

Year of the Shadow Lodge

Chapter 1

So, you'd like to hear about the attack on the Grand Lodge of Absalom, eh? Whatever you want, honey, I have tons of stories I'm willing to tell. Thing is, it's an awfully long story to tell with a dry throat, so I'd be delighted if you paid my drinks. Mind you, my tastes are expensive; I'd hate to leave the story unfinished... What's that, what's my favourite drink? Oh, you're such a persuasive individual. Just ask the barkeep, he knows what I like. So, the story of The Year of the Shadow Lodge. Luckily for you I was there, which means I can relate the tale in its full glory. Any other hack performer will probably have heard it third-hand, so only I have the full details of what happened that day. To coin a phrase, stay a while, and listen:

Well, it was the day we all celebrated the city's freedom of tyranny, the First Siege of Absalom. Literally everyone was looking forward to seeing the Passion, the grand (and gaudy) re-enactment of that siege, the highlight of today's festivities. I was performing outside, hoping to catch a few coppers from generous onlookers, bored from waiting in line to be accepted inside. I quickly understood this was a futile attempt, as every free space of the street was occupied by vendors, performers, drunks and other forms of entertainment. My act went by largely unnoticed, so I decided to get in line as well.

After a while, when I passed an alleyway, I noticed someone beckoning me to follow him inside the alley. I was hesitant, as I knew well enough that shady figures in alleyways present all sorts of dangers, but some people in line next to me noticed him as well, so I decided I was safe enough.

Inside the alleyway, four onlookers had gathered to listen to the cloaked figure: "It seems we have two things in common, an eagerness to participate in good celebration, and this," he said, as he showed us an intricately carved wayfinder. I recognised the thing as something only important Pathfinders possess. I wanted to interrupt him, because while I had always yearned to go on adventure, I was just a simple street performer, barely worth anyone's time, but he continued. "I assure you, it's mine. I know a good number of you are already planning to attend the festivities this evening. I need but a casual favour. An old associate of mine, Charvion Eater-of-Bones is set to make an elaborate display of some artifact he claims to have recovered. I've not had contact with him in a year or so, and I have a curious feeling about the event. More I cannot say; however, I'd appreciate you keeping an eye on whatever stunt he is considering. He's a natural charlatan, that one. Just keep an eye out is all – nothing serious. Don't let him know you're watching, and do not approach the artifact during the showing. Most importantly, do not tell anyone of this conversation."

We all hesitated, nervously glancing at each other, not quite sure what to make of this. A large, green-skinned woman spoke up: "Excuse me, what's this artifact you're talking about? Is it dangerous?"

"The artifact itself is just a tool, only dangerous in the hands of dangerous people, much like how a sword can be used to protect or harm, depending on the intentions of the wielder. No, this artifact is said to be recovered from the Mwangi jungles. Like most other artifacts, it is said to possess great power, but what power exactly, is unknown to me."

"So you're saying this Charvion guy has... unethical intentions, so to say, otherwise you wouldn't bother with enlisting us," the woman continued.

"Heh, you could say that. As I already mentioned, I haven't really kept in touch with him over the last year, but I know him well enough to know when he's up to no good."

A gnome on a tiger piped up. “How do you know him, exactly? And why don’t you keep an eye on him yourself?”

“Excellent questions, little one, but I have no time left. Perhaps I’ll answer them next time we meet. Good luck on this endeavour,” and with that, he turned on his heel, ducked around the corner, and was gone. I rushed after him, wanting more information, but despite being only a second or two behind, the only thing I saw was a small bird of prey taking air.

“Huh, curious,” I muttered, as I joined up with the rest of the group. For the first time, I took a good look at everyone, figuring we’d have to join up if we wanted to fulfil this curious request. “Well, I guess it’s best if we get to know each other better, if no one objects to this unexpected turn of events.”

“Not me,” a stern-looking man said. “I am Kos, a cleric of Sarenrae. I am distrustful of both this Charvion guy and our mysterious task-giver, but if he says Charvion isn’t to be trusted, the least we could do is check it out.”

“I’m Gabby, and this is Child-Killer,” the gnome said, while patting the tiger on his head. We all took a step back when we hear the tiger’s name. “Oh, no, it’s nothing like that,” Gabby giggles, but refused to say any more.

“Well, okay then, I’m Saphira Ainara Blair.” A tall woman with what looked like a sword on a stick strapped on her back spoke up, attempting to break the silence. “I might have some anger issues sometimes, but don’t worry about that, I have it under control.”

“My name is Haruna Irving,” the green-skinned woman said. “I’m on a pilgrimage, but I decided to stop in Absalom to take part in the festivities. I must admit, this is quite the change from what I’m used to in the monastery. And what about you, er...” Haruna frowned, looking at me, not quite sure what to make of me. I sighed. This happened a lot. I smoothed the ruffles of my dress a bit, trying to buy some time.

“It’s the dress, isn’t it?” I say. “That’s what’s confusing you, right?”

“Er, no, that’s not what I-” Haruna stammered.

“Yes, exactly,” Gabby blurted out simultaneously.

“No no, that’s all right, I get that a lot. Let me explain myself, and why I’m dressed this way. My name’s Zaigan Rifrey,” I said. “As you can see, my Azata-blooded ancestry has cursed me with androgyny. Long story short, I can’t hold a steady job. People keep being weirded out by my appearance and are uncomfortable with me as a co-worker or vendor. I tried some jobs as a merchant, but customers were more interested in me than in my wares. I decided to turn that into my occupation, just performing on the streets for a living.

