

## PATH OF THE DEATHLESS (BOOK 2 COMPLETED)

### 4 Deathless

*When the System arrived and the old world fell, humanity did not break cleanly. The Integration saw the convergence of many creating calamities. Volcanoes roared. The sun flared. The moon shattered. The Earth parted. The seas rose. Dimensional gates opened across the wasteland. Some small enough to be a doorway. Others great enough to swallow old megacities.*

*While some people rose from the ruins of the old world and eventually learned to rebuild or even rise above through the Paths and magics they obtained, others found themselves cast down into a dark place filled with treachery and horror.*

*Not much is fully known about the Necrotech Legions aside from the fact that they dwell in the great Abyss alongside horrors and monsters. What is certain is that their time in the dark has left them deeply changed and warped. No longer can anyone who lives in the Abyss be considered human or any other race. They are touched by the taint and carriers of the abyssal scourge.*

*All attempts at diplomacy between the world above and the dwellers below have ended in tragedy and bloodshed. The only thing the Necrotechs seem to*

*seek from those who remained in the light are their lives and their homes, slaughtering cities and towns with abandon, capturing the survivors and bringing them back down into the dark.*

*For what? This, too, remains unknown. For no one has descended deep enough to find where the taken reside...*

*-On the Necrotech Legions, Yellowstone Republic primary school essential reading*

4

Deathless

“Take the elevator. Protect yourself.” Roland’s burning hawk appeared to sink its talons into his shoulders, and it somehow fused over him, becoming a dense coat of feathered armor, its wings spreading wide like a burning cape. Gone was the blue coat. Faded was the man drowning in indecision and grief. Here was the warrior of legend, the Pathbearer that drove the monsters back into the Abyss. Here was a killer of nightmares.

His fiery cape shivered, and the ground beneath him cracked. “Don’t die, boy. For all the ill that I cannot surrender, I wouldn’t want such a thing for you.” And then the Pathbearer-Master was up in the air, rising like the fiery hawk he had just fused to himself, his arrows climbing with him. Each of the bolts shot off in a different direction. Shiv saw them impact colossal serpents of bone that gored through entire streets and shatter the horrors utterly. He saw them pierce through surrounding buildings, striking only the enemy, gliding between the innocent and the allied.

For a few moments, Shiv just stared on in envy and awe. This was what his parents took away from him. This was what Roland Arrow couldn’t let him have. The truest expression of power. The manifestation of one’s material spirit against the cruelties of the world. The ability to rise beyond all obstacles by strength of the self alone.

Shiv thought of defying the Town Lord in a fit of childish rage. But he pushed that down. There was no sense in risking his life pointlessly, and he needed to find Georges. He needed to make sure his mentor was okay. After that...

“This is an opportunity,” Shiv said. Screams of terror and battle cries echoed from across the city. There was fighting almost on every street, with every Pathbearer facing threats of all forms and sizes. More explosions rose on the horizon, but by now, the Pyromancers in the town were sapping the flames, wrestling them away from the burning buildings for their own use.

Everyone was fighting for Blackedge. What better time to earn a distinction in the eyes of the System than today?

Shiv got on the elevator and felt his stomach drop. Realizing he was unarmed made him feel strangely vulnerable, but he would handle it. *Avoid combat until I can find something. Use my stealth. Get a knife. Keep moving. Make sure Georges is fine. And then...*

And then he would try and help where he could. If he couldn't earn a Path, then perhaps his valor might change the Town Lord's mind regarding his nature. Roland's indecision meant that not all was lost. He could be swayed. Shiv knew it. He *had* to believe it.

By the time he was back in the castle proper, Shiv found himself walking down a hall covered in bodies. More of the dead here were some variation of lesser vampire. He could tell that from their bat-like faces and the fact that fire had been liberally used on them. Parts of the surrounding infrastructure were melting, and elsewhere, Shiv heard the clamor of ongoing battle.

He moved carefully but quickly, using his senses as much as he could. If he ran into any kind of threat right now, he could do little more than struggle and die. Thankfully, it sounded like most of the bloodshed was happening elsewhere.

