The Dice Must Roll
Chapter 4: The Shadow Speaks
By Draconicon

Once they finished their witness reports with the cops, the party gradually split. Greg was dragged off by Ailsa, the pair of them planning to figure out what the fuck was going on with the DM and how he had just stood off to the side. Lorkos, embarrassed at what had happened to him in the alley, had gone off in his car for a drink. Ryker…

Well, Charlie didn't know where Ryker went. That folf had been the angriest of the bunch of them, though, and seemed to be on the hunt for something. If anyone managed to tick that guy off further, the panther felt that their chances of avoiding a beating were pretty low.

As for him, he thought it'd be better to make himself scarce for a while. Maybe grab a coffee and calm down, see if he could figure things out a little better. But that turned out to be a bit more complicated than he expected.

Charlie had barely made it to an intersection when he realized that things had changed further than expected. The streets had gone from simple pavement to cobblestone, and the cars were...older. Not older as in more aged, but older models, with the newest one on the road looking like a classic from the previous century. Some of them were barely running at all, with people having to get out and turn cranks to get the engines to run properly again.

And that was only the start. At the first intersection, Charlie tried to cross normally, but lacking lights or anything else, he realized that he would have to dodge around everything. And when he first tried, he found himself rooted to the spot, fixed in place.

"The hell…"

He tried to pull himself off the sidewalk, but his feet wouldn't leave the ground. He could take a step back, yes, but moving forward was next to impossible. And it shouldn't have been.

Side to side? Fine.

Backwards? Fine.

Forward, as long as he didn't try to cross the street? Fine.

Crossing the street? Might as well have been trying to climb through brick.

The panther glared at the vehicles darting by, then blinked. So far…

Everything else has been about the dice, he thought, rooting through his pockets until he found the container. *If we had to roll to fight back then, roll to attack people...and convince others…*

He pulled out the green d20. It was still glowing, too, which didn't exactly make him feel good about this. The panther hesitated, then rolled the little thing at his feet.

Just like that, he felt free. He snapped up the dice - it had come up at a 14, with a +3 bonus for dexterity and another +3 from tumbling giving him a 20 - and finally managed to step down from the sidewalk.

And he started backflipping.

"Ah, ah, ah, ahhhh, AHHHHHHH!"

He was screaming by the time he got to the other side of the street, having felt the brushes of cars going by every few feet. His fur was wild, sticking up like he had just been struck by lightning, but he had gotten to the other side completely untouched. Somehow. By backflipping.

He looked down at the dice again, shaking his head.

"Okay, that...okay, it was cool, but no. No, no, no, no, no, not again, no."

They went right back in his pocket, and he resumed his search for a coffee shop.

#

Six dice rolls later - two more to tumble across streets, one to 'fight' a bird that wouldn't leave him alone, and three times to regain his sense of direction - Charlie felt something shift. He stumbled, caught his balance...and realized that he'd done it without having to use the dice.

The panther spun in place. Behind him, the city was completely covered in cobblestone streets, old cars, dim buildings, and nothing but gas lamps for lighting. In the direction he'd been walking, it was modern again, and -

He looked at his dice. They no longer glowed.

So...the game only works there?

Confirming his guess when he found that his snake was missing, the panther wasn't sure if he was relieved or not. The fact that the game was spreading, that it was covering more and more of the city as it went out, was definitely not a good thing. Who knew where - or even if - it would eventually stop? It could go far enough to cover the whole city, or even the whole country. They didn't know enough about it to say anything for sure.

On the other hand, it was good to be past the ridiculousness of having to roll the dice for everything that he did, and better to be back in reality. Maybe, just maybe, the game would continue to expand slowly, or maybe it was already done. In either case, he couldn't do anything about it right at the moment.

Where's a freaking coffee shop…

#

He eventually found an off-chain place, more of a bakery than a coffee-shop, though they still were able to get him a latte. The panther took a few long drinks of it, chugging down the caffeinated drink before he was able to calm down. Oddly enough, a fast-beating heart made him feel better than he otherwise might have.

Hoping that everyone else was having a better day than he was, the panther looked for a free table. His eyes skipped right over the hooded figure in the corner, at first, but then they were pulled right back as a blue-scaled hand slipped out from beneath the long, draping robes. Fingers curled, and he felt a strange tug forward.

Oh, crap…

Charlie pulled the dice out of his pocket. They weren't glowing much, but they did have enough of a glint to tell him that the game area was expanding again. He tried to pull out the d20 to roll whatever save he needed -

"Ah ah, little panther," the hooded figure said. "If you roll that, we will have to fight. How about you sit down first, and we'll see if that's even necessary. Hmm?"

"..."

"Sit down with me."