“But that doesn’t explain the dress,” Kos said when I fell silent, “why confuse people even more?”

I grinned. “Heh, good question. It’s just that, over the years, I’ve found out that female street performers earn more money just by teasing and flirting with the audience. It’s a cheap trick, I admit, but it works. And if you look in-between a man and a woman anyway, I figured I could make use of it.

“Yeah, but are you a boy or a girl?” Gabby asked, oblivious to the weight of her question.

I chuckled nervously, hoping to find an answer I could use to defuse this situation. “I’ve been switching genders multiple times a day for the last few years now, the gender I was born with and the gender I prescribe to currently aren’t necessarily the same thing anymore. Physically, I’m definitely one way or the other, but mentally, I’m more of an in-between. I’m flexible enough to roll with whatever you think I am. Heavens, it’s practically my job now. Long story short, I am whichever gender you choose to attribute to me.”

“Okay, then I think you’re a lady,” Gabby beamed, “because you’re wearing a dress!”

“Works for me,” I said, as ruffled Gabby’s hair. “Anyone else have any questions about which bits I have where?”

They didn't, they just shrugged and mumbled a bit while avoiding my eyes. *Ah well, I'm sure they'll get over it*, I thought.

Chapter 2

After paying a few coppers for tickets to the mezzanine seats, it was surprisingly easy to find prime locations right across from the field seats. It's funny how people suddenly become generous enough to give you their spots when they see you have a tiger with you. While we were getting to know each other better (I failed to learn the tale of how Gabby's tiger got his name because I was distracted by Kos' story about how he accidentally set the communal kitchen on fire), someone entered the arena floor and announced:

"Welcome to Absalom! On this glorious eve we gather again in celebration of our wonderful city and its freedom from tyranny. We present to you all – the Passion of the First Siege of Absalom! A performance great and terrible, re-enacting Absalom's victorious slaughter of Warlord Voradni Voon's troops upon the city's rocky shores. As the highlight of this year's performance, directly following the Passion, the Pathfinder Society has generously agreed to a public unveiling of its latest acquisition, a terrifying device dredged from ancient ruins in the Mwangi Expanse. And now, ladies and gentlemen, please take your seats. The performance is about to begin." With a bow, the man leaves, and the performers start to pour in from the entrance.

The Passion takes hours to tell, and is bloody, overly violent and tries so hard to tell a gritty story that half the crowd has zoned out halfway through and starts to talk among themselves, joking about the bad performances, booing and cheering at certain actors and mocking the special effects provided by some clever uses of Prestidigitation I hadn't thought of. All in all, the play was terrible, but it was one of the best nights of my life.

Following the performance, a large stage is wheeled in to the west side of the Irorium. The stage is covered with a large curtain. Beneath is a scaled set of a ruin and in the centre stands a bizarre, cage-like structure of weathered metal covered with strange runes and other ornate etchings. A man who must be Charvion Eater-of-Bones stood next to the cage, and says, "Good evening, friends! On this auspicious night I present to you an incredible spectacle, the type of which you have never seen before. From the darkest jungles of Mwangi, I have procured an ancient device, an artifact capable of ripping through the very cloth of our reality!"

Charvion touched something on the cage, and it fell open, slowly unfolding like a blossoming flower. He stepped inside, and the cage began to close around him, crackling with swirling tendrils of mystic, silvery ether. In an ominous and unearthly voice he bellowed, "I am now fused to the ethereal plane—the realm of ghosts! Ask me what you will, and the dead shall answer through me! But be wary of what you seek, for you may not like the answers."

I nudged Kos in his side, whispering "This must be what that guy warned us about. I'd like to take a closer look at that thing, see if I can make something out that might be useful."

"How do you reckon we get close to it without attracting attention?"

Saphira noticed us whispering and join in, saying "Well, obviously we act as if we want to ask a question, and while we're queueing, we'll have all the time we need. Let's go." And with a quick pull on my arms, I was whisked from my seat, leaving the rest of the group behind. Haruna yelled, "Just go, we'll keep watching from here, we have a better overall view of what's happening than you down there." Kos, clearly torn between joining us on the field or staying behind, decides the group with the tiger can probably handle themselves and joins us, but doesn't join the line.

By now, half the crowd in the mezzanine seats had entered the arena floor, clearly wanting to know some trivial detail about the dead. From around me, I heard some people telling their neighbours that they're certain some dead relative had buried some money

somewhere, or that they intended to find out whether they have some illegitimate family members or other such drivel. I sighed, tried to make the most of the situation, and started practicing some dance routines, both out of boredom and trying to entertain the people around me. No such luck; they're all too preoccupied with the prospect of hearing some long-dead gossip that they don't even notice me. Too bad.

After a while, Saphira is the only person in front of me. She steps up on the podium, just out of earshot, and asks her question. I can't quite make out her question, but Charvion answers in a booming voice, "The Starstone? Well, let me consult the dead!" Charvion is quiet for a while, then answers her question. I completely forgot to pay attention to what he said, as I was both mulling over a potential question myself, and studying the contraption he was in. I couldn't make anything from it; the runes were clearly ancient, but the tendrils of energy obstructed the sight enough that I couldn't get a full view of the contraption.

"And now, child, what is your question?" a voice booms at me.

"Er, what?" I say, pulled out of my trance.

