

SHATTERED STAR



OLD FRIENDS

PATHFINDER'S JOURNAL: LIGHT OF A DISTANT STAR 1 OF 6

As soon as I saw the gnome, I knew trouble couldn't be far behind. It was only the merest glimpse of her, a flash of green somewhere out there in the lawless, jostling crowds of Riddleport's Wharf District, but that one glance was all I needed.

I had most definitely not been looking for an adventure, not in this place. In the few months since my arrival, I had adopted the habit of keeping my head down and my hood up, covering the elven ears and blonde braid that attracted too much of the wrong kind of attention. Even Mordimor clinging with a badger's tenacity to my shoulder seemed to elicit fewer stares than the sight of

an unaccompanied woman, clearly neither pirate nor whore, walking these seedy streets. Life in Riddleport, most anarchic of Varisia's cities, had taught me to keep my head down, my clothes baggy, my stride masculine, and my dagger close at hand.

But upon sighting that familiar, unmistakable green hair, I didn't hesitate to push through the hot spaces of the crowd to verify what I already knew instinctively. I had not seen Shess, nor any of my Magnimarian friends, since we parted soon after docking in Riddleport's silty common harbor. The excited knot in my gut and the recklessness with which I made my way toward her—one knife-armed

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fishmonger threatened to gut me for treading on his bootless toe, and only a warning hiss from Mordimor backed him off—had undermined the lie I told myself whenever thoughts of my friends should intrude upon my work. I had missed them. It was that simple, and that honest realization felt like the first salve of comfort in a long summer of exile.

I also felt trouble in my bones, and the sight of Shess confirmed it.

She was marching with girlish enthusiasm at the head of a gang of some of the worst-looking wharf dogs I had ever laid eyes on. Even in a city that, in places, is little more than extended shore leave for the most nefarious, notorious, and downright depraved seamen in all of Varisia, Shess and her pack stood out.

“Out the way, bilge drinkers!” Shess wailed. She had changed one set of outlandish finery for another since the last time I had seen her, clomping along in heavy hobnailed boots beneath the rough-cut hem of billowy silk pantaloons dyed a vibrant crimson. In contrast, a suit of corseted leather armor snugged and shaped her torso to exaggerated effect, calling to mind the sort of thing you might pay extra to see in the back room of a Calistriian temple. In her tiny fist she brandished a battered tricorne hat, and at her waist she wore the same short sword I had seen her use to such deadly effect when last we were in Magnimar. Her face was red from shouting. “Make way for the Char Street Clippers, you bunyip-lovin’ sons of seacows!”

The crowd parted, but not without first cursing and yelling imprecations at Shess and her bunch of thugs. Like Shess, her gang wore a motley of styles and mismatched bits of armor and gear, as if they had made a random sampling of all the lands north of the Arch. But what was endearing in Shess seemed a symptom of derangement in her followers. The incongruity of the childlike gnome leading a band of cutthroats and sea dogs seemed at least as intimidating to onlookers as the notched blades and well-used cudgels each of the thugs brandished openly as they loped along with the aggressive assurance of natural predators.

As soon as I had taken in the scene I moved back further into the crowd, ducking behind a trio of colorfully dressed Garundi traders and trying to maneuver out of the line of sight of Shess and her gutter sharps. For a moment I doubted that it had actually been her, and not some other green-haired gnome. A dozen speculations as to the meaning of what I had seen began to swarm within me. How well did I know her, really?

I paused for a tense moment as Shess and her coterie moved by, fighting the urge to just go back to my real business in Riddleport and my already overdue appointment with my employer, Gundsric. I should

just do what the Lodge expected me to do, my duty as a member of the Pathfinder Society, and forget about this mad piece of happenstance. I thought of Master Shaine, and his ironic, often cryptic warnings to us about the dangers of storytelling. “Seek truth, not tales,” he would say. “If you look first for a story, you’ll always find one.”

Well, I had found my story, and I couldn’t help but follow it.

As the locals say, summer is the worst time to visit Riddleport—except for all the other seasons. The air is stifling, dense with heat and salt-tanged humidity and the radiant warmth of ten thousand unwashed bodies. Thumbnail-sized black flies buzz around the chaotic middens and trash heaps left by an ungovernable populace. In places, the open sewers create an air so fetid that you have to hold your breath to keep your stomach down. Riddleport rests between two great insulating spurs of rugged rock, and the winding, narrow streets and leaning buildings found across much of the shore-side sections of the city trap the hot summer air in stagnant pockets. At night there is some relief when the ocean air blows strong toward the land, but holdouts can always be found, seemingly unreachable bubbles of heat and foul air that refuse to relinquish their dominion over the muddy streets and overflowing gutters.

