

PATH OF THE DEATHLESS (BOOK 2 COMPLETED)

5 (II) Path

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Path

Shiv cursed as unbearable pain appeared and ceased before he could scream. *Bastard.*

Toughness > 22

Physicality > 22

At least dying constantly was advancing his skills pretty quickly. *Unnaturally quickly.* It took Shiv months of brutal training and effort to advance his Physicality. Even longer for some of his other skills. Death seemed to sear something into his soul—spurred him to evolve and adapt for his inevitable return.

Comparatively, his Revenant and Vitality Drain skills grew far slower...

As Shiv pulled what heat he could from the raven, he studied his new Feat as well.

He Who Rises From Ash Eternal (Unique) - Allows the Pathbearer to quickly learn new Skills and advance existing Skills through repeated deaths.

A Unique Feat as well. And it seemed to apply to whatever skill he was lacking—the ones that might have helped him avoid his most recent death. That was his working theory, at least.

But while he was learning, the raven-helmed stranger did the same. Instead of rushing off to finish Adam, he lingered, studying Shiv's bifurcated body. He then examined the shadowy entity draining him with only a faint hint of discomfort. As Shiv finished draining the vitality he needed to resurrect, he stepped out from the cocoon and stood before the raven again. The killer just regarded him quietly for a moment.

Then a flare of blue came from behind the raven-helmed stranger, and he took Shiv by the neck. Suddenly, the world became a mess of shifting darkness. Shiv tried to move but found himself fixed in place and unable to respond. “Let... go...” Then, he was out, and he found himself trapped in the raven’s grasp while both of them were right behind Adam. “Adam! Look—” His warning wasn’t needed.

The Young Lord rolled away from a sweeping strike delivered by the raven. Shiv noticed how the mysterious adversary targeted the Young Lord’s ankles rather than his head.

“Let him go!” Adam cried. He briefly stared at one of Shiv’s corpses some hundred meters away. The Young Lord was still covered in Shiv’s blood, and his eyes went to the currently struggling Shiv for an answer.

“Yeah, I don’t know myself,” Shiv croaked, elbowing the raven in the chest.

The raven looked between them once, then settled on Shiv. “This... This isn’t possible.” Shiv tried to jab a thumb into the raven’s eye, poking his finger into the dark slots of his visor. The raven didn’t even seem to blink. Then, an arrow struck Shiv’s shoulder, and he felt a pocket of space collapse around him.

The clenching pressure of a spatial transition gripped Shiv as he toppled next to Adam. He collapsed, cursing the world, clutching his shoulder. “You shot me in the *felling* shoulder!”

Adam snorted. “I was aiming at your head.”

“I wish you were—I’d be dead now, and it wouldn’t hurt so much.”

With a hiss of pain, Shiv ripped the arrow out of his shoulder and found himself glad his Toughness wasn’t capped anymore. His body felt sturdier than before. Harder. He came to stand behind Adam as the raven began to circle them.

“So, what’s the plan?” Shiv asked.

The Young Lord formed a massive ballista-sized arrow and drew it back on his bow using the help of a few magical hands. “We kill this tainted bastard.”

“I asked for a plan, not your general hopes and feelings.”

Adam clenched his jaw. “Why don’t you come up with a plan, Tanner? Hm? Why don’t you?”

“I wasn’t the one that went to a fancy academy,” Shiv growled.

“Yeah, but you are the one who just came back from the dead twice.”

The raven stopped strolling, glaring at both of them. Off by the side, a stone golem erupted from the earth, stomping down on one of the crow-helmed strangers. Isabella and the others were putting up quite the fight, but... the crow-helmed strangers also didn’t seem to be attacking with nearly the intensity Shiv expected. It was like they were waiting for something, going in turn...

Shiv sighed as he picked a jagged rock off the ground. He wasn’t going to like this, but he couldn’t really deal any damage to the raven any other way. Being alive was a liability. “Alright. Here’s a plan: You shoot your arrows and keep him busy. I’m going to kill myself.”

Adam snorted. “Fine—wait, what?”

Before anyone could stop him—before his own fear could take hold, Shiv found his carotid artery and drove the pointed rock in with all of his might. Blood immediately filled his throat. Shiv gurgled. Adam’s jaw dropped. “What the felling moon...”

The raven-helmed stranger blasted forward. He turned into feathers and passed through Adam as the Young Lord fired an arrow. Still, by the time he reached Shiv, it was too late. Shiv’s body dropped, gurgling a final breath while the raven cursed and punted Shiv’s body over the ledge.