"What do you want to ask of the dead?" Charvion asks me. I would say he sounded impatient, but the sound of his voice was distorted enough from within the cage that I couldn't get any sense of emotion from him.

"Oh yes, my question. Well... As you can see, I'm from angelic descent. It has its upsides, but I really feel like it's more of a curse than a blessing. I'd like to ask my Azata ancestor why I am this way."

Charvion falls silent for a long while, his eyes fogging over, in all likelihood searching for the spirit in question, until he fixes his gaze on me again. "Child, you have an important part to play in the history of this land. Not only today, but from every day onward. I know it is a heavy burden to bear, but I know you will make good use of it."

When Charvion remained silent, I curtsied to him, thanking him for the honour, and climbed down the podium. Just as I landed on the ground, a low, droning horn suddenly rises over the cacophonous throng. Soon after, it is joined by a second horn, then a third, then dozens. The crowd erupts into chaos, and I shot a confused look at Saphira. She shrugged, then pointed at the sky. I followed her gaze, and I noticed a few dragons approaching from the sky.

"I'm pretty sure that's not part of the festivities," I muttered to Saphira as I tried to locate the rest of the group.

Chapter 3

A massive black dragon dove through the centre of the Irorium, spewing gouts of acid onto the arena floor. She headed straight for the small stage where Charvion stood within the cage. Striking with both claws, she plucked the artifact free from the base, shattering the stage and sending remnants of the mock ruins everywhere. The creature lifted into the air, with Charvion clinging to the bars and screaming in terror. The great beast continued her flight, winging off toward the Grand Lodge. A few short moments later, rattling explosions shook the city, and a shimmering column of pale, silvery light shot up out of the grounds of the Grand Lodge and into the night sky.

"I have no idea what just happened," Saphira yelled, trying to reach me through the throng of panicked theatregoers, "but that can't be good. Let's find the rest and see what to do next."

"Seriously?" I yelled back. "You still want to go through with this? I'm just a street performer, I can't take on an army of dragons!"

"Doesn't matter! You're a Pathfinder, right?"

"No, not exact-"

"Seriously? Well, as said, doesn't matter, we need to do what we can to get this mess under control." Saphira managed to reach me, and put a hand on my shoulder. "The fact that you're not running away means that you have what it takes to be a Pathfinder. Now act like it!"

I wanted to reply that I didn't run away simply because I *couldn't*, I was paralysed with fear. Black dragons soared overhead, bombarding the Irorium with globs of acid and goblins. Some nimbly jumped from their mounts' backs, some stumbled and landed in a ragged heap on the ground. It was a miracle we weren't noticed yet, but it was only a matter of time.

"Look," Saphira added, pointing towards the rest of the group, slowly reaching our side, "they are just as scared as you are, but they're still looking out for the rest of the group. Come on and *act like a Pathfinder!*"

By now, most of the crowd had fled for the exits, and a group of goblins looked menacingly at us, seeing a new target to harass.

"See these people? They're defenceless against these things. It's up to us to help them to an exit, even if it means just stalling long enough for them to leave." Having said her piece, Saphira turned around, ran at the first goblin in sight, unslung her weapon, and drove it through the goblin, drawing shrieks and hisses from his companions.

I took a quick glance at Gabby and Haruna on the other side of the Irorium. Child-Killer crouched and simply leapt all the way from her seat in the mezzanine onto the arena floor, while Haruna nimbly jumped over the seats as if they weren't obstructing her at all. Well, all right time to get into action, then. I might not be a fancy adventurer like them, but I certainly could act like one. From what I'd heard, goblins were hardly a threat anyway. As long as the dragons didn't get in the way, we were fine. I took a deep breath, drew my rapier (I might not exactly be combat-trained, but you must at least be able to defend yourself if you live on the street), and ran after Saphira. When I had nearly reached the group again, Kos had managed to burn a goblin by shooting a burst of fire from his hand (I didn't exactly see how), and Child-Killer had proven his name by ripping a goblin apart. Great. The less I had to deal with these things, the better.

We ran for the main exit, but were quickly interrupted by another group of goblins as they landed right between me and the rest of the group. I ran at a goblin, hoping I'd hit him more out of luck than by skill, and somehow managed to skewer him right into his heart, dropping his lifeless body onto the floor in front of me. Child-Killer ran for another goblin

and managed to bite through an artery, happily munching on what's left of the goblin's neck. The last goblin managed to hit Haruna, but she seemed unfazed. In return, she lashed out with her limbs, striking it with her head, elbows and knees, until she actually managed to sever the goblin's head from its body with a well-placed kick, launching it into the field seats a couple of dozen feet away.

"BOOYA!" Haruna yelled, sweat glistening on her brow from the effort. She did a few victory poses out of enthusiasm before she remembered her monastic vows and adopted a more serene pose, quickly glancing around if anyone had noticed. She caught me staring, but I just gave her a wink of understanding. Haruna blushed, then composed herself again.

We nearly reached the main gate, but a dragon landed right on top of the gate's arch and spew acid at us. Most of us managed to dodge it, but Kos took a faceful of dragonspit. "Argh, quickly, through the service exits," Kos yelled, wiping the acid away with his sleeve, "we're not ready to fight this thing yet!"

Yet? I thought, *I don't want to fight that thing ever, let alone right now.* Just before we reached the service gate's entrance, three more goblins landed in front of us. Much like the other two waves, they were no match for Saphira, Child-Killer and Gabby, and Haruna. Kos took watch, making sure no other enemies reached us, while my main contribution was to catch up with the group and providing a distraction so the others could take care of the goblins.

