



THE CHAR STREET CLIPPERS

PATHFINDER'S JOURNAL: LIGHT OF A DISTANT STAR 3 OF 6

To think that lurking in the shadows of some moldering old casks with a con man, a wizard, and an Ulfen mercenary would feel like familiar, safe territory to me is a strange and, perhaps, wonderful thing. But after my fright with Gundsric that afternoon, this was exactly where I wanted to be.

Even Mordimor, generally on record as disapproving of these kinds of things, seemed eager to take part in the culmination of Kostin's big heist. Granted, all that the plan entailed was to wait for an invisible Shess to slip out of the Char Street Clippers' headquarters with the scepter, and

then for all of us to steal away into the dark. Our presence, Kostin assured me, was merely a form of insurance.

But, as I well knew, these things never go according to plan. The logic of our story demanded it, and as Master Shaine would say, even our simplest choices have the power of prophecy. I had chosen to live an adventure, and I knew somewhere deep in my bones that I was going to have one that night.

We were hunkered down between a sagging, tin-roofed shed and the upturned hull of an old skiff, positioned nicely in the dark space behind the aforementioned casks.

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The reek of tar was in the air, as was the ever-present salty stink of Riddleport's harbor. We were in the eastern section of the Wharf District, south of Rotgut and not very far from Gundsric's fortress of a house, almost up against the jagged hills that marked the city limits, smack in the center of a cluster of rundown buildings that had been abandoned once this little neck of the harbor had silted up. The shallow, almost stagnant water that still filled the channel was hardly enough to buoy a rowboat at high tide, and thus the docks and piers that lined the inlet had fallen into disuse and ill repair.

Of course, no building remains unoccupied for long, and the Char Street Clippers were only too happy to make a home in the derelict warehouse that bordered the northern tip of the inlet. The gas lamps that lined the more traveled byways of the city were but a distant glow this deep into the slums, and the moon was the merest sliver. But the stars were bright and clear, and Castrovel glittered like a faraway emerald directly above us. A single bat flapped in zigzag circles about the reeking inlet, no doubt having found a rich source of insect life. Mercifully, the night was a cool one, the wind blowing in from the gulf having banished the swelter of summer for the time being.

"I can wait no longer," Aeventius said, squatting uncomfortably along the edge of the shed rather than risk soiling his fine clothes by sitting on the street itself. "As it is, I will already be late for this evening's performance at the Sable Flag."

Kostin shot back with a choice Varisian curse. "You're seeing this through. Your 'play' can wait."

"Scaerelli is performing *Vestments Unseen*. I hear it is quite critical of House Thrune, and do not wish to miss it."

I looked at the fourth member of our group, the disheveled Ulfen warrior Gyrd, whom I had fought alongside in Magnimar. His bloodshot gaze met mine and I rolled my eyes at Kostin and Aeventius. Gyrd, expressionless as always, turned back to survey the dockhouse.

"You forget who you're talking to, Aevy." Kostin, voice rising in irritation, turned around and wagged a finger at the wizard. He was dressed in the black leather I had seen him in the day before, though with the addition of a fine matching set of longsword and dagger at his waist. "I know all the bookmakers in the Wharf. I know where the money goes, and you've got more than a few crowns going on Dashak in tonight's games. So don't try to tell me you're going to some theater instead of slinking off to Zincher's Arena."

Aeventius's eyes narrowed. "A man can have money on the games and still attend some other engagement. Where I go is none of your concern anyway, you trumped-up guttersnipe."

Kostin grinned. It was a smile I'd seen before, whenever he was about to fight. "I do have to wonder how obvious it is to all the bluebloods up on the Summit why the Reatés family doesn't have two coppers to pinch together. Maybe the heir has a gambling problem?"

"Abadar blast you!" Aeventius snarled, voice rising beyond all levels of caution.

"Not holding my breath on that one," Kostin said, smirking.

"This from a man whose devotionals sway between a drunken lout and a moth-winged wanton."

"You're just mad that Desna never smiles on your wagers."

I was about to say something to stop their bickering, but a warning bark from Mordimor drew our attention back to the Clippers' warehouse.

Six figures had approached the warehouse and hailed the guards. They moved with a lanky shuffle, hunched men and women hooded in black. Two of them bore a heavy sack between them, nearly dragging it along the street, each man holding a rope-end that bound the bag closed. In the weak light of the guard's lantern it was difficult to get an impression of the new arrivals, save that each had a lean and hungry aspect associated with criminals of the most dangerous sort.

"Shess never said anything about this," Kostin whispered.

Many of the Clippers were gone this evening, engaged in some work for one of the minor Rotgut bosses that didn't want to get his hands dirty or risk offending the real powers of the city. The strange thing about the Char Street Clippers, Kostin had explained to me, was that they had so far been able to flout the authority of Overlord Cromarcky and the other crime lords of the city. They had gotten away with overstepping their bounds again and again, their own power increasing at an unprecedented rate as a result.

"They're going in," Aeventius said, exhibiting no trace of his earlier petulance. "This may make things difficult for the gnome. We should observe more closely."

We agreed. Watching the last of the visitors enter the double doors of the warehouse, Kostin suggested we sneak in closer to the building and try to peer through one of the filthy, alley-side windows that were visible from our position. Backing away from the casks and making our way around the tangle of sheds that lined the approach to the warehouse, we moved as quietly as we were able, staying out of the single guard's line of sight.