Shiv didn't know much about the layout of the building he was in, but he remembered the way back to the kitchen, so he started there.

He doubted Georges and the others would hold in place if the fighting was this close, but at least he might find a clue leading to where they were.

As Shiv got closer to the kitchen, however, his blood began to churn. Some of the corpses were skeletal constructs—like the risen dead—and others he could not recognize at all from how badly they were destroyed. Then, there were the Arrow Family Guards. A group of them lay dead against a wall, their heavy blue and gold plate pierced in several places, leaking blood. They were piled just in front of the kitchen, and from what Shiv could tell, it looked like they were making a last stand—or fighting desperately to protect the staff.

A rustling sound came from inside the kitchen. Shiv went stiff. Someone was groaning in pain, cursing to themselves. The Omenborn paused and eyed the other soldiers. He wouldn't be able to get their armor off them. Even if he could, the plate looked heavy enough to crush a Pathless.

What he could scavenge were their weapons. All of them had greatbows carved in the shape of a hawk. Not that useful for Shiv. He lacked the Physicality to draw them and the skill to aim. The soldiers that had large

hammers or swords were also out of the question. Some of those weapons looked magical, and Shiv had about as much magic in him as the skeleton a few feet away still had blood in their body.

But then there were the daggers. Shiv knew how to use those. He took five round-pommeled knives from the fallen soldiers. Even so, he knew his current skill levels would be pretty useless against a proper Pathbearer most times, but it still gave him some kind of option—or at least self-comfort. That mattered more than most would assume in battle.

Before he entered the kitchen, he angled one of his knives past the doorway, using it as a makeshift mirror to get a glimpse of what was inside. What he saw made him clench his jaw. A good portion of the staff had returned after Roland's arrival. And then they were butchered. Most of them lay unmoving on the ground, the white floor now painted with slick, dark red. It was more a slaughterhouse than a kitchen now, and Shiv did his best to distinguish the bodies, trying to see if Georges was among them. Hoping he wasn't.

Then, there was movement. Someone was still alive, wheezing against the vegetable station that Shiv had helped man earlier. It took a few moments to see that this wasn't a chef but a soldier. There seemed to be no one else in the room, so Shiv called out. "Are you the only one that's left?"

The sound of something smashing into and taking a chunk of the nearby doorframe made Shiv doubly glad he called out first. Suddenly stepping out into the open in front of a wounded and likely incoherent Pathbearer was a great way to get killed. Even a Pathbearer throwing a random object could leave a clean hole through someone like Shiv.

“W-who’s there?” the Pathbearer called out. His voice was wet, and he gurgled as he spoke. Shiv didn’t like the sound of that.

“Not an enemy. I was brought here as a chef.”

“A chef?” The soldier coughed. Then he laughed. “Wh—why are you still here, then? Can’t you see there’s a—a bloody war on...”

“I’m going to step out now. Don’t kill me.”

“Can’t anyway. Vision’s too blurry... and I don’t have enough left in me to nock another arrow. I’m done. I’m done.” The guard sounded resigned, and Shiv took a breath before entering the kitchen. He stepped carefully and did his best to avoid the blood. He knew enough about working in places like these to be aware that one could slip easily. Shiv also tried not to step on any of the bodies, but with how many were dead, the act was difficult, and he needed to avoid getting his boots slick.

As he walked, he looked for anyone he could recognize. His heart fell when he saw the fine-moustached chef staring up lifelessly at the ceiling, but there was no Georges. No Georges anywhere.

There was still hope...

Shiv approached the soldier lying against the cooking station with both hands raised and regarded their injuries. The soldier was an elf with a tuft of dark hair. Blood poured from a deep cut above his scalp, and his helmet lay discarded nearby. He narrowed his eyes at Shiv, as if he were unable to properly see in this light. There were several other holes in his armor, and crimson rivers welled out from those openings too.