Once we made it into the tunnels and were catching our breath, a cleric, dressed much like Kos, but more geared for battle, approached us, saying "Nice work, people. I saw you fight off these goblins. You did well, and may the Everlight shine upon you always." I felt him release some kind of energy, invigorating us all. I didn't get hurt, but I could see Kos' acid wounds disappearing from his face, and the wounds on the rest of the groups disappeared as well. We thanked the strange cleric-type person, and he ran on.

"Hey dancy lady, it seems like you're much slower than us," quipped Gabby, "why's that?"

"Well, I have all my belongings on my back, including my journal, food, backpack, and so on," I panted, "I can't just leave it behind, do you know how long I've had to dance to earn all this?"

"Aw, c'mon," Gabby said, with a smile on her face, "I'm sure Child-Killer would be happy to carry some of that for you." She patted the tiger's flank again, and it seemed to huff in delight at the attention.

"Much appreciated," I replied, as I carefully unslung my backpack and secured it in one of Child-Killer's saddlebags. I petted the tiger on its head as a way of saying thanks, but I quickly withdrew my hand when he playfully nipped at it.

"All right, everyone caught their breath?" Kos said. "Looks like we've got a long way to go before we can have a proper rest tonight."

Chapter 4

As we raced through the Foreign Quarter to the Grand Lodge, we entered a large marketplace. Collapsed buildings, broken tents, and piles of debris torn from other structures formed a crude but effective-looking barricade across the centre of the market square, blocking our progress. We all noticed goblin ears pointing out from behind the debris. This was most certainly a trap, or at least something designed to slow our progress.

“I think I see a way through,” Haruna said, and ran off towards an opening in the barricade, nimbly dodging a few crossbow bolts as the goblins fired at her. Saphira and Child-Killer followed suit, quickly closing the distance between the goblins and us.

I looked at Kos. We were both much slower than the rest of our group. Kos nodded at me, and said, “You go help out wherever you can. I’ll support you from the back,” as he unslung his crossbow. I thanked him and ran ahead as well.

By this time, Saphira was already face-to-face with one of the goblins hiding behind his makeshift cover. She ran over the pile of junk, causing several items to dislodge and collapse in on itself, but she was steady enough to not let it bother her. As the first goblin fell to Saphira’s assault, I noticed a shape shooting a crossbow bolt at Saphira’s back. I barely had enough time to yell out a warning, but Saphira couldn’t dodge the bolt in time. As Saphira fell to her knees, Haruna ran over to the shape to deal with the new threat.

Child-Killer followed Saphira’s example and ran over the pile of debris, ignoring the avalanche of rubble he caused, straight to the last goblin in sight. He simply tore an arm from the goblin’s body, and Gabby’s scythe quickly disposed of the rest of the enemy. I ran over to Saphira, but she seemed more shocked than anything else. As soon as I pulled the bolt from her back, she got up again as if nothing happened and ran after Haruna. I looked back at Kos, but he just shrugged and said, “Seems like they can handle themselves. Just do what you can. I will heal Saphira as soon as we’re safe again.”

I ran for the shape behind the barricade. By now, Haruna had already run around the barricade, cutting off any escape route the lone figure might have. As I got closer, I noticed that the shape was a human female, dressed in religious clothing, but I couldn’t make out which deity she belonged to. Saphira was throwing jabs at the female, but she seemed aware of the situation, and was on her guard.

“Come on, I need to do something,” I mumbled, “I don’t need to fight her, others are way more capable of that, I just need to provide support... But what?” As I hesitated, I took a good look around me again. While Child-Killer was gnawing on the detached goblin arm, Kos fired another bolt from his crossbow, just to keep the enemy at bay. Saphira apparently had had enough of the situation, dropped her weapon, and leapt over the barricade, while Haruna was still sneaking up on her. “Everyone has a specific role to fulfil, but what’s *my* role? What am I good at? I’m just an entertainer, distracting people from their worries by providing light-hearted entertainment.”

And then I realised. As long as I can distract that person, I’m providing enough help. I lifted my dress just a bit, to make sure it wouldn’t entangle my feet while I was dancing, and I started moving, kicking up my feet, whirling around, and generally showing as much leg as possible. “Hey lady, could you spare a few coppers for a poor performer?” I yelled, trying to grab her attention as much as possible, but to no avail. Saphira provided too big of a threat to be distracted by my twirling. As soon as I saw it had no effect, I dropped my performance, hoping I could do something else.

“Don’t worry, dancy lady,” Gabby said, as she raced past me, “I liked it! I’m sure the others will like it as well!” I blushed. Damn it. How come whenever I’m in a crowd I can tune everything out and get close with anyone, feeling absolutely no shame at all for getting intimate enough (perhaps a bit too intimate, I must admit) to get a little bit of extra coin, but

whenever I'm in a private conversation, I'm suddenly aware of my own looks and behaviour again?

While I was having my own personal crisis, Saphira's hands suddenly transformed into claws and she started attacking the female with them. Haruna attacked her as well, and managed to knock her out by a well-placed hit to the temple. As soon as Kos caught up with the rest of the group, she was already tied down. I was fine with killing goblins, they're annoying little pests, but I won't kill another human being, even if it attacked us first.

"Speak," Kos simply said when we brought her back to consciousness. "We'll deliver you to the authorities to deal with you as they see fit, but we will plead for a lighter punishment if you help us first. Why are you aiding goblins, and to what end?"