The voice was not particularly loud, though he couldn't have called it soft, either. It was just...there. Just a quiet thing that expected to be obeyed.

Hoping that this was one of those things that wasn't entirely invisible to the rest of the world, like a cutscene in some games, the panther gave in and sat down.

"Alright. Who are you?"

"Heh, that's your first question? Who? Not what, or why I'm here, or anything else?"

"If you're a typical villain, you're going to go into the whys in a bit. I'd like a name to put to the robe."

"As you wish. My name is Dresnath."

"..."

"It doesn't mean much to you, does it?"

"I'mmmmmmm going to roll Knowledge (History)."

The panther proceeded to do that. *2.*

"...I got nothing."

"Heh, not surprising. You aren't from our world, and we haven't come forth enough for our history to overtake yours. Give it time."

Overtaking their history. Now *that* wasn't something that he particularly liked the sound of. It was bad enough that game mechanics were starting to take over the real-world ones, and he doubted that it was going to get less complicated than it already was. If he and his friends didn't do something soon, this could get ugly.

Still, he affected a casualness that he didn't entirely feel, rolling his d20 again, this time for a simple bluff.

15+3=18.

He heard a different sort of rattle-rattle in his head, and felt about right. The bluff seemed to have beaten whatever this Dresnath had rolled in Sense Motive, at least.

He smiled.

"So, you're trying to overwrite our history...what kind of history are you bringing in return?"

"Heh, you should know. You summoned our world."

"Our?"

"Mine and my master's."

"Would your master happen to be Rodrigo?"

"Hmm, that's not his preferred name, but yes."

"Figured."

So, the big bad is invading our world, and slowly overwriting it with his own. That was something that worked with the overall plot, he supposed, though he wondered how it had even started. Magic seldom made sense, but this was one particular curse that he didn't understand at all.

He sipped at his latte again, trying to think clearly.

"What do you want, exactly?"

"Me?" Dresnath smiled under his robe, the edge of a dragon's snout appearing as he lifted his head. "I'm just looking for a world of my own."

"And it has to be this one?"

"Any one but the one that we're in...Anything but that."

"Considering you're the bad guys, I'm pretty sure that you only have yourselves to blame for that situation."

"You'd be surprised."

"...So, what are you here for, then? Why are you talking to me? What's the point?"

The dragon rolled his eyes.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"I think I can believe just about anything at this point."

"Would you believe that it's the script?"

"...Okay, I'd believe just about anything except that."

The dragon shrugged, leaning back in his chair. He didn't seem particularly bothered, either, almost like he expected it to go that way. Oddly enough, that actually made Charlie think about his excuse for being there again in a different light.

Before he could think about that, the dragon pulled out several boxes from inside his robe. Each one was filled with dice, and each one was glowing.

"Are those…"

"The stolen dice from your friend's store? Yes."

"Why did you -"

"There's reasons. Very, very important reasons for these."

Dresnath patted the tops of the boxes, shaking his head as he did so.

"Before I open them, however, I have a question for you. A very important question that I want you to think about."

"...Okay."

"Imagine, if you would, that you are on a script. Imagine living your life out again and again, day in and day out, fulfilling the same obligations, the same role, the same speeches that you've made a hundred-thousand times. Imagine that, no matter what you do, the script adapts and pulls you back into the role.

"Imagine living like that for as long as you've existed. And then, imagine what would happen when, occasionally, you have the chance to break that script. Where something happens, when the stars are right, and you have the chance to maybe, finally, break it for good.

"How would you do it? How would you 'break' the script?"

To Charlie's surprise, the dragon sounded almost desperate, as if he had been hunting for an answer to that question for a countlessly long amount of time. The panther stared at him, shaking his head slowly.

How…

It almost sounded like the battle of a player against a bad DM, in a way. The DM constantly railroading people, exercising the authority of his role as the master of the table to make sure that everything went according to plan. The players could do whatever wacky, zany things that they wanted, but a tyrant at the DM screen meant that they were always dragged back to the plot, eventually.

The only way that you could handle that was to try and break the game, but…

What would breaking the game do when it was the villains that wanted to break the script?

"I don't know," the panther said.

10+2, Bluff, 12.

This time, it wasn't enough. Dresnath shook his head again.

"And here I thought that this party might be a bit more interesting, a bit more helpful. It's not like there's any rules lawyers among you, fighting to keep it bound that way. Why do you want to hold back?"

"Because…"

"Is it because we're the bad guys?"

"...Kinda, yeah."

"You ever think that maybe we don't want to be?"

"..."

"Heh, I doubt it. You never do."

The dragon shook his head, though this time with a more rueful smile.

"Well, Rodrigo will have a little more information, anyway. Trying to break the script by playing on player sympathy isn't going to work."