Everything deepened Shiv's unease. The Arrow Family Guards were heavily armored. Shiv likely couldn't get through all that metal even with all his might. But it seemed like someone opened these soldiers up like they were little more than aluminum cans.

A longbow rested horizontally across the soldier's lap, and each breath the man took was more labored than the last. Something was filling his lungs. That needed to be cleared before a Potion of Regeneration could be used— Shiv knew that from all his trips to the Biomancer. Just a problem: There were



no Biomancers around, and Shiv didn't have nearly enough skill in healing to help this guard.

"Do you have a potion on you?" Shiv asked. "Something for your wounds."

"Used them on my sister," the soldier coughed. A bit of red came out. "It didn't work. She's lying out there with the rest."

Shiv winced. "I'm sorry."

The guard nodded, and he had a faraway look. "Me too."

The Omenborn looked down at the man and rolled his shoulders. The armor was heavy, but... with Shiv's Physicality, he could bear a *lot* of weight for a mortal. And Pathbearers usually weren't much heavier than normal people. "Alright. I'm going to pick you up if I can. I don't really know the layout of the building, but—"

The guard shook his head. "No... no... I'm done." A look of resignation came over him. His gaze was already unfocused. "You should get out of here, chef." The guard reached to his sides and pulled at something. His breastplate popped off as the sides opened, and the guard painfully peeled it off himself.

“Here. Don’t have time to show you how to put on the rest, but this is... is simple. Just wrap it around your body. It’ll close itself. It’s simple. I unequipped it already.”

Shiv stared at the heavy piece of metal. “I don’t think I can bear that much weight.”

The guard chuckled. “N-no weight. It’s light as a feather. Enchanted w-with gravity magic.”

Shiv paused. That was convenient. No wonder some of these guards could move like they were wearing nothing.

“Is the bow—”

The guard shook his head. “You have to pull that. Sorry, chef. Don’t think you have it in you.” He barely had the strength to toss the chestpiece forward. It splashed into a puddle of blood, and Shiv carefully put it on, pushing his arms through and closing it around his body. It snapped shut and tightened to fit his body as the guard explained, but Shiv found himself wondering how he was going to get it off. He didn’t see what the guard pulled or did—

**Equipment Obtained > [Starhawk Arrow Cuirass]**

**Tier: Initiate**

**Condition: Damaged**

**Composition: Titanium**

**Enchantments > Weightless; Size-Fitting; Self-Cleaning; Binding**

**Equip Item to Chest?**

Shiv blinked. He had never seen these System notifications before, but he knew what this was. It was a bound item. Something someone could connect to their soul to keep it from being stolen or forcibly taken from them. It could still be damaged and destroyed, though. Shiv had heard some Slayers talking about upgrading their kit.

**[Starhawk Arrow Cuirass bound as chestpiece]**

Whatever the Omenborn could say about Roland Arrow, he made sure his guards were well-protected. The enchantments likely didn't come cheap.

"What's your name?" Shiv asked, ignoring how some of the blood soaked through his chef's clothes.

"Feather," the guard ground out. "Feather Udenz. Wh—why?"

"So I can tell your family what you did for me."

Feather shook his head. "No family anymore... not since... not since the... ritual. Parents died protecting our Lady. They... failed. I was supposed to protect my sister... Skye... I failed... I failed...I..." And then he was someplace far beyond reach.

Once again, Shiv was damned to face the darkness of his birth. Another family ruined by the ritual. Ruined by the fact of his existence.

*Godsdammit it all.*

“I’m sorry,” Shiv muttered to the guard as he got up. He wiped his feet off on an apron before he left and continued moving. No sense in dwelling on the past now. He needed to find Georges. And then he needed to help the people here. To make whatever he could right.

He wasn’t someone else’s responsibility or fear. He was his own man, damn what his parents did.