"M-many thanks for your graciousness. I was hired by Charvion. I do not know for what end, but he orchestrated this whole event. It's got something to do with the Pathfinder Society."

"Wait, so him getting kidnapped is part of the plan?" Haruna asked, incredulously.

"Apparently so. He's got plans for the Grand Lodge, something to do with scrolls hidden within the mausoleum."

"You mean to say," Saphira towered menacingly above the bound shape on the ground, "that Charvion managed to strike a deal with multiple dragons without horribly getting mauled in the process?"

"Yes, can't you hear what I'm saying?" The woman sounded irritated, annoyed by having to answer questions even she was probably wondering herself. Understandable. "But that's all I know, I was just a flunky in the big plan. All I had to do was provide a distraction, not a slaughter. Look, I regret my decisions, okay? Charvion's playing some one-man show, and the rest of us aren't happy with it, but--"

"The rest of *us*? Who's 'us,' exactly?" Saphira interrupted.

"Er... Me and the goblin crew, I mean," the woman hesitated, unconvincingly.

Saphira's hands transformed into claws again. Our captive actually, audibly *gulped*, then whispered, "The Shadow Lodge."

Suddenly, a great flash of blinding light erupted over the city and, for a moment, there was silence. Then another terrible explosion rocked the city. An enormous black dragon could be seen circling above the Grand Lodge, near the ghostly pillar of light. He roared and plunged toward the light.

"Let's not waste any more time," Kos said, "looks like we're needed elsewhere. Just leave her here. I hate to say it, but we don't have time for her. If she's lucky, she'll escape before we come back. If she's not, well, let's just hope the Dawnflower will be kind to you."

Chapter 5

When we reached the Grand Lodge, we all fell silent for a moment. Defying all recent memory, the Grand Lodge's great steel gates stood closed and fast. Now silent, the façade was heavily scarred with claw marks and acid burns. A long crack divided the arch above the doors, splitting the glyph of the open road. On the ground below, the shattered bodies of half a dozen men and women lay in the dust.

"Great, how do we get past this?" Kos wondered. While we were mulling this over, more Pathfinders started to appear, until there were nearly thirty of us standing before the gate.

"Come on," someone yelled, "if we all push, we might get this thing open!" To punctuate his statement, he hurled himself at the doors. It took a few minutes, but in the end, we all managed to push the door open, and were able to look at Skyreach, the Grand Lodge's fortress.

Defending Skyreach, a valiant group of Pathfinders lined the towers and stations along the fortress's exterior. On the grounds in front, a large black dragon lay in a crumpled heap, its corpse riddled with arrows and leaking acid and ichor. Charvion's forces appeared to have stormed the fortress, but the Pathfinders were able to take down the dragon, and now the courtyard was transformed from a battlefield to a place of slaughter. With the dragon dead, the goblin besiegers knew they had no chance, and started to flee. Most of the Pathfinders had already dispersed, running for the mausoleum, only our group was left to defend the gates.

A small group of injured goblins headed straight for us, most likely trying to escape from the battlefield. "All right, stand back," Kos ordered, raising his arm to hold us back, "we have no quarrel with these creatures. They might be evil, but we have more pressing matters to attend to."

But it was too late. Saphira broke off from the group and headed straight for two goblins. Kos sighed, pointed his outstretched arm forward, and threw a bolt of fire to one of them, immediately turning it to a smouldering heap of cinders. Two other goblins noticed the aggression aimed towards them, broke off from the group, and started to attack us. The combined efforts of Saphira, Haruna, and Child-Killer (and rider) were enough to dispose of them. Kos and I stood at the back of the fight, ready to act whenever necessary.

As predicted, the rest of the goblins ran past us without even looking at us, and when there was no goblin left in sight, the hooded man who gave us this mission in the first place appeared from the shadows. He looked injured, with several arrows sticking out of his body, and he limped visibly, but he waved Kos away when he tried to tend to his injuries.

"I have little time to speak. However, I must burden you with a suspicion that is now a reality."

"Let me guess," Haruna interrupted, "something to do with the Shadow Lodge?"

The man paled (an impressive feat, as he was already pale due to blood loss). "How did you know that? Wait, doesn't matter, there's no time for that. You are right, the Shadow Lodge is real. We have long suspected this might be the case, but we were never able to prove it."

"What's so special about this Lodge, anyway?" Gabby wondered.

"The Shadow Lodge exists to unite people with a common goal, much like others Lodges do the same. However, this Lodge is more interested in fulfilling its own interests, rather than working with other people for the betterment of all. They're not necessarily evil, but their methods and aims are... frowned upon by other faction leaders. We have no idea what their ultimate goal is, but I suspect that this is their grand entrance, to announce themselves to the world.

“We’ve gathered that Charvion wants something that’s hidden in the mausoleum,” Haruna said, “something to do with special scrolls.”

“Interesting... Well done, Pathfinders, your work is almost over, but the hardest part is yet to come. I must task you with stopping whatever plan Charvion’s hatching, because whatever it is, it can’t be good. I’m sorry I can’t be of much help, I must check on whatever is left of our Decemvirate.” With a nod, he headed back out of the gate, leaving us to our own devices.

Chapter 6

As we ran for the mausoleum, an enormous black dragon swept over Skyreach, breathing acid on the defenders in the towers, then roared with anger, and winged over to the mausoleum, landing on its roof, clearly intent to attack anyone foolish enough to approach the building.