Toughness > 23

Only Toughness this time. Interesting. And slightly disturbing. This death was because Shiv’s flesh couldn’t stop a rock from being thrust through it. Strength and speed had nothing to do with it.

Shiv immediately reached into the raven’s body and drained their vitality. The man staggered and let out a hoarse growl. He was slowing, his body shaking. An excitement kindled inside Shiv. He wasn’t helpless. He was a Pathbearer; this was a fight he could help win.

But then the raven adapted as well. He vanished and reappeared a few dozen meters away, striding toward the other survivors.

“No! Isabella!” Adam cried.

Shiv’s insides dropped. *Georges.*

Both the Deathless and the Young Lord rushed after the stranger. The latter shot over the raven’s head with a flourish of his burning wings and fired a rain of arrows. The raven vanished before they could hit—and reappeared in the air beside Adam.

Again, he attacked non-lethally. The stranger threw an arcing kick that spiked the Young Lord into the ground beside his beloved, smashing a few of her barricades apart.

Shiv frowned internally and adjusted his strategy as well. The raven suspected something about him. The flash of their eyes earlier might have been an Analyze Skill. Had to be considering how they could tell Shiv had the Path of the Deathless. They kept moving, blasting down and stomping on Adam’s chest while swatting his lover and the others aside. The Young Lord, or at least his armor, proved resilient, and he rose from the ground, firing more arrows.

The raven vanished again, appearing at random places across the lawn as if they were blinking in and out of existence.

He knew about Shiv's capabilities, but the crows that came with him didn't. And Shiv needed to resurrect again.

He got to his first crow, who—oddly—was just watching Isabella crawl back to her feet rather than attacking her. The Technomage's armor was busted and smoking, while her hammer looked mangled. She was vulnerable. Nothing about how the crows acted in this fight made sense.

Shiv didn't have time to think on that much longer, he started draining the vitality of the crow.

This one let out a ragged cry, interrupting the two others near them as they paused what they were doing. One was ripping their blade out of an Arrow Family Guard's neck while the other was busy battering a large automaton Pathbearer into scrap.

The crow that Shiv was draining let out a shout and swatted at the space he occupied. That didn't do anything, as the strikes just passed through him. The other two stared at their companion as if she were insane. Then there was a

sudden flash, and one of their heads peeled apart in neat slices. The warmth of their life force started fading fast.

Behind the body stood Georges with two bloody kitchen knives. Shiv gawked as his victim fell to one knee. This one had substantially less warmth compared to the raven-helmed stranger. Maybe they were only a High Initiate-Tier Pathbearer. The only other surviving crow was considerably brighter, and they went after Georges immediately.

Shiv cursed and tried to drain his victim faster, but his skill limited his speed. Still, his shadow began to form, and Georges was no fool—the chef retreated down the mess of rubble and bodies again as the crow went after him.

Four seconds later, Shiv hatched out from his cocoon, standing over a downed crow. “Wait—” she wheezed. Shiv didn’t listen. He stomped down as hard as he could on her neck. It took him three tries to finally break it.

After that, he picked up the obsidian shortsword she was using and made his way over the detritus as sounds of battle were rejoined around him.

Shiv crawled over the hill just in time to see Georges and three other survivors trying to fend off the final crow. Isabella lay somewhere by the side, clutching

her arm. Behind them were the bulk of the other survivors. Non-combat Pathbearers, families with children...

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The already damaged automaton Pathbearer died valiantly—throwing themselves in the way of a mortal thrust meant for Georges. Sparks burst out from the mechanical lifeform's chest as their core was extinguished. Shiv cursed as he jumped. He drove his blade into the back of the crow. It was like trying to stab through a mountain. The obsidian blade bit through some armor but stopped dead and slipped from Shiv's fingers—he didn't have the Physicality to pierce someone beyond Initiate Tier.

He did, however, distract them. Just long enough for the final guard and Georges to stab the crow. Not enough for them to kill the felling bastard, though. Or stop them from cutting Shiv in half as a counterattack.

In Shiv's defense, he tried reacting—shifting his guard to block the cut. He was just far too slow. By the time he realized what happened, he was looking at his lower body next to his head, and realized he was half the man he used to be.

“Broken felling Moon,” Shiv grumbled. He glared up at the crow who was now back to fighting the others. He didn't have the seconds it would take to die from his bisection, so Shiv spat blood and proceeded to use his stolen blade on someone he could reliably murder with it—himself.

As he drove the tip through his skull, Shiv perished immediately and reached out to drain the last crow.