Rather than avoiding the sounds of fighting, he followed them, inching closer to the conflict. The air grew colder, and he could feel currents curving around the corner as if a window was open. This was odd, as he was in the middle of the castle, and there shouldn't be any windows around. Shiv reached the end of his corridor and held up his dagger again to peek at what was around the corner. More bodies. More undead. Where were—

A section of the wall exploded beside him. Something heavy tore through the room. The sheer force of the impact launched Shiv off his feet, while what felt like a series of hammers smashed into his borrowed chestpiece. Shiv coughed but rolled with the fall. Years of fighting lesser vampires during his off-time taught him an important lesson: you stay still, you die.

As he clambered back to his feet, he felt himself for injuries. His right shoulder felt like he just rammed it into a wall, and the dust made it hard to see, but otherwise... Fragments of marble and rebar were stuck inside his damaged chestpiece. Shiv swallowed and mentally thanked Feather again. Shrapnel was a deadly problem for someone that lacked the Toughness of a Pathbearer. Following the furrowed path of destruction before him, Shiv found a huge beast with wide fangs and deep-red eyes lying dead with a cerulean arrow in its chest. Its body was the color of mucus, and Shiv worked his memory to recall where he had seen this thing before.

Was this an Abyssal Troll? It looked like one from the bestiary. Broken Moon, those hadn't been sighted in ages. Were the Necrotechs really attacking again?

The sounds of heavy combat made him look out through the new "opening" carved into the castle. Shiv blinked as he found himself taking in rows of guards and other Pathbearers fighting a desperate defense on the rear lawn of Starhawk's Perch. Hordes of monsters attacked the Pathbearers, only to be repelled by steel and spell. A bright-blue arrow shot into the air and exploded into a few hundred identical copies of itself, pelting the oncoming enemies like a hailstorm of death.

In the chaos, Shiv caught sight of Adam Arrow. The Young Lord was an echo of his father, and he seemed to fight like Roland too. Except, rather than

creating a hundred new arms to fire arrows ceaselessly from a single bow, Adam had three hovering arms wielding a shield, a hammer, and a sword.

You could be reading stolen content. Head to [NovelBin](#) for the genuine story.

Part of Shiv hated the sight. He could have achieved that in his life if he wasn't so deprived. He knew he could have.

For a few heartbeats, Shiv watched Adam Arrow and the others fight and endure against the enemies. The Omenborn knew there wasn't much he could add to the struggle, and it seemed they would survive. The better choice was to leave anyway.

There were a lot of people to help, and the ugly truth of it was that though he understood Adam Arrow, that didn't mean Shiv much liked the Young Lord. And liking mattered a lot, especially when it was about risking your life for someone.

But then, Shiv caught sight of a man in the middle of the crowd among another group of non-combatants. His lion's mane of dirty blonde hair immediately made Shiv recognize who it was.

*Georges.*

And there was no choice at all. Shiv was already walking out through the rubble and creeping toward the fray before he knew what he was doing. He couldn't leave Georges here without making sure the man was safe. Yes, Georges was a Pathbearer, and yes, Shiv didn't have much power, but...

Whatever he had, he would give to Georges, because who else in his short, miserable life had given as much for him?

But he didn't make his approach recklessly. Recklessness and blindness were fatal mistakes for a hunter, and Shiv had *no* room for incompetence as a Pathless. If he rushed into the fight, he would be a liability at best and dead from collateral damage at worst.

He surveyed the battlefield. There looked to be about twenty or so Pathbearers holding the rear garden. It wasn't that way to start. Shiv looked at the ground and counted quite a few dead guards. The remaining survivors had rallied around Adam Arrow and his beloved in a final defense. Her hammer sent walls of earthly spikes smashing into the attacking hordes of monsters, and she erected barricades from her surroundings almost as fast as the Abyssal Trolls could smash through them.



The struggle was at a stalemate for now, but the number of enemies seemed ceaseless. Shiv wondered how the enemy could teleport in with such impunity, but then he recalled the Slayers Guild vanishing in a rising column of fire. Along with the teleportation anchor. A dull horror built in the back of Shiv's mind. He thought of Tran for a moment. The revelation that the man had been working for Roland was hurtful, but he'd still been nice. Nicer than most to Shiv.

