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PATHFINDER'S JOURNAL: LIGHT OF A DISTANT STAR 2 OF 6

The day after I fell back in with my Magnimarian friends, I found myself walking the same streets where I had first spied Shess. The same streets, the same destination, but now everything was different. Was I Taldara Meirlanel the Pathfinder, explorer, and chronicler? Or Tal the thief?

Scratching Mordimor behind the ear as we walked through lanes that now seemed somehow less hostile and foreign, I tried to dismiss the whole notion. My father would have said it was my human side—my “blind side” he called it, with no small measure of contempt—that

cared so much for labels and absolutes. “Scholar or thief?” he would have said, dismissing the whole thing with a wave of his hand. “Why not both? And much more besides.”

Why not both, indeed.

I had sent word to my employer, the alchemist Gundsric, yesterday by courier as soon as I was able. His reply, a terse rescheduling, awaited me when I returned to my lodgings at the Sated Shark late that night. For the past six weeks, I had assisted him in cataloging his massive collection of artifacts, and engaged in a great deal of

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translation and annotation of the rare scrolls and tomes he had accumulated. It was stimulating and rewarding work, and the dwarf's library was perhaps the finest in the city outside of the archives of the Cyphermites. It also paid very well, for the wealthy dwarf had once held a high position at Riddleport's famed Gas Works and, it was rumored, had further enriched himself through private expeditions into the poisonous underground world beneath the forges.

Thus, my guilt at entering the dying dwarf's service under false pretenses was acute. It had not been chance that had led me to Gundsric's door, but rather a directive from Sheila Heidmarch, Venture-Captain of the Pathfinder Lodge of Magnimar and my immediate superior in the Society. The orders—which came in the form of a suggestion—were to verify the rumors that Gundsric had come into possession of the last journal of Jan Lortis, the Pathfinder who had famously discovered the trans-dimensional tomb of the Gepesh twins in Ustalav, and who had disappeared with no word while exploring the wilds of eastern Varisia two decades ago.

Verify the rumors, or reclaim the journal if possible. Direct offers to buy the journals had failed, and subsequent attempts to arrange for a copy to be made were turned away by an irritable Gundsric, who denied any knowledge of the text. To describe the dwarf as possessive would be a gross understatement, and it was thought that any further queries about the journals would only alienate him further. Therefore, Gundsric did not know that I had any affiliation with the Society, and neither had I mentioned the journal. Instead, I worked in his home, staying alert to any signs of my true goal, or any mention of Lortis or his expedition.

Scholar, thief... and spy?

Gundsric's house straddled the border between the Wharf District and the tangle of tenements, grog shops, and brothels disdainfully referred to by the locals as Rotgut. It was likely the most lawless district in Riddleport, and certainly the most rundown. A curious place for a dwarf who had retired rich from the Gas Works to make his home. Perhaps the rumors were true that Gundsric was as pleased to sell his potions to any street scum who met his price as he was to supply the city's wealthier and more respected individuals. Or maybe it was that, suffering from fatal black lung contracted in the carbauxine mines below the city, coughing his life away bit by bit, Gundsric no longer feared the knives and clubs of the urban predators all around him.

To see his home, however, was to get a different impression of Gundsric's desire for security.

Approaching it from the west through a narrow lane between leaning rows of strake-sided buildings, it seemed at first a lichen-slick wall at the end of the

street. As I drew closer, the wall revealed itself as a stone foundation making up half the height of a fortresslike three-story dwelling. It was as architecturally alien to the city as a Shoanti felt tent would seem pitched inside the Black Dome of Sothis. The house's few windows—heavily shuttered with iron-shod marine oak—were situated asymmetrically around the upper story. Decades of weather had rusted the shutters, leaving streaks along the sides of the house like the dried blood of some long-neglected wounds. Overall the place was as squat, ugly, and guarded as the dwarf himself.