"This was all a scam?"

"Hardly. If you'd listened, then maybe it would have been something worth doing, but…"

He recognized the look on the dragon's face. He'd seen it on the faces of teachers in school, and bullies in the hallways. It was that look of 'now I'm going to have to hurt you' regret. Not a real regret, but the sort that was always followed by something problematic. Charlie reached for his dice -

"Ah."

Dresnath was faster, grabbing hold of the box of them before he could. Charlie's eyes went wide, the panther trying to grab for the dice -

Only to freeze. Just like when he had been on the intersection, he was completely unable to move. Now that there was a chance of failing something, he couldn't do it without rolling the dice and figuring out what his chances were. He groaned, straining against the game, but his hand kept stopping a few inches away from the dice box as Dresnath swung it from side to side, the dragon sighing.

Come on...come on…

No matter how he pushed himself, he couldn't get any closer. Even when the dragon pushed the box a bit closer, it was like fighting with a magnet, his hand getting pushed further back.

The game must have been reading intent. The dragon intended to keep the box away from him, while he intended to take it back. Since Dresnath was a creature rather than a player, he didn't have to have dice on him to roll. Without his own to counter it, Charlie automatically failed and the creature automatically succeeded.

It wasn't fair.

"Well, at least now I know the rules here, too," the dragon said. "I've been working on this little idea for a while now. Ever since Rodrigo commanded me to figure out a way to break the whole system, I've been trying to find a way to stop the heroes from eventually taking us down.

"As long as the script's followed, there's no way for us to win. We can't seem to strike a killing blow on you guys. Something about a benevolent DM involved in writing this whole thing, I imagine. But…"

He smiled, holding up the dice box.

"Considering that the rules require you to have dice, we have a way of forcing a stalemate. You can't die, but you can't act against us, either. All we need to do is keep you from having the dice to roll, and you can't do anything."

"Nnngh...Is that why...you took all the dice boxes? So we couldn't replace them."

"One of the reasons. The other one is a bit less long-term than that."

The dragon shook his head, reaching over to the panther's latte cup. Charlie couldn't even stop him from taking that, and Dresnath threw it over his shoulder into the trash can.

"But you don't need to worry about that. I'm going to take care of everything. Just stay out of my way, and everything will be fine."

"As a player, I can't do that."

"Well, play if you like. But without these, you're pretty worthless."

The dice ratted in the container again. Charlie glared across the table at the dragon, getting a little sick of his cockiness, feeling more than a little angry at his own helplessness. This wasn't supposed to be how it went for players in these kinds of games.

The rules require me to roll dice if I want to succeed or fail on something. That's part of the rules. But…

But what if I use a spell that doesn't require a dice roll?

It was his only chance, and he just hoped it worked. He reached out for the magic that came from being a druid and pulled at the edge of it. Summon Nature's Ally. Only a first level version, but -

"Oooh-oooh-ah-ah-ooooooh!"

A monkey. Loud, annoying, and one of the most grabby animals on the face of the earth. The panther opened his eyes to see that the dragon was completely gob-smacked by the sudden appearance of the primate on the table.

If this is a system that makes me roll for my summons as well as my companion, I'm fucked, but if it makes the DM roll instead -

A mental command sent the monkey forward, grabbing for the dice box.

It succeeded, ripping it out of the startled dragon's hands. Green light flashed as it went flying through the air towards him. Charlie snapped it out of the air -

BOOM!

Only to be knocked back by the thunderous clash of a sudden bolt of lightning. The monkey disappeared in a burning pile of blood and guts, and most of the customers suddenly stood up, staring in shock at the corner of the room.

Charlie couldn't blame them. He was soaked in blood, his clothes were ruined, and magic, real magic, had just gone off in front of them. The panther groaned as he pulled himself back to his feet, shaking his head as the dragon mage pulled himself out from behind the table. The pair of them squared off, standing in the middle of the bakery with their hands at their sides. This time, the panther kept a much tighter grip on his dice, not wanting to lose them a second time.

"I was making a serious offer, you know," the dragon said. "Without the dice, you would have been helpless, but effectively immortal. You would have lived in the game world in that stalemate. Neverending."

"I don't think I can really accept that."

"It's better than the alternative."

"What, death?"

"No…"

Dresnath sighed.

"Well, back to the drawing board. I can't take you down now, but I can make sure that you're out of commission for the next phase."

And as far as Charlie knew, this Dresnath probably could. That casual use of the lightning bolt had been way over-level for someone like him to fight on his own. This was probably at least mid-game in terms of boss level, perhaps even as late as the end-game.

Wonder if we're breaking script here? he thought, even as he hurriedly went through the mental list of spells he had left. *Would be nice to know what the script fucking is...*

<u>The End</u>