All of which affects the mood of the pirates, smugglers, thieves, and mercenary scum that are the lifeblood of the city’s erratically beating heart. Moving swiftly in the wake of the gnome and her wolf pack, I wove through the mob, heading southwest toward the deepwater docks and the caulking yards. The aroma of hot pitch and sawdust crept in among the pervading odor of sewer, sweat, and rotting shellfish. I slowed my progress as, ahead of me, one of Shess’s thugs clubbed a brawny dockworker out of the way and the crowd, teetering on the edge of riot, roared and spat curses in half a dozen languages.

“Filth like that keeps this town down,” a gap-toothed, skinny young man in rough-spun cloth said on my right, clearly trying to engage my attention. Immediately suspicious, I tensed, and felt a faint contact on my left. I whirled and smacked away a boy’s hand as he fumbled at my belt pouch clasp. Mordimor bristled on my shoulder, emitting a rasping hiss that chilled even my blood. The would-be pickpocket—a boy of no more than ten years—dodged away into the crowd, and I turned back to face his accomplice. The man simply smirked and held his hands up in a helpless gesture, and I noted his red-rimmed, squinting eyes, one of the telltale signs of gleam addiction. He backed away, slipping into the crowd until he became just another part of the ever-moving tide of humanity.

I noticed then that my dagger was in my hand. I didn’t remember drawing it. Two months in Riddleport had

honed a certain feral instinct within me, more so even than the years I had spent traveling the wilds of Avistan with my father. Something about Riddleport breaks down the civilizing barriers that those of us possessing a healthy moral compass erect against our inner savage. The city is a knife-edge of instinct and aggression, and few are immune to its influence for long. And to think I had once been excited to come here.

Shess and her gang were moving again, and I followed, trying to do so with minimal disruption. Keep the head down, use the peripheral vision, never make eye contact. The armed sea-killers of a dozen pirate crews swarmed these streets in various states of drunken belligerence and with little censure from the local gendarmes of Overlord Cromarcky—himself the chief crime lord in a city of crime. You took your life into your own hands in Riddleport, and the biggest surprise of all was that more people weren't killed or maimed or robbed at knifepoint on any given day.

Halfway across a square in which armed guards collected tolls for the use of a hand-pumped well, Shess and some of her thugs turned in my direction, shouting. For a tense moment I knew I had been seen, that they would come after me, and that the Shess I had so briefly known had slid down into some strange abyss of violent criminality that would make murdering me seem perfectly sensible to her gnome mind. But it was something else they barked about, someone else they had seen, and the pack moved on. I followed, heartbeat gradually slowing back to something approaching normal, Mordimor chattering on my shoulder in an attempt to soothe me.

The narrow maze of streets necessitated that I stay closer to my quarry than I would have preferred, so scares like that were inevitable. The principles of tracking a game animal through woodland and tailing a person around town share much in common, perhaps more than those who have only ever attempted one and not the other could ever realize. Having lived in both worlds, I would say that creatures of the two legged variety are generally easier to track, at least if you have some passing familiarity with their environment. Unlike the predictable behavior of elk or deer, however, most people have a nasty tendency to do something unexpected should they spot a tail, such as sound an alarm, lay an ambush, or start flinging spells. While the fundamental truth of remaining undetected applies to both situations, the results of failure are radically different.

Emerging from a switchback alley in which I had been forced to drop ever farther behind Shess and her gang lest they see me, I came upon a broad, gas-lamp-lined street slanting seaward, one of the main thoroughfares of the Wharf District. I caught the briefest glimpse of one

of Shess's trailing thugs rounding a corner to my left, which placed them in a section of bunkhouses and pitch sheds that served the wharves. The street here was wider and better cared for, with most of its cobbles still intact, unlike the patchy, ankle-rolling mud ruts I had just passed through. But what really caught the eye was a sight I never tired of, a reminder not only of my true purpose in Riddleport, but of my life's goal, and my reason for returning to Varisia after a decade's travel across Avistan.

The Cyphergate.