I did not have long to wait after rapping with the heavy bronze knocker—a ring through the nose of a verdigris bull's head—before I was greeted with the metallic clacking of locks and bolts from within. As always, Mordimor mumbled his displeasure at this. Gundsric's front door was of steel-hard black wood, which I suspect had been alchemically treated. The only other access to his dwelling was a portcullis-fronted double door leading from his basement to a damp alley that ran some ten feet below street level around the back of his house.

With the snicking of the last lock, the door swung inward. Gundsric stood filling the doorway like some stunted old tree. What strength had once been his was long dissipated by his illness, and his eyes bulged from a gaunt face that seemed to have had all the flesh sucked from it below his dry yellow skin. He wore a heavy leather apron over threadbare cloth, and was stained and soiled from head to foot. On a silver chain around his neck hung the battered pewter flask I had never seen him without. His right shoulder was higher than his left, resulting in a hump that lent him a leaning, unbalanced aspect. Most striking was his beardless face, withered like an old fruit. Many of the dwarven carbauxine miners of the Gas Works trimmed or even shaved their beards to better accommodate the cumbersome breathing apparatuses they employed. Whether Gundsric had done so and kept the fashion, or whether his beard had fallen out as a side effect of black lung, I couldn't guess. His beardlessness marked him as a dwarf apart, sick and alone.

"Elven reliability," he said, glowering at me beneath bushy eyebrows like a tangle of iron wire. "This is how you repay me for my generosity."

It was a conversation I had had with him many times before, and one it is needless to relate here. It was something of a formality, each of us reminding the other of our usefulness, of our lack of other options. Gundsric needed me because no scholar in the city would work with him due to his abrasiveness and bad reputation. I, as a penniless academic denied access to the Cypher Lodge (or so my story went), had no other employment options that did not involve learning a new profession—most especially the world's oldest, as Gundsric never failed to imply.

In the end he assented to my entry, his black eyes scanning the street suspiciously as if seeing an assassin in every shadow. I moved into the dim interior, flinching slightly at the always-jarring—and always-different—commingling of odors within. Today the eggy stink of sulfur had joined hands with the harsh chemical reek of ammonia to produce a bouquet of truly unwelcoming proportions. Beneath it all, hardly discernible, was the ever-present whiff of the noxious carbauxine the dwarf used to light and heat his home.

“Don’t just stand there sniffing. Get to work. And don’t let that weasel of yours wander around again—this can be a dangerous place.” Gundsric finished his reproach with an explosive cough, lungs rattling like wet parchment. Before he stumped off to his basement workshop—one of many rooms I had never seen in his house—he fixed Mordimor and me with a wicked grin, his teeth flecked with fresh blood.

I went upstairs through a dark, narrow stairway to the workroom, a small, wood-paneled chamber containing a single desk and weakly burning gas lamp. I busied myself with the familiar routine of translation while Mordimor slept curled up in my lap. The room was as spare as a cloister, and other than the corridor and stair I had just moved through and the foyer and rude privy at the entrance to the house, it was the only part of Gundsric’s home I was allowed access to without his supervision. What lay beyond the barred doors I passed almost every day was largely unknown to me.

When the dwarf had new work for me, he would set out the items or texts in this workroom, along with terse instructions and a quantity of elixirs that aided in translation. My knowledge of languages is not inconsiderable, but Gundsric’s collection included many texts in obscure and antique dialects that were unreadable even to those fluent in the modern forms of those languages. Since my own minor magical skill is not equal to the task of more than a few minutes of such translation work, and Gundsric’s potions were far more potent than any spell I could ever employ, I had come to rely on the alchemist’s elixirs almost exclusively. Even, I am sad to say, to the point of shunning my own scholarship. Each draught did more than merely convey the meaning and nuance of unfamiliar scripts, but seemed to invigorate and even elevate all my efforts, extending my awareness beyond what I had ever been capable of in the past.