“How in Sarenrae’s name are we going to defeat *that*?” Kos wondered aloud. “I’m not sure my crossbow can even reach that high up.”

“We don’t need to fight her,” Haruna pointed out, “we just need to sneak past her. Look, here comes our distraction.”

Indeed, while Haruna spoke, two groups of much stronger-looking Pathfinders headed towards the dragon, yelling to the remaining Pathfinders, “You deal with Charvion, we’ll take care of this!”

Grateful for the opportunity, we made a mad dash through the courtyard towards the mausoleum, but the dragon managed to spot us. Being too distracted by the other two groups, however, all she managed to do was crash her tail into the side of the building, causing a shower of rubble to rain on top of us. Luckily, the building didn’t collapse in on itself, but we all took quite a few hits to the head, nearly giving us all a concussion.

At the end of the courtyard, Kos mumbled a prayer and the sluggishness disappeared from my head, as if the rocks hadn’t harmed me at all. We all thanked Kos, and headed inside.

Inside, we found large, steel surgical tables, lined with texts, surgical instruments, and all sorts of tools used in alchemical and biological tests. Along the walls were shelves full of bottles with salts and embalming fluids, and beside them stood barrels and buckets that must have been used as waste receptacles. Gabby crinkled her nose, and Child-Killer sneezed due to the pungent smell of the room, and I wasn’t feeling much more comfortable, either.

“Let’s move on,” Saphira said, as she motioned us forward, “the less time I spend in this room, the better,” and ran straight ahead into the opening at the other side of the chamber. We all followed, not wanting to spend too much time in this macabre room.

This cavernous hallway contained a number of elaborate skeletal displays. The reassembled creations consisted of both accurate assemblies and imaginative creation built from the bones of multiple specimens. Several large, glass cylinders contained colonies of dermestid beetles for cleaning bones. Several had actively decaying specimens. Arches along the side lead to small workstations. Near the back sits another, larger work area filled with kilns, a hearth, and some large iron vats. In the middle of the floor, six corpses lay piled together in a pool of blood.

“Stand back, I need to see how these people died. I suspect foul play.” Kos stepped forward, intent on examining the bodies. But before he could reach the bloodslick, two goblins had popped up from behind a workbench, and started pushing a tank full of beetles off a table. Before any one of us had a clue what was going on, the container had crashed to the ground, releasing thousands of tiny, flesh-eating insects, and they were heading towards us.

Kos looked back at us, grinned, and said, “Hang on, I got this,” then turned back again, stretched out both of his arms, and yelled “You could have bathed in the light, but now it will burn you!” With that, a cone of flame shot from his fingertips, engulfing the swarm. When the fire had stopped, a surprising amount of beetles were still coming towards Kos, who looked shocked, and muttered, “Huh, this usually works...”

Always quick to react, Saphira started digging through her backpack, and then pulled out a flask of alcohol. “What are you doing?” I yelled, dumbfounded. “This is no time for a drink!”

“Oh, this isn’t for drinking,” Saphira replied with a shine in her eye, “I know I can do something much better with this.”

While I was distracted, Gabby rode Child-Killer into a side-chamber, hoping to circle around the goblins, and Haruna had made her way forward, slowly walking around the cluttered floor. I kept back, unsure of what to do in this situation.

Saphira was finished with doing who-knows-what to her bottle of booze, stood up again, and threw it at the still-smouldering group of insects. When it hit, it erupted into a ball of flames, and the chirring of the bugs rose to a deafening wail. Miraculously, some bugs still survived, and were upon Kos now, but Kos ducked out of the way, threw another small ball of fire from his fingers, and the last pieces of the swarm were burnt to a crisp.

The goblins saw their chance and surged forward, hoping to catch Kos unawares, but Child-Killer neatly intercepted them, grievously wounding one goblin, but they retaliated by nearly knocking Gabby out of her saddle. Gabby looked quite the worse for wear, but now she's situated herself in between the two goblins; escape was nearly impossible.

I finally came into action, deciding it was up to me to save her. I took a breath, started the music in my head again, and went through my dance routines, running through my repertoire looking for the flashiest dance I could remember. Let's just hope these buggers are easily entertained enough that I can distract them so Gabby can escape, and let us take care of them. I decided on an old crowd-favourite, something where my dress twirled up high enough that you could almost, but not quite, see my undergarments. Indeed, one goblin looked over at me, his eyes glazed over, and completely forgot about the tiger-riding gnome right in front of her. Sucker.

By then, Haruna had reached the group, and managed to knock the injured goblin out of commission. But instead of escaping, Child-Killer unleashed his claws and teeth on the last goblin, and one quick swing of Gabby's scythe sealed the goblin's fate. At least it died with a smile on its face, I guess.

I continued dancing for a while, feeling too elated to stop mid-routine, but I stopped when I heard a thunderous roar from outside. Almost forgot there's a dragon ready to eat us above our very heads, and we were on a timer. Whoops.

The dragon roared again, but somehow the roar changed pitch and volume until the last thing we heard was a "**RRROOOAARRR**_{ribbit}," and an explosion of cheers resounded from outside of the mausoleum. We looked at each other in confusion, until a Pathfinder came running inside, and said, "We polymorphed the dragon into a frog! No need to worry about that anymore, let's just all head for Charvion!"