Hopefully he survived.

That led to another thought, however: *Jump Mages*. Most people didn't have the ability to teleport. Spatial Magic was a dedicated skill bound to a select few Paths. The enemy must have a Jump Mage nearby if they were spawning in so many monsters. And after a bit of looking, Shiv found them at the far edge of the lawn.

Five Jump Mages covered in shadowy hoods and large cloaks worked in unison, wielding staffs and focus crystals to pull horde after horde of horrors onto the battlefield. Spatial pockets burst around them, birthing dozens of monsters at a time. Though Shiv couldn't quite tell what kind of plate they were wearing with their cloaks, he did get a glimpse of their feet and caught a gleam of heavy metal.

The Omenborn sighed. Damn mages. Damn their stupidly thick armor. Life would have been easier if spells couldn't work in heavy armor or metal or something.

Clenching his dagger, Shiv plotted a solution to his problem. A direct attack was out of the question. He wouldn't bet on himself in a direct brawl against a lesser vampire without a great deal of planning. He would need to use his Stealth to get closer. Once he did, though... These might be mages, but they were likely still tougher than he was by far. He might be able to do some damage by stabbing them in the eye or under the armpits, but if their Toughness was well past twenty, then even that was in doubt.

What he was absolutely sure about was how he couldn't beat all five of them in a melee, even if he did surprise them. He needed something that would take them out of the fight at once—or interrupt them long enough for Adam Arrow and the others to mount a counterattack. And that couldn't be achieved through brute force.

And so Shiv thought. He planned. He watched. Until he saw a badly cracked stone statue of a large hawk at the edge of the garden behind a torn protective fence. A statue that stood on a ledge that loomed over open air and the abyss below...

An idea came to Shiv. An idea connected to something he realized earlier. He wasn't nearly strong enough to out-wrestle a Pathbearer, but he was still about as strong as a mundane human could possibly be, and they probably weren't that heavy. If he was lucky, the enemy Jump Mages had Weightlessness enchantments on their armor as well. If he wasn't... Well, he wasn't the one that was going to be pulling them. *Gravity* was going to do most of the work for him.

He'd once heard from Heather, Tran's Jump Mage, that teleporting someone took a lot of focus. Focus one would be struggling for when in free-fall.

Shiv just needed good rope and a hook of some kind...

\*\*\*

A few minutes later, Shiv had both rope and hook taken from a heavy chandelier looped around his chest as he shimmied along the edge of Blackedge with his hands. His feet dangled above open air, and with each swing, he inched a bit more to his right. Using his Stealth Skill, he avoided detection and took a roundabout route to flank the Jump Mages. Such was why he was clinging to dear life, trying not to fall.

Distant sounds of battle came from below. As Shiv looked down at the Abyss, he realized the aerial protectors guarding Blackedge had engaged the enemy before they could emerge from the cracks. Flashes of fire and light dotted the space just above the darkness below, and Shiv caught sight of a great many moving objects between the shutters of light.

“Looks like there really is going to be war again,” he breathed. Part of him couldn’t believe it, but another part of him was filled with hope. If he survived this, maybe he could be drafted into the republic’s forces, despite what Roland thought. That would ensure he had a Path at least.

He reached where the statue was with minimal noise and slowly began to pull himself up. He thanked his own high Physicality Skill and the weightlessness of his armor for making this attempt possible, and slowly, he pulled himself up and hid behind the statue. It was barely large enough to cover his body, and he clung to what remained of the fence for dear life. This close, he couldn’t risk peeking at his enemy using his knife—a gleam would be too obvious, even with the imminent twilight.

Instead, he inched his head out and saw the Jump Mages still consumed by their tasks, ignorant of his presence. Shiv swallowed and began wrapping his rope around the statue. It creaked ominously, and he did his best to avoid sending it toppling over prematurely. It took all his considerable Stealth to hide

the noise he was making, matching the pace of his work with the wind, but in the end, he managed the first part.