This had been, in many respects, the happiest period of my life, however brief it was, and however false so much that underlay it would one day turn out to be. In that tiny, dim room, I had worked as if possessed, seeing with better, brighter eyes into the rich lore of the untrammelled past. It was a kind of meditation, a trance,

and often the hours would slip by without my noticing their passage.

But that day was different. I was distracted, the twenty-sixth-century folio in the Taldan vulgate I was annotating lying neglected before me while my thoughts drifted to Kostin. He and Aeventius had not been idle in the past months, and both had regaled me with stories last night in the common room of the Gold Goblin. The old cons they had pulled together as teenagers had been dusted off anew as they lied and cheated their way around Riddleport’s seedier shoreside, all the while setting things up for their big score. Even the acerbic wizard had, after a few glasses of Chelish red, laughed and joked about their progress.

What would they have done in my position? Here I was, virtually unproven to the Society, entrusted with a task by my venture-captain, and yet what progress had I made? I caught myself toying with the faintly glowing elixirs then, fingers running over the cool glass vials, tracing the star-shaped symbols engraved on the corks. There were three left in the rack, which meant that I had consumed two already in the space of only a few hours. Naturally the effect should diminish somewhat, using them everyday as I had, but my rate of consumption had begun to worry me. I snatched my hand back, resisting the urge to have another potion. Mordimor stirred on my lap, fixing me with a quizzical look.

I surveyed the nearly featureless room. The dim glow of a single gas lantern was adequate to my needs; in fact, my already keen vision seemed sharper than ever before. It was a side effect of the potions, of course. I placed my quill in its holder and pushed the folio aside, my thoughts trending in new directions. What would Kostin do in my position?

Thoughts racing almost too fast to follow, I stood up, hardly noticing Mordimor’s grumbling protest as he plopped off of my lap. I was seeing Gundsric’s house now, seeing all of it in my mind’s eye, in much the same way my imagination had danced along the edges of the Cyphergate, or as it did when confronted with the various minor artifacts of the dwarf’s collection. The floor plan was unconventional, almost bizarre, but how much of what I was now imagining was truly guesswork? I knew a wide stairwell ran from the main floor up two flights; I had seen this when Gundsric led me down a normally locked corridor to a room containing his Keleshite ceramics. That stairway ran parallel to the one I climbed everyday—staring straight ahead I would be looking at those stairs right now, could I but see through the paneled wall. But with the stairs in such a position a dead spot was created, a wasted triangle of space, between the stairwell and the exterior wall.

It was then that I noticed the door.

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I rushed to the spot, running my hands over the smooth walnut paneling. How could I have failed to see this, day after day? Sliding my fingernails in the cracks between panels I gave a light tug, to no avail. I tried another panel, while Mordimor sniffed along the crease where wall met floor. There was no give at all in the wood, and I stepped back, exasperated.

And then, as certain as my vision of the door had been, the logic of its opening came to me.

It was a dark burl of wood, low down along the wall but not uncomfortably so for someone of the dwarf's stature. A hard push was all it took. With a click, the panel before me popped away from the wall and swung gently outward. Pulling it open all the way, I could see a dark, slant-ceilinged hall running deeper into the house.

Mordimor chuffed in surprise.

"I know, Mord. I can't see how we could have missed it, either." I stooped to scratch his head, and a glint of light on the back of the door drew my attention. There, a little below chest-height for me—but eye-level for a dwarf—was affixed a kind of prism. Leaning down, peering into the thick, green glass, I could see almost perfectly through the thin door, despite it being smooth and solid on the other side.

So, I had been watched. The spy had herself been spied upon.

Since I had come to rely on Gundsric's potions entirely, I had stopped even bothering to cast my own translation spells. Thus I had fallen back into the daily habit of preparing the simple magic I used to speak with Mordimor, something we both looked forward to for a few minutes every day. Conversing with an animal in such a way is never as straightforward or precise as people imagine, but after years of mutual experience Mordimor and I have come to understand one another quite well.