Neither the largest nor the most spectacular of Thassilonian monuments, the 'Gate nevertheless stands out as unique. No doubt this is partly due to the way most visitors first encounter it. Coming out of the Varisian Gulf, edging slowly into Riddleport's harbor, all travelers pass under that massive, rune-inscribed arch. Its dimensions are unusual, however, as the Cyphergate is not an architecturally sound arch at all, but rather a true section of a circle, one that many scholars believe continues underground to form a perfect ring of stone. Thus we pass not under it, but through it—a distinction that is no mere semantic argument for anyone who has done so. When last I had seen Shess, she had taken a little girl's delight in imitating the many sailor's rituals and wards that the seamen enacted whenever their ships passed through the 'Gate. Now it seemed she may have crossed the line from imitating pirates to becoming one.

Even with the Cyphergate looming in the middle distance, it is easy to scoff at such superstition. But aboard ship, sliding slowly beneath the ancient, inscrutable stone, all scholarly detachment vanishes, and one is left instead with an imagination laid bare, raw right down to the bone. It is not fear that causes the crews to cover their heads, flash the tines, or recite a few lines of crude verse in Varisian. Rather, it is awe—awe in the awareness that the age and mystery of the great arch eclipses the entirety of their experience with an utter and nearly annihilating sense of timelessness. It is a thing perhaps only ever felt, and never truly articulated, though we Pathfinders might find ourselves without vocation should we ever stop trying.

I picked up my pace. As always, I longed to linger and marvel at the great monument. Despite my hard-won familiarity with Thassilonian script—the language of the empire that once ruled these lands—the runes of the Cyphergate remained a prevailing mystery. Some have suggested that they are mere decoration, which to me seems about as sensible as stenciling a pretty flower on the Starstone. No, to dismiss what we do not know with such a banal explanation undermines the very fabric of our motivations as scholars and explorers. It is to suggest that these relics are only truly significant because of their pedigree, and not their inherent power. As much as I may disagree with the Cyphermages in their obsessive

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approach to studying the 'Gate, they have at least never been guilty of the sin of too little imagination.

Drawing my hood close, I slipped around the corner, catching sight of green-haired Shess in the distance as I lost the Cyphergate behind a long row of three-story bunkhouses. But the 'Gate lingered with me, like the afterimage of some bright star, and I felt as if I could close my eyes and redraw the entire monument from memory—not just what I had seen, but all of it, even those portions hidden from mortal view for millennia. It was an exhilarating sensation, this heightened intuition, and one that had become familiar during my stay in Riddleport. Testament, I thought, to some newly achieved level of visceral understanding, a finely realized integration of my scholarly and imaginative impulses.

I stayed along the line of the bunkhouses, ignoring the looks or occasional comments from the dockhands, mates, carpenters, and tar-spattered caulkers I passed. The crowd here had thinned out, and Shess's gang made better time. Again they slipped around a corner farther ahead, moving toward the harbor, and I quickened my pace.

It was quieter here, as if the summer heat had muffled all sound in a damp blanket. The air was thick with the almost overwhelming smell of pine tar and charcoal fires. I flattened myself against the final bunkhouse's wall—clinker-built like the hull of some northman's linnorm-prowed raider—and peered around the corner.

Shess and her gang had stopped a stone's throw away in the lot of a vacant pitch yard immediately behind the bunkhouse. Half concealed by barrels of tar and stacked bundles of oakum, another armed gang of thugs was rapidly forming up to bar Shess's passage. The two forces squared off, spitting and shouting, waving their weapons in the air.

With a shock, I realized that the tall, regal-looking man leading the other gang, Shess's opposite number in this drama, was also known to me from my time in Magnimar.

Just then, Mordimor chirped a warning.

"Tazza, Explorer-Queen of Arcadia, makes an important discovery," whispered a well-known voice from behind me.

"And Kalashar the Unvanquishable, Deadliest Blade in All Casmaron," I said, smiling despite myself as the old names of childhood came back to me, "has a whole hell of a lot of explaining to do." Mordimor let out a quiet bark of agreement as we turned toward this third familiar face of the afternoon.

"That I do, Taldara—but not here." Kostin Dalackz, my oldest friend and the man I had been avoiding since we both set foot in Riddleport two months ago, flashed

his lopsided, rakish smile and gestured that I should follow. I did, feeling at once relieved and apprehensive.