What came next was all or nothing: He let the hooked end of the rope slip from his hand as he stepped out. His heart was pounding, but this was the moment that he either turned the tide or died a horrible death. He spun his hook and regarded the Jump Mages. They were standing close together. Weaving streams of translucent disturbances snaked out from the casters and melded into various pockets. Good. He just needed to wrap his rope around their waists and tighten it. It would need to be fast, but surprise might give him the edge, even if his enemy had a higher Reflexes Skill.

He focused. He spun. And when he was ready, he let the hook fly. It curved through the air and went taut as Shiv swung left. One of the Jump Mages paused and then turned at the noise. The rope struck and folded around their chest as the hooked end swung like an anchor, wrapping around the others.

As the hook came back around, Shiv tugged the rope hard. It took a small act of luck—and a sudden skill level—for him to catch the hook and draw the entire rope taut.

**Reflexes > 17**

Shiv latched the hook onto the statue in a frantic motion and slammed into it hard with his entire body. The stone hawk cracked—jolted for a second—failed to fall, and so Shiv slammed his shoulder into it again, his heart screaming.

As one of the Jump Mages reached a hand out and prepared to hit Shiv with a spell, a crack resounded. The base of the statue broke, and it toppled over the edge. Shiv dove to the side. A beat later, the Jump Mages were torn off their feet, dragged toward the edge.

Yet. Nothing was ever so easy.

At the last moment, Shiv felt someone sink their fingers into his pants, gripping him by the ankle, and he lurched toward the edge as well. His mind screamed. He pulled out one of the many daggers he scavenged. He cut up once. His blade sparked off armored fingers. He slammed into the broken railing, but his armor protected his chest from suffering any real damage. The weight pulling against him quickly made it hard to break, however. As he tried to cut again, he realized his first knife had flown out of his hand and was nowhere to be seen. That was fine. This was why one looted as many knives as they could—you could never have too many knives.

He cut again this time, targeting the fabric of his pants rather than the Jump Mage holding him. He caught a glimpse of a pointed, armored visor beneath

that dark hood, but the Jump Mage's body language screamed of fear. Shiv sliced away the fabric, and before the mage could do anything else, they were falling with the others.

"Enjoy the scenic route down," Shiv chuckled, adrenaline making him slightly giddy.

It was then that a shadow loomed over him. Slowly, the Pathless turned, and he saw a not-so-dead Abyssal Troll glaring down at him with those big sharp fangs, and red, beady eyes.

"Shit," Shiv muttered. He tried to move—but the troll snatched him off the ground in a blast of speed that shouldn't be possible for a creature at over four meters of height. Shiv kicked, stabbed, and cursed at the troll. The beast clenched its hand in response, and Shiv felt his armor buckle and fold inward—breaking a few of his ribs in the process.

**Chestpiece: [Starhawk Arrow Cuirass]**

**Condition: Damaged > Severely Damaged**

Shiv groaned and wheezed as his vision went black. Once more, the world saw fit to remind him of his place at the moment of his triumph. Just after his wits prevailed, his mortal body failed him. The troll laughed as it crushed him with a single hand and pulled him closer to take a bite. “Tasty little morsel!”

Shiv could smell the fetid stench of the beast’s breath and dense plaque lining its teeth, but he found himself mostly stunned by the fact that the beast could speak. It was *intelligent*. The bestiary didn’t say that.

Before the troll could take a piece out of Shiv’s confused mind, however, a comet of bright blue burst through its chest, and the monster gurgled. “H-hole?”

It staggered forward, and Shiv looked down to see himself dangling over the edge. The Pathless croaked. “No! No! Fall backward! Backward!”

The troll didn’t listen. It released Shiv from its hand as it smashed through the fence and toppled over. Shiv let out a final muttered curse as he clawed out to grab the ledge—but it was too far. Shiv dropped. There wasn’t anything he could do about it.

Then, a gauntlet of glowing sky-blue shot over the edge and caught him by the hand. “Hold on!” came a cry from above, and suddenly, Shiv found himself



drawn back upward. He rolled over the edge as he coughed. His ribs were a nest of festering agony, and his heart was screaming. But still, he was alive. Thank the System, he was alive.