I cast the spell now, the words spilling out of me in an old familiar rhythm, the gestures nearly automatic. A successful casting is always recognizable, and I immediately felt the power flood through me, a comforting yet invigorating wash of energy. I told Mordimor to wait in the shadow at the base of the narrow stair and call a warning to me should the dwarf emerge from his basement laboratory. Not for the first time, I envied wizards and their uncanny bond with their familiars. But perhaps this lack of true integration, this reliance on a spell to bridge the gulf of incomprehension between two beings so inherently different, is the price Mordimor and I pay for retaining our individual selves.

My badger friend grumbled in mild consternation, told me to be careful, and rubbed his whiskered snout against

my hand in a gesture that needed no spell to translate. He then bounded off down the stair, a black-and-white ripple of fur. With one last look over my shoulder, I entered the secret hall.

It was long and low, and faced on one side with a shelf littered with artifacts. Here and there I recognized objects and texts that I had worked with in my little room. This, then, was the path Gundsric took to carry materials in and out of the workroom. The path he used to creep up to the door to spy on me, for whatever suspicious reasons of his own. I could hardly resent the fact or hold it against him, given my own intentions.

The first room I came to was the mirror of my workroom, though cluttered with a disarray of manuscripts and tomes on leaning shelves. My impression of Gundsric as an organized, orderly dwarf suddenly needed revision, for this place was clearly the product of a chaotic, almost



**"PERHAPS THERE'S MORE
TO THE OLD DWARF
THAN MEETS THE EYE."**

careless mind. Or, perhaps, one preoccupied with other matters. Dark as it was—the carboxine lanterns here maintaining but the merest flicker—I could still make out the steep stairs leading up to the third floor in the black portal at the far end of the room. Pausing briefly to listen for any telltale warning from Mordimor, I stifled the apprehension that had been threatening to overtake me since I first opened the secret door. Taking a deep breath, I tried to calm my racing heart. This was what I had come for, I reminded myself. Not the research. Not the translation. This.

I moved to the stairs, and upward. For all I knew, the journal of Jan Lortis was lodged in one of the leaning piles in the room I had just passed through, along with a dozen other unguessed rarities. But I did not have time to check every spine and catalog. Already a plan was formulating in my mind, one I thought worthy of my new profession, and one I hoped would allow me to return to these rooms at my leisure in the near future.

Just ahead, the light increased, though the air grew yet more oppressive with heat and dust. The first room on the third floor was a jumble of old armor and antique weapons, objects once cared for and now given over to neglect. A silver-chased breastplate of Cheliox's old empire lay dusty in a corner where it had fallen from an armor stand. An Aldori dueling sword, its hilt encrusted with emeralds and pearls, hung dingy and forgotten from pegs on the far wall, the blade's once-fine steel freckled with rust. A dozen other such treasures languished here, as if imprisoned for the crime of daring to approach perfection. It was an armory that would make any prince

envious, but it seemed more the hoarding of some kleptomaniacal goblin chieftain than the collection of a wealthy dwarf, a race that prized metalcraft above almost any other art.

The next room told a similar tale of disregard in iron, bronze, and polished stone, containing as it did an extraordinary array of Ulfen ritual vessels engraved with Skald runes. I fought the urge to linger, moving quickly, hoping to find what I was looking for before my nerve gave out or Mordimor signaled me. Two more rooms, two more neglected treasure-troves, and I finally came upon what I sought. A window.

I slipped over to it, remaining alert to the room's contents. Here for the first time I was seeing evidence of Gundsric's profession. The room was laden with glassware in a myriad of esoteric shapes, as well as racks of carefully labeled solutions in every color imaginable. One whole wall was dominated by a system of small drawers, and the pungent odors of a thousand reagents danced in the thick air. Another wall was pinned with dozens of curling parchment maps, yellow and brittle with age, each bearing heavy notations around the irregular shapes of an underground tunnel system. In front of the room's only window, a small table held a gas burner beneath an armature designed to hold containers above the flame. Here, at least, was some semblance of the careful mind I had always ascribed to the dwarf, and it seemed the disregard with which he treated his collection did not extend to the alchemical tools of his craft.