Chapter 7

After a quick ministration by Kos, we ran on. While we were fighting the goblins, other teams had run ahead and were taking care of the rest of the mausoleum. We ran through the area used to store the bodies (I saw a glimpse of some skeletal-looking things writhing around on the ground), the incinerator room and the library (both curiously empty of threats). Gabby took a quick look at the books in the library, but they all had to do with necromancy: anatomical references, funerary rites of various cultures, death ceremonies, toxins, tinctures, and similar morbid works. She stuck out her tongue, said “Yeurch,” and quickly put the book back before heading on.

We arrived in a room whose sole feature was the strange, metal cage sprawled in the centre of the room like a great, undulating, skeletal lotus. Long tendrils of translucent ether lash violently from the artifact, while crackles of eerie light dance across the metal frame and up into the ghostly pillar that erupts from the centre of the device into the night sky. A dozen bodies surround the pulsating cage, flopping on the floor and convulsing madly. To make matters even worse, the other side of the room was locked.

“Let’s just make a mad dash for the other side of the room,” Saphira said, “I’m sure that if we’re fast enough, these tendrils won’t be able to harm us. Over there, we’ll figure out how to break through the lock.”

“Easy for you to say,” Kos remarked, “You’re about twice as fast as I am. This armour slows me down quite a bit, I’m pretty certain I won’t be able to dodge these things.”

“Fair point,” Saphira says, “what do you suggest, then?”

“As much as it hurts me to say this, but... Could you help me out of my armour?” Kos grins sheepishly, “I’m faster without it, and I’ll put it back on once we’re past the cage. I’d rather take my chances with these tendrils unarmoured than to spend any more time around it than I need.”

“Sure thing.” And with that, Saphira helped undress Kos.

When Kos was nearly freed from his armour, the group of Pathfinders who defeated the dragon showed up, looking around the room, assessing the situation. They nodded towards each other, ran for the other side of the room, and simply bashed through the locks in one attack.

“Well, that takes care of that. Let’s just put my armour back on again. I don’t think we have the time when we’re on the other side of the room,” Kos said, hoisting up his just-removed armour again.

We all (although Kos slightly slower) dashed towards the other side of the room, miraculously enough dodging all of the tendrils, and we were ready to finally face Charvion.

Chapter 8

There we stood, about 30 Pathfinders in total, ready to face what was on the other side of the door. Kos performed a quick prayer to Sarenrae, asking her for her blessing during this fight. Another cleric healed whoever needed it. Wizards leafed through their spellbooks. Some warriors counted their arrows, checked their weapons, and readjusted their armour. This is what we've all been waiting for. We would go down into history as the group that took down Charvion and his army of goblins, dragons, and his Shadow Lodge, or we would die trying. We were prepared for anything. We kicked open the door, ready to take down Charvion.

We were all expecting Charvion's big entrance, announcing the Shadow Lodge's plans for Golarion, an overly long monologue that ended with empty promises of our doom. I mean, that's what we've learned from all the stories, right? No adventure can conclude without an epic speech about the world being reshaped according to the evildoer's desires, the heroes in turn defying the villain, the villain exclaiming how weak the heroes are and that he will crush them like a bug. Someone will undoubtedly make a witty retort, then the battle would commence. That's how every epic quest concludes, that's what most of us have been hoping for ever since the dragons appeared above the Irorium: a heroic conclusion to a heroic tale.

Whatever our expectations, reality was quick to disappoint.

On the other side of the door, we found Charvion kneeling on the ground, covering his head with his hands, sobbing and warding off the spirits that still clung to him from the spirit cage. "Why won't they leave me *alone*?" Charvion wailed, as another spirit flew through his body, wracking him with pain.

Charvion looked up, straight at us, and started to laugh maniacally. "So, you think you can stop me? I'd like to see you try," he managed to say, in between fits of laughter. "In fact, I think I'd be better off *dead*!" He almost screamed these last words at us, and his last word was punctuated by a nimbus of white flame erupting about him, which then exploded, sending several different versions of Charvion flying about the room. They all stood up and laughed, and in one loud chorus they all said, "Come and fight me, Pathfinders. Your days are numbered!"

Sensing our cue, we all stormed into the room, each group tackling a different flickering, yet still solid-looking version of Charvion. Child-Killer was the first of us to react, and managed to tear out a reasonable chunk of Charvion's side, but he didn't seem to care. Haruna and Saphira managed to catch up with Child-Killer and Gabby, but were unable to reach our opponent. Charvion, in turn, turned towards Gabby, cackled maniacally, and shot some magic darts at her, hitting her full in the chest. Gabby was almost blown out of her saddle, but managed to stay upright.

Kos made a run for Gabby, sensing she couldn't survive another blast like that, and cured her of her injuries through divine magic. "I'm out of juice. It's up to you, now," Kos said as he gave an encouraging slap to Child-Killer's side. "Make it count, girl." Gabby nodded her thanks, and swung her scythe at Charvion. Then Child-Killer opened up his onslaught on Charvion, and he certainly looked the worse for wear.

I ran over to Kos as I watched Saphira and Haruna tear apart Charvion (literally, in Saphira's case, as she was using her claws again), and said, "They seem capable of taking care of themselves."

"Yeah, they're quite an efficient team, the four of them. But I'm sure they'd appreciate it if you helped out a bit as well." As if to emphasise his words, he shot another jet of fire from his fingers, causing Charvion to stumble back in pain, and simply blink out of existence.