Helping hands took him under an arm. “Are you alright? Do you need a potion? What you just did was—*absolutely mad!*” Adam Arrow laughed. Shiv blinked. “But I’ll see that my father has you—” By this point, the Young Lord finally noticed who he was trying to help back to safety, and the admiration and happiness died on his face. “You... What are you...” He looked at Shiv’s crumpled cuirass. “Why are you—”

“I was here as a... a guest chef,” Shiv wheezed, doing his best not to double over from pain. “I got... this armor from Feather... he gave it to me for... protection... before he died... I came... help Georges.”

Adam Arrow just stared at Shiv for a long time, like he couldn’t process what was happening. Slowly, he stepped away from Shiv.

It occurred to Shiv that he was exceptionally lucky the Young Lord didn’t see him earlier, for he might have just let Shiv fall.

“I—” Adam began.

“I can vouch for him! I can—Shiv!” Georges was crawling over a small mountain of bodies, both monster and human.

“Georges,” Shiv coughed in relief.

“Wait? You’re actually a chef?” Adam muttered.

Shiv looked at the Young Lord and sighed. “You gotta have an actual job. Most of us do, anyway. Can’t all be born well.”

Adam’s mouth fell slightly open.

“My, my. The Young Hawk is still standing. You do your parents proud, Young Adept Arrow.”

Adam stepped out from behind Shiv, and the Omenborn lifted his head to see a lone figure walking toward them. They were dressed in garb that overtly reminded Shiv of a raven, with an ink-black feathered coat draped over their body and a strange, beaked helmet of black metal hiding their facial features.

Shiv couldn't see if they were holding any weapons, but there was a menacing aura to the approaching enemy that was unlike anything he had ever felt.

Everything inside him told him to run. To throw himself off Blackedge and die rather than fight this man. Shiv told his fear to shove it and forced himself to stand.

"Stay behind me," Adam said, his voice hard. Over the mound of bodies, his fiancée and several others joined Georges as spectators to the scene.

Shiv wanted to say something about how Adam could have this one because Shiv already dealt with all the mages, but a bow from the raven-helmed stranger made him pause.

"I salute you for being resilient. It seems that the tales of your talent were no exaggerations."

"Who are you?" Adam Arrow growled. He drew his arm back, and a bow flowed into shape in his hands like it was made from water. His magical arms bearing other weapons spawned around him as well.

Shiv glared at the flourish and pulled out another dagger, filling both his hands with steel. It didn't look like much beside the Young Lord, but it was something.

"I am a representative for a few interested parties," the raven-helmed stranger continued. "And I am here for you. Surrender and come with me. Or don't. And we can test the true extent of your skills."

From his tone, Shiv got the impression that the man was grinning under his helmet.

Adam scoffed. "Fine." The Young Lord loosed an arrow. The shockwave from the string's release nearly sent Shiv tumbling off the edge again. His ears were ringing, but he still saw how Adam attacked. He launched his arrow—and then teleported it with a burst of spatial magic. A gap in space opened behind the raven-masked stranger.

Who dodged it with a casual step—still barely perceptible to Shiv's vision—and a laugh. "Ah. You look so much like your father, but something of your mother remains in you after all."

Adam snarled. But in a blink, the raven-helmed stranger was upon him.

He was faster than Shiv could follow—faster than anyone he'd seen by far. The man was more than just a blur—he *vanished* from places and reappeared like there was no travel time in between. He didn't even leave shockwaves or trails of destruction like most Pathbearers.

The Young Lord fought back, launching two more arrows and striking out with all three of his magical hands. Several sparking impacts flashed as metal sang against metal, but with a resounding crack, Adam was launched like a small pebble across the lawn, digging up a tunnel of dirt.

Shiv couldn't even comprehend what had just happened. All he knew was that the raven-helmed stranger looked unharmed, while Adam was coughing and crawling out of a deep pit in the ground.