At the window, I tugged hard at the shutter's bolt. It was stuck fast, no doubt having remained locked for years. Straining, with both hands wrapped around the rust-furred toggle, I wrenched at it. Once, twice, three times—I may as well have been trying to pry a stone loose from the house's foundations. I had to make this work, had to open it now, as I knew I would never have the

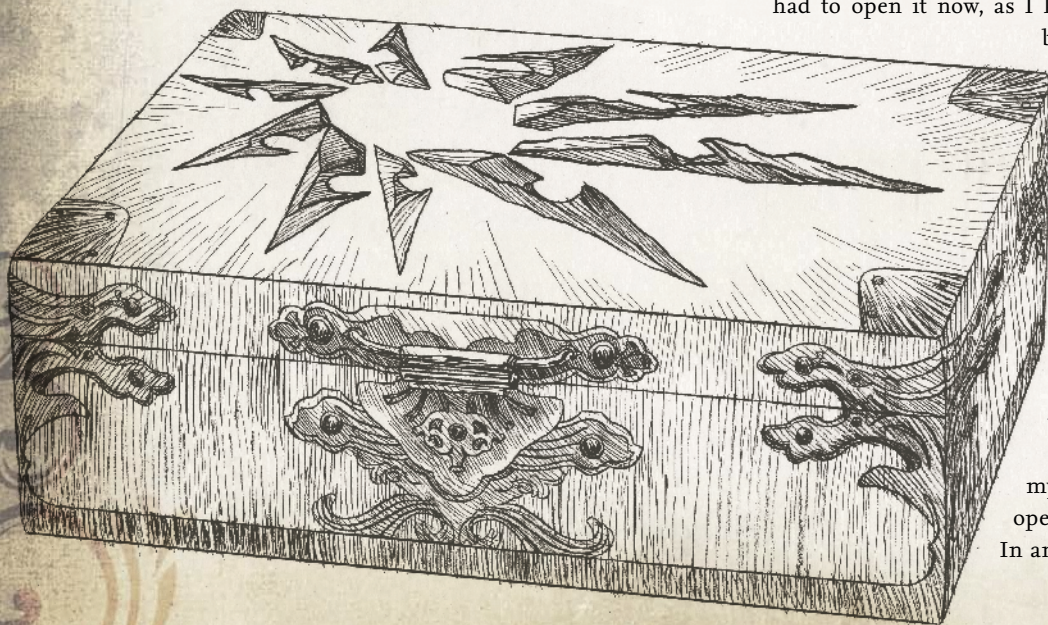
bravado to attempt this again.

Whatever chance I—or more to the point, Kostin or Shess—had to break into this house later and search it more thoroughly depended on opening this bolt. Opening it right now.

Almost without noticing, I caught a sound barely louder than the pounding of my own heart. It was Mordimor's warning bark, far below.

With a savage jerk I flung myself at the bolt, forcing it open and crashing to the floor. In an attempt to arrest my fall, or

"WHAT IS IT ABOUT THE SYMBOL THAT SO CAPTURES ONE'S ATTENTION?"



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at least minimize the noise I was making, I had grabbed unsuccessfully for the nearest handhold, knocking a small box off the table. I stood up quickly, pulse racing, hardly feeling my scraped palms, and scooped the rectangular box—about as large as a loaf of bread—off the floor and replaced it on the table.

Something about the box stole my attention. It bore the same star-shaped rune as the translation elixirs, and I noticed for the first time the similarity it held to a Thassilonian sihedron, though Gundsric's star was composed of ten arms of disproportionate and unequal length. Something about it twisted at my gut, and even as I yanked my eyes away, I felt it calling them back, dragging my attention toward it. Sweat broke out on my forehead as I forced myself to look elsewhere.

More of the translation potions stood on a rack next to the gas burner. Without thinking, I grabbed one of the vials and slipped it into my pouch.