Our enemy was gone, but there were still lots of other Charvion-copies in the room. I agreed with Kos, I needed to start pulling my own weight around here. So far, I hadn't contributed to the fight, and although the other groups seemed to be taking care of themselves,

things could go sour at any moment. And indeed, when I took my time to look around, I saw other groups having problems of their own. I saw one Charvion turning a person into a slug, and in another area of the room, Charvion had managed to confuse some people, causing them to attack each other, instead of him.

“Curious,” I said.

“What?” Kos growled, annoyed to be distracted from the fight again.

“Other copies seem to be using very different powers than the one we were fighting.”

“Well, I see some Pathfinders with magical items and weapons, and some people are using spells and powers I haven’t even heard of. They must be much more powerful than we are, so I guess Charvion has to use more power against them, as well.”

“But why doesn’t our Charvion do that? Or against all of us?”

“Why do you even care?” Kos retorted. “Sounds like you’re disappointed. Anyway, my guess is that there’s still only so much power Charvion can use. He’s spreading his power equally over all of his copies, is my guess. He’s giving each copy enough power that they’ll wear us down in the end, instead of focusing all of his power in one attack, and risking that some people will live through it.”

“Sounds reasonable,” I said. I wanted to argue some more, but one more copy detached itself from the group and headed straight for us, forcing me to focus back on the fight again.

I cleared my throat, emptied my mind of thoughts, and took a few deep breaths. The music comes naturally to me; having spent so long on the street, I can find a rhythm in almost any background noise. I started making some sweeping motions with my arms, bent at my knees and started weaving a performance out of the flowing movements I’ve seen some monks use to meditate. I didn’t even pay attention to Charvion anymore, I would sense from the sounds of my surroundings whether it had any effect or not.

Apparently it did; Charvion was either so confused about my sudden performance that he even forgot about what was going on around him, or he was fascinated by it, as was my intention. In the end, it worked out well for us, as Charvion stood there gaping at me while Saphira snuck up behind him and planted her claws in his back, causing this ghostly apparition to disappear as well.

A third Charvion approached us, but now we had a tactic ready: Child-Killer and Haruna blocked his escape routes, Kos on the lookout and prepared to shoot any new visitors, and Saphira and I performing the distraction team-up. Indeed, while Haruna took another blow from magical darts shooting from Charvion’s fingers, they also dished out a lot of damage, and by now, this copy looked pretty terrible as well.

Or so I’ve been told after the fight was over. I was still busy dancing, vaguely aware of the situation around me. I could feel that the dynamic’s shifted again, so I switched up my dancing as well. I neared the end of my routine, and I smoothly transitioned into an exuberant twirling dance, something akin to the dervish demonstrations I used to watch, grabbing Charvion’s attention once more. I smiled. We’re beating up enough ghosts that it should be over in a matter of minutes now. I could feel the ghostly presences around me dying down, and with that, the sound of battle as well.

Charvion lashed out at Haruna again, but was too distracted by my tempestuous twisting and turning that Haruna easily managed to dodge the claws. Saphira buried both of her claws into this Charvion’s back as well, and it dissipated with a shriek of frustration.

Then, suddenly, all the remaining apparitions snapped back into the centre of the room, and formed one, opaque Charvion once again. He fell to his knees, heavily wounded and gasping for breath, and yelled out in frustration, “Gah, fooled by the same parlour trick twice in a row!”

Something in the other room audibly *clunked*, and a strange humming sound emanated from the spirit cage. Charvion started to be pulled back to the cage, clearly struggling against the spirits that drew him in. None of us dared to interfere. Pretty soon, Charvion reached the artifact and, caught for one moment on the edge of the light's eclipse, hands wrapped around the cage itself, mouthed the words, "Help me!" before a second burst of light enveloped his body, pulling the Pathfinder out of existence. As suddenly as it began, the room went dark and silent, and Charvion was no more.

The crowd erupted into a cheer again. The siege was over, the dragon was turned into a frog, and Charvion was transported to a different plane entirely. Things had taken a weird turn here and there, but in the end, we were all still in one piece. We all breathed a sigh of relief. We gathered up, went to a bar, and got so blisteringly drunk that I completely forgot how this mess all ended. I'm sure the Pathfinder Society eventually found out what had happened (I saw the cleric we left behind walking through Absalom the other day, so I'm pretty sure she got a nice deal out of it when she spilled the beans on Charvion's plan. Her name's Melyra, by the way. We shared some drinks together. Great person, just too bad of her questionable choice in deity) and took safety measures to make sure it would never happen again.

What happened to the spirit cage? I don't know, and honestly, I don't care. I'm sure it's stuffed in an unmarked wooden crate in the Pathfinder Society's warehouses somewhere. I hear that's what they usually do with ancient relics adventurers risked their lives to obtain.

As for me, the Pathfinder Society offered me a job as a Pathfinder. I still perform on the streets or in an inn whenever I'm not on a mission, to shake things up a bit. Sure, it's not as exciting as raiding tombs, acting as a bodyguard, or getting people in or out of a sticky situation, but it's much easier and safer work. At the end of a day of performing, I know I'll have earned enough money to last for a while without having risked my life for it, or angered a group of people I shouldn't have messed with. Speaking of which, I have a show here tomorrow night, I'd be glad to perform for you. Storytelling isn't my strong suit; you should see me dance to make your mind up whether my skills really are as good as I say. Oh, you're buying me another wine? Much appreciated. Any chance you can spare me a few coppers as well? Thanks a bunch, honey...