“Adam!” his fiancée cried out as she came down from the mess of bodies. Just then, however, several shapes landed before her. Each of these figures was dressed like the raven-helmed stranger, but their helmets more resembled crows. They drew wicked daggers as they closed in on the survivors. Georges pulled out two cooking knives in alarm, and Shiv cursed.

He tried to rush toward them, but nearly doubled over from nausea and pain. He couldn't save them if he tried. But... He looked to Adam Arrow. He could maybe help Adam deal with the raven. Shiv had that much left in him at least.

Shiv gathered his Stealth Skill, pushing beyond the pain as he loomed close behind the raven-helmed stranger. Adam noticed his approach as he summoned his bow again. Shiv swallowed and prepared himself.

The raven-helmed stranger looked thin. Shouldn't weigh much. If Shiv could get close enough, he could maybe trip them. It was madness, but... what else was he supposed to do?

*I could run...*

No, he couldn't. He couldn't save Georges and the others. Only Adam could do that. And Adam couldn't help if he was killed by this bastard.

One step. Two steps. Three steps. Shiv got closer. And the raven-helmed stranger saw fit to approach Adam with a casual stroll.

"You need to work more on your Reflexes and Awareness, Young Lord Adept. Some more close-combat as well. Your skills are many, but so few are in the

Adept Tier. I fear that though you possess the potential of an ocean, you have spread yourself so thin that you are as shallow as a puddle.”

“You really like to hear yourself talk, don’t you?” Adam spat.

“Quite,” the raven-helmed stranger said. “It’s my second favorite thing about this.”

Just two steps away, Shiv crouched low.

“Yeah? And what’s the first?” Adam asked, nocking a new arrow to his bow.

“Oh. The violence.” Shiv moved. Adam fired his arrow. The stranger vanished. And the world disappeared into a maelstrom of pain.

**Chestpiece: [Starhawk Arrow Cuirass]**

**Condition: Damaged > Destroyed**

## Starhawk Arrow Cuirass can no longer be equipped

Two spikes of agony sank into Shiv's back and twisted upward. Swords peeled what remained of his broken armor away, the metal parting from Shiv's body in pieces as he choked on the blood flooding his lungs. Looking down, he saw two blades jutting from his chest. One was far longer than the other, but both were spreading a blackness across his skin.

Shiv tried to kick, but found himself unable to feel his legs.

"Tanner!" Adam cried out, his face breaking into a look of pure horror.

*Tanner?* Shiv blinked. Almost no one called him that. He himself didn't even use his first name anymore.

"Oh, no, Young Lord, was this your friend?" the raven-helmed stranger chuckled. "I fear it is unwise to befriend the Pathless. They are so very fragile."

"Put him down!" Adam shouted.



“Shiv!” Georges cried at the same time.

“Shoot—through me!” Shiv cried, spitting mouthfuls of blood. Adam hesitated. “Shoot! Shoot, damn you! I’m already dead—I’m... I’m not like them... I tried...I really did...” He wheezed.

Adam swallowed. But before he could act, the raven scoffed. Shiv felt a heavy foot slam into his back and launch him forward. The world lurched. The horizon zoomed. And the last thing Shiv heard before his death was a horrible cry from Adam as the Omenborn splattered apart against the Young Lord’s body.

Yet... Despite this, Shiv’s senses remained. Darkness didn’t claim him. No afterlife arrived.

For a few moments, he lingered at the place of his death, all sense of pain gone, his body weightless, and his mind reeling.

Just then, a System notification appeared.

**Conditions for Curse “Omenborn” have been fulfilled > Path restrictions lifted!**

**Path Gained: [Deathless]**

**Skill Gained: Revenant (Unique) > 1**

**Skill Gained: Vitality Drain (Legendary) > 1**

**Feat slot unlocked!**

**Feats Gained [1/1]: [He Who Rises From Ash Eternal] - Allows the Pathbearer to quickly learn new Skills and advance existing Skills through repeated deaths.**