But I had no time to spare on exploring this further. Still feeling the box's siren call, I turned and raced back the way I had come. Again Mordimor's warning bleat reached me, and my fear at being caught, at ruining my chances of ever finding the journal of Jan Lortis, paled in comparison to my concern for Mordimor's safety. In only a few minutes my evaluation of Gundsric had changed, and now I saw the bitter, angry dwarf as something other than pitiable. Whether it was my fear that suggested this to my already hyper-stimulated mind, or perhaps my own intuitive understanding of his character brought on by the glimpse at Gundsric's private rooms, I could not say. What I did know with a sudden, undeniable certainty was that I had been underestimating the alchemist—perhaps dangerously so.

I sped through the dust and the jumble of the third-floor rooms, and down the stair as fast as I was able. I was hot, dizzy, all my fears given a sickening, vivid edge by the potion. Once again, I heard Mordimor's cry as I entered the secret corridor, though this time it was punctuated by Gundsric's own shouts. Dashing down the hall, I experienced one of those moments when time seems to slow, when even the simplest things seem fraught with difficulty, and in that short corridor I endured an eternity's worth of dread.

Emerging from the passage after what was in reality but a few seconds, I was relieved to see the workroom empty. But the noise of Gundsric's cursing and Mordimor's bleating had grown louder. I spun, slamming the secret door in my haste to get it closed. Wincing at the thud, I lunged toward the stair, just as Mordimor shot up and out of the darkness of the stairwell and into my arms. He was trembling but unhurt.

"Torag take you, vermin!" Gundsric clambered up into the room, eyes red and bulging. His lips and chin were

smearred with bright blood. Seeing me, he roared and shook his fist. "Your damnable skunk bit me!" he ranted, his words transitioning into a bloody, hacking cough that robbed him of all speech.

Still clutching Mordimor, I squeezed past the coughing dwarf and took the stairs two at a time. I could not stay in this house another minute—I was shaking as badly as poor Mord. Over my shoulder I said something about having to leave early, making some sort of inarticulate apology. I do not truly remember what I said, but I still recall the tremulousness of my own voice and my fear that the dwarf should notice it.

He stumped after me, slant-shouldered, moving like some poorly made, clumsy-limbed golem. His hacking cough boomed off the walls and filled the close spaces of the house—a metronome tracking the rhythm of his dying.

I fumbled at his front door, Mordimor clinging to my shoulder. The sensible thing would be to talk, ease the dwarf's suspicions. He was angry at my badger's unlawful wandering, at being bitten, but Gundsric knew nothing of my own explorations. The rational part of me screamed to slow down, to smooth things over as I had done so often before. But I could not—my perception of the dwarf had altered, and without being able to say why, I now regarded the thing that hacked and gurgled in the corridor behind me as a monster.

As I worked the last bolt in a panic, his bloody hand closed over mine.

My flesh rebelled at his touch. He gave off heat like a forge fire. So close, I could smell the brimstone stink of him, the riotous mingling of odors both sour and sweet that surrounded him like an aura. Paralyzed, my body screamed silently to push him away, to draw my knife. To kill him if I could.

With a snarl, he threw open the last bolt and flung the door wide.

"Get out," he said, voice husky and crackling with mucus.

I slipped around him, not daring to look. The humid street air that greeted me was like a breath of spring after my ordeal. I hastened to be on my way, body aching and tense, tendons like the snare-strings of some sprung trap.

At the end of his street I paused, daring to look behind me, still cradling Mordimor. Gundsric stood in his door, a dark silhouette, crooked and still as any broken thing. The sun was barely past noon, and the air was as rank and stifling as any other mid-Erastus day in Riddleport. But standing there, looking at Gundsric, I felt a chill as cutting as the windward shadow of the Winterwall steal over me. Shivering, and with the black shape of the dwarf still watching me, I turned and lost myself in the comforting anonymity of the crowd.