"How long were you tailing Shess? Did she see you?" Kostin led us into the same bunkhouse I had been hiding behind. I lowered my hood. The place seemed empty save for a few rats that scampered away as we entered, though obviously it was still in use by a couple of dozen workers. Seeing my scrutiny of the rows of straw bunks spanning each wall, and perhaps sensing my anxiety, Kostin gave my non-badger-bearing shoulder a gentle pat. "Relax, I bought off everybody in this place for the day. We're finally doing the job."

The job. I had been there for Kostin's last "job," a bit of skullduggery that had apparently irritated certain parties in the Night Scales, one of Magnimar's nastiest thieves' guilds, to the point that it was suggested we leave town. Suggested, that is, by a certain Sczarni crime boss of Kostin's acquaintance, who happily provided us passage on an outgoing crayer at no charge—so long as Kostin took care of a little job for him once in Riddleport.

Kostin must have seen my frown. He dropped his hand from my shoulder and stepped back, taking me in from boots to braid, really looking at me for the first time.

**"MORDIMOR IS MORE COMPETENT
THAN MOST HUMANOID COMPANIONS."**



"You look tired," he said.

He, on the other hand, looked good—"purposed with life" as my father would say, though the phrase sounds better in Elven. Riddleport seemed to agree with him, confirming what little I had heard about his antics over the last few months. His dark hair was shorter than it had been since we were kids running through the streets of Magnimar brandishing broomstick swords; Kalashar and Tazza killing giants and mapping distant, uncharted lands. I had seen a bit of this change in him aboard ship as Kostin's Varisian blood stirred at the prospect of travel to other lands. After a lifetime, albeit an eventful one, cooped up in Magnimar, Kostin was finally on the road,

**"IN RIDDLEPORT,
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as was every Varisian's birthright. He positively glowed, and his brown eyes danced as if he were privy to some private joke between himself and the universe.

"You don't know how tired, Kostin. But do you care to explain why Shess and Aeventius seem about to start a gang war out there?" It came out as somewhat petulant, and I winced. I was too on-edge. Our last days on the ship had been awkward, and our parting perfunctory. I was irritated at having run into him like this, and at having not expected it. Most of all, I was angry with myself for being angry in the first place, to put so much stock in this moment with Kostin in a squalid little bunkhouse while outside I could hear a score or more people readying to shed each other's blood.

"Think of it as a play, a bit of opera." Kostin broke eye contact to move over to a south-facing window, little more than a ship-style porthole. I followed. We peered out, both of us stooping slightly, our heads close. He smelled of oil and leather and smoke. "Shess needs to get in good with the Clippers. She's been doing this and that for them—you know, Shess-style jobs. Now she has to do something big."

Outside, the two gangs faced each other, fanning out to fill the tight confines of the yard. I couldn't see Shess at all, as the cluster of thugs standing behind her completely blocked the tiny gnome from view. I could, however, see Aeventius quite clearly, dressed as ever in expensive clothing more suited to a nobleman's ball than a tussle in a pitch yard. The wizard was standing with icy arrogance while one of his lieutenants ranted and spat at the intruders.

"This is 'the something big,'" Kostin said, just as Aeventius, seemingly tired of the exchange, made a casual gesture that knocked one of Shess's Clipper boys—a man standing some twenty feet away from the wizard—sprawling into the dirt of the yard as if he had been felled by a mallet to the skull. The two sides immediately converged upon one another like packs of starved wolfhounds, and Mordimor and I both flinched at the suddenness and ferocity of the fight.

Kostin chuckled. "Aevy did a great job getting these pitch yard boys to provoke the Clippers—the promise of gold and his insufferably overbearing nature really worked wonders." Outside a wave of painfully vivid multicolored light swept over a part of Aeventius's crew, blinding or stunning half of them. That would be Shess's handiwork. Kostin and I both instinctively turned away from the flash, our faces very close now.

"Of course..." Kostin beamed like the kid I had known, the kid he still was in many ways. "Aevy and I were setting them up all along to be hammered by the Clippers as part of Shess's full initiation."

Looking back at the chaos outside, I watched Shess roll under the legs of an adze-wielding assailant and spring up behind him, driving her short blade through the small of his back. He dropped in agony, revealing the delighted

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face of the gnome, her tricorne hat somehow still affixed to her head. The Char Street Clippers were outclassing Aeventius's gang, most of whom I now noticed were armed with little more than tools and other makeshift weapons. A great many had already scattered for cover among the barrels and sheds of the caulking yard.

