones crack. The raven didn’t even budge. “What are you? Some kind of summonable spiritual guardian? Wait... Weren’t you Pathless a few minutes ago—”

Shiv kicked the man in the groin with his other foot. Still nothing. “Dammit,” Shiv gasped.

The raven reached out and took him by the shoulder with a gentle hand. “Ah. You kick this way, boy. Let me show you.”

Shiv tried to get away. “No, no, no, wait, wait—”

The raven-helmed bastard drove his foot up and through Shiv’s privates, splitting him clean in half.