Toughness > 24

Physicality > 23

Reflexes > 19

Skill Gained: Parry (Initiate) > 1

Shiv felt a thrill go through him as his skills surged in growth. He never managed to advance the same skill more than once over a single day, let alone several. But here he was doing it in the span of minutes. All he had to do was die. Which... was admittedly unpleasant. Still, he didn't stay dead, and he even got a new skill out of all that.

Parry. That was going to be useful.

Shiv's shadow began to reform as the last crow spasmed and shook while fighting the two survivors. This one held almost three times the life force compared to the last crow Shiv drained. He guessed they might be a Low Adept or something. Seeing how he could *barely* perceive some of their attacks, he guessed he was right.

It also meant he couldn't drain as much from the crow as fast—but he was still draining them of their vitality, and that affected them badly. Their body shook with every strike, and it seemed like they were in extreme pain with how they twitched and jerked. They didn't cry out, though, which creeped Shiv out. The last Arrow Family Guard drove his greatsword into the crow's chest as their twitching arm failed a parry. The blow bit into armor—but failed to penetrate. The crow seized the blade and channeled a jet of acid out from their palm.

The guard screamed as the corrosive fluid burned a hole through his skull, and he went toppling back, wailing and choking all the while.

Shiv was glad he was in his Revenant state during that moment, because if he was still alive, he would have likely thrown up.

As the crow turned on Georges, Shiv hatched out from his shadowy cocoon and did what he planned to do against the raven earlier: He ducked down and ripped the legs out from under them. To his rising hopes, the crow fell over on their chest, and Georges dove on them, stabbing and dicing like the assassin was some kind of vegetable. The kitchen knives chipped and shattered, but the assassin's garb split apart as blood flowed and the white of bones shone in the twilight of the eclipse.

In the aftermath, when the crow stopped twitching, both Georges and Shiv worked to catch their breath. "Well. That was some nice cutting, chef." Shiv chuckled. "You got him between the vertebrae pretty good."

"Yes, well." Georges paused, looked up at Shiv, then looked nearby where "another" Shiv lay there, cut in half. The Deathless smirked weakly.

"Yeah, the curse is gone too," Shiv said.

It took Georges a moment to process what Shiv said, then he narrowed his eyes at him. A spark seemed to go off inside the older man's eyes.

"*Deathless?*"

“I—” Shiv started, but found Georges gripping him by the arms, looking him up and down.

“And it’s really you? Still you?”

“Seems so,” Shiv said. “There’s no interruption between me being alive and dead. It feels continuous.”

“Bloody, hell, Shiv. What the hell did they do to you?”

Shiv knew who Georges was talking about. This must have been part of the ritual. And at that, he realized that Roland Arrow probably wasn’t going to take this very well.

A thunderous impact shook the world, and Shiv heard Adam Arrow cry out with effort and pain. Both Shiv and Georges looked over the mound of rubble they were hiding behind. There were bodies everywhere. A good few of them Shiv’s. The only ones still alive were the non-combatants, Georges, and Isabella. And they needed to get away *now*.

“Georges, you need to get out of here,” Shiv said. “Get the others and go. Run as fast as you can. Adam and I will deal with the last one. Stall him until the

Town Lord returns, at least.” At the mention of Adam’s name, a crack sounded, and the Young Lord started screaming. Shiv’s lip twitched. “I really should get back to him.” But he could wait a moment. Adam had the Toughness.

And Shiv still didn’t like him that much.

Just then, the Deathless paused and regarded Isabella. She lay there, clutching her wounded arm... but she looked decidedly uninjured otherwise. Sure, her armor was badly dented, and her hammer was smoking, but she could still stand. Pathbearers had far more pain tolerance than a mere mortal. She also didn’t seem to be that worried about her love, either.

Maybe it was an arranged marriage or something. Shiv didn’t know or care. But it was strange that she was so hurt that she didn’t notice Adam fighting for his life. Especially when she called out for him earlier.

Another heavy impact, followed by relative silence. Not good. They didn’t have any more time. “Georges. Go.”

“Lad,” Georges said, his expression twisting into a look of discomfort.

“The non-combatants need someone to get them out. This might clear your indenturement. Go. Please. I can’t die, don’t worry about me.”

Georges pointed at Shiv’s corpse. “You’re lying felling dead right there in two parts.”

“I can’t stay dead—it doesn’t matter, just go! Now!”

The head chef struggled for a moment, swallowed, and held out his only remaining kitchen knife to Shiv. “Georges... I don’t have the Physicality.”

“It’ll cut. Trust me.”

Shiv accepted the weapon, and immediately, he felt a weight settle into his hand and being. A weight that felt like the cuirass he wore earlier.