The wizard stood archly among the mayhem, occasionally staggering an attacker with a flick of his finger. Then, with a gesture as elegant as a composer conducting a Chelish symphony, he cast a different sort of spell.

Aeventius disappeared.

In the very next instant he reappeared a few paces away, took a step, and winked out of sight once more.

"A new one," Kostin said. "He seems to really like it."

The wizard was moving toward the bunkhouse, blinking in and out of the startled crowd. Once he came within inches of Shess, who feigned a thrust in his direction with convincing sincerity. Aeventius was running now, his progress difficult to follow.

In fact he was running directly toward us where we stood watching him through the porthole, but there was no door on this side of the building.

"Uh, we need to move back now."

Fascinated by what I was seeing, I didn't move.

"Tal..."

Aeventius continued to appear and disappear in a manner almost hypnotic. One falcion-wielding thug almost hit him with a wild swing, and Aeventius promptly stepped into the man's guard and dropped him with a precise uppercut. Few suspected a wizard of packing that much punch, but I knew he had once made a study of the art of boxing—part of a street hustle Kostin and he had perfected years ago. Aeventius blinked out of existence again before the man even hit the ground.

And appeared right outside our window an instant later, running full speed toward the wall.

"Tal!" Kostin took hold of my arm and tugged.

Where there had been two of us, there were now three—the wizard hit us like a runaway carriage as he passed through the plank wall. There was a loud smack, as if someone had actually been thrown against the wall rather than run *through* it, and a yelp of pain. Kostin's tug had got me out of the worst of it, but he had pulled me off balance as Aeventius plowed into us. I whirled, feeling Mordimor fly free of my shoulder, and toppled into a bunk on the other side of the narrow room.

Kostin, clinging to me, fell atop me in a sprawl, face to face.

In the second of stillness that followed, I heard Aeventius's muffled moan. I twisted my head to see the wizard lying on his back, no longer flashing in and out of reality. Mordimor, by some twist of badger luck, was wrapped belly-down around the nobleman's head.

"Arrgh!" Aeventius said, flailing himself into a sitting position as Mordimor hopped off him, bristling. Both were spitting, though for different reasons. Aeventius cast a baleful eye at the embarrassing tangle Kostin and I had made on the straw mattress.

"Glad to see you're keeping yourself entertained, Kostin—and what the hell is she doing here?" Aeventius rose to his feet, rubbing his back as if it pained him. Walking through walls was apparently not without its consequences.

"It worked just as we planned, Aevy." Kostin settled into a comfortable spread atop me. "Real good job out—"

I pushed him off of me and out of the bed, and he tumbled to the floor with a grunt.

"Save it!" I said, pointing to the window as I swung out of the bunk. "What about Shess's thugs?"

But Aeventius was already up and scanning the yard through the window. "She's leading them away, toward the docks, though a few have stayed behind to take some trophies. They'll round up the stragglers and kill them. No loss—they were a truly tedious bunch of dullards."

"Trophies?" I asked, a queasy sensation in the pit of my stomach.

"Ears." Aeventius turned to smile at me. "Why did you think they were called the 'Clippers?'"

"Then it seems the pocket is half picked, my friends." Kostin, regaining his feet, moved between Aeventius and me and threw an arm over our shoulders, squeezing us into an embrace. "Let's go get that scepter. You in, Tal?"

I had been in this position before, and had thought then that it wasn't what I had wanted. I had just seen men die. Die because these two desired to steal something—a scepter?—for a Sczarni cutthroat and fence. I looked at Aeventius, scowling as he pushed Kostin's arm away; the wizard was a callous and self-obsessed elitist. Kostin, next to me, was smiling, eyes alight with the prospect of pulling a job; my friend the thief, the cad, the con man. They were asking me to do what I swore to myself I would never do again, and asking as if they were bound for something no more odious than a picnic in the hills.

I thought of the dying dwarf Gundsric, my real reason for being in Riddleport, no doubt furious I had missed our daily appointment. I thought too of Master Shaine, shaking his head in disappointment as I weighed the needs of the truth and the needs of the tale.

I looked at Mordimor, head cocked in consideration, one clawed forepaw raised as if he were uncertain which way to run.

"I'm in," I said, almost without meaning to. Kostin hugged me in triumph as Aeventius sneered.

They were both talking now, fast—about their plans, about the job—but I wasn't listening. All I could do was wonder if I had really chosen this story for myself, or if it had in fact chosen me.