The knife looked plain at a glance, but it felt light in his hand, and its edge held an unnatural gleam that was almost pale—like a fragment of the broken

moon. The chipped parts were also slowly filling in, to Shiv's surprise. Was the weapon fixing itself?

Equipment Obtained: [Halspur's Perfect-Edged Chef's Knife]

Tier: Adept

Condition: Severely Damaged

Composition: Moonsteel

Enchantments > Binding; Self-Sharpening; Self-Mending

Equip item to right hand?

[Halspur's Perfect-Edged Chef's Knife bound as right-hand weapon]

"Georges, this..."

“I was going to give it to you when you got a Path from me. But I think the situation is close enough right now.”

Shiv looked at his mentor and smiled. “Yeah. Go. I’ll find you at Swan-Eating Toad after this.”

“You better. You die and I will fire your bloody ass. I’ll take it out on Seymour too.”

And that was all the incentive Shiv needed. As Georges helped Isabella up and started cursing at the cowering non-combatants to start running, Shiv clutched his new knife and climbed above the rubble. When he reached the top, Shiv’s breath caught as he found the environment completely changed. Most of Starhawk’s Perch was little more than ruins now. There were hundreds of craters everywhere, like the place had been bombed by magical artillery. More columns of smoke rose with screams in the distance. And right before Shiv was Adam Arrow, crawling toward the mound with a single functioning arm.

The Young Lord’s armor was still intact, only covered in dirt from what Shiv could tell. It seemed more like crystal than metal. This didn’t stop the raven from badly twisting the Young Lord’s joints. The masked assassin stood just a

few meters away, and he looked at Shiv with body language that radiated disgust.

The raven's ink-black coat was mostly burned away, revealing leather armor of the same color beneath. He held two new blades Shiv didn't remember seeing before, and one resembled a literal lightning bolt more than a solid blade. There was also the way the raven favored one leg—a slight limp to his gait.

Seemed like Adam did some damage after all. Or Shiv. The Deathless marked this as a collaborative effort.

“You... I am so tired of butchering you...”

“Well, I'm not tired of dying yet, so get your swords ready, because I want some more Toughness.”

The raven-helmed stranger just sighed. “What are you even talking about?”

A cough sounded from below Shiv. The Deathless looked down as the Young Lord looked up.

“You’re alive again,” Adam choked. “Great.”

“You don’t sound so happy.”

“Your plan was... terrible...” Adam managed.

“Well, whose fault is that? I told you I was going to kill myself—and then did. You were supposed to fight this guy off. I had three people to deal with. Don’t they teach you how to fight at your fancy academy?”

Adam clenched his working fist. “You’re a tainted bastard, Tanner Lowe.”

“It’s Shiv,” the Deathless snorted. “No one calls me Tanner Lowe. No one.” Shiv let out a breath and shook his head. “Well. Suppose I’ll go finish what you couldn’t. With this... chef’s knife.”

Shiv was going to die. This was going to hurt. But he was probably going to get some skill levels from this. He was looking forward to it, all things considered.

“Alright,” the raven muttered. They took a step. Suddenly, they were right in front of Shiv—and had him by the neck again. “Time to bag two problems for the price of—”

Shiv wasn’t expecting much when he dragged his new knife down along the raven’s other arm. He certainly didn’t expect the blade to actually slice through the leather and sink into flesh. The raven wasn’t either, for that matter. “Ow! You—”

Blood gushed out. Shiv watched as the raven dropped their blade and snarled. “Vermin! Tainted little—”

“Come on!” Shiv said, barring his teeth, preparing himself for death. The swords were going to hurt, but he could take it. He could take anything.

But the raven didn’t stab him. Instead, he reared his arm back, still cursing, still outraged, and he *threw* Shiv. The air around the Deathless rippled as his limbs jerked violently. His arms and legs went the wrong way, and the sheer pain made Shiv black out momentarily. When he returned to himself, he found himself still sailing through the air, well over a hundred meters away from Starhawk’s Perch. His arms flopped uselessly, but the kitchen knife tumbled after his ruined right arm—bound as it was.

In the distance, Shiv saw the raven look down at Adam as a spatial distortion expanded from the assassin and spirited both of them away. A mere second later, a series of golden arrows arced over the ruins of the castle as Roland Arrow's presence finally returned.

Too late to do anything.

By this point, gravity took hold of Shiv once again. He briefly forgot he couldn't die and panicked, but quickly calmed. Then he turned and saw the Abyss expanding far below him. His panic returned as a weary resignation. "Well. This isn't good."