My pulse quickened, and I was reminded of my escapade in Gundsric's house earlier in the day. But there I had felt an overwhelming anxiety and inexplicable sense of dread, whereas now I was enjoying a feeling of exhilaration. Almost of anticipation. At that moment, stalking quietly through the shadows, wincing at every creak and tinkle of Gyrd's chainmail or admiring the way Kostin placed his feet with such deliberateness, I had no trouble reconciling all the pieces of my life. Scholar and spy, explorer and chronicler, Pathfinder and thief. Perhaps it had been the banishment of the guilt I had felt over lying to Gundsric that had finally freed me to feel this way, to feel as if my life was a natural whole and not some play in which I merely portrayed all the parts.

Or perhaps it had been Gundsric's potion. For the hundredth time my thoughts went to the stolen vial in my pouch, every fiber of my being tingling with the desire to snatch it up and drink it down. It was an unwelcome feeling, and one I had prayed to Sarenrae to rid me of, though rarely do I feel the need to invoke the divine. In that respect, I suppose I truly am my father's daughter.

The first window we came to was dark, blocked by a wall of detritus on the other side. We slipped farther along the building's flank, Mordimor leading the way with his nose to the ground. The next window was glassless, being a thin piece of hide stretched and pegged into place, and the small room beyond was a blur. Kostin informed us that this was the likeliest route Shess would take to escape the warehouse once she had the scepter—a quick slash with a dagger would silently open a portal to the outside. We briefly discussed doing the same when we discovered the third window on this side of the building was completely boarded up.

"We now know less than we would have if we had remained in place," Aeventius said.

Gyrd grumbled in agreement. The taciturn northman had been growing more anxious by the minute, his concern for Shess palpable. The two had long been friends, having both served on the crew of a longship raider many years ago and worked as a team ever since. The big man's knuckles were white on the hilt of his blade.

"We have to keep going around, or we go up," Kostin said, frowning. "We can split up, try both. Or we can just trust Shess to get the job done and go back to waiting by the sheds."

I was about to suggest we continue our circuit of the building when a muffled shout from within the warehouse intruded on our conversation. For an instant we froze, looking at one another as if to confirm what we had just heard.

Then we heard it again: mixed in with the cries of deeper voices was an almost childlike voice raised in fear or anger. Shess.

Growling, Gyrd drew his sword and barreled past us, back toward the front of the warehouse. I hissed his name and tried to catch hold of him.

"You won't stop him. Aevy, follow him in. Tal and I will try this window."

Aeventius nodded with an exasperated sigh and cracked his knuckles. "They're probably just about to start the prologue to *Vestments*," he said, before turning to run after Gyrd.

"Starting the first bout, more like." Kostin dashed to the hide-covered window, Mordimor and I close behind. Drawing his long parrying dagger, he slashed the skin along two of the hide's edges before vaulting through the window. Mordimor went next, with my help, and then I slipped inside, the dry skin rattling as I passed through.

The commotion had grown louder, Gyrd's frontal assault no doubt having added to the mayhem. The room we were in was small and dim, illuminated by a single forgotten

candle stub guttering in a wall sconce. It was clearly the living quarters for four or five people, as bedding and filthy blankets covered much of the floor. We wasted no time, moving immediately for the door. Fitting a bolt to my crossbow, I nodded to Kostin that I was ready, and he threw the door wide.

A corridor ran straight, brightly lit at the far end. The noise of combat reached us and we raced down the hall toward it, all sensible caution lost in the need for swiftness. About the only thing we could count on now was the effectiveness of our surprise attack, and our own skill at arms.

A shape darkened the way in front of us. I stopped, raised the crossbow to my shoulder, and tried to line up a shot. But Kostin was in the way, and did not slow his approach. In the split second it took him to close on the figure, I saw more clearly that the man in front of us—one of the Clippers—had his back to the corridor and a bow trained on something in the large space ahead. Kostin never hesitated as he drove his dagger low into the man's back, then flung him aside as he charged into the room.

I followed, eyes locked on the dying archer. He was a small man, dirty, clothed in a ragged Varisian patchwork vest. I could see so much of him so clearly in the almost insignificant moment between entering the room behind Kostin and raising my weapon to shoot an approaching axeman. Insignificant, save that it was the small, dirty man's last. There was little blood left by Kostin's precise attack, but nevertheless there lay the broken man, crumpled like an insect, his limbs twitching in shock. He wore a simple silver ring on the third finger of his right hand, and his unkempt beard was flecked with gray. His short bow protruded from beneath him, and I saw that it had once been a fine weapon. He could have passed for Kostin's cousin, for in both men the Varisian features were strong. Had he been given a *kapenia* when he came of age? Did he swear to Desna in a million different ways, and had he traveled the wilds in a covered wagon? Had he seen this exact, final moment in a hand of harrow cards, the empty eye sockets of a skull staring back at him above a perfect smile?

His dark eyes met with mine for the briefest moment before I tore my gaze away. A man with a woodaxe was bearing down on Kostin's right-hand side, while Kostin himself was locked in combat with a swordsman wielding a combination of curved blade and buckler. Such a small interval of time: One second a man lives, the whole of his years stretching back like a winding and not-always-clear path through the forest of the past. The next he dies, his path to be traveled no more, blotted out and shrouded in a darkness that can never be seen through, save only by the gods themselves.

One second Taldara Meirlanel feels sorrow and regret at a thing fairly called murder; the next she raises her crossbow, sights along its length, and looses a bolt into the

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eye of man who dies before his body even hits the ground. She does it to protect her friend; she does it because that is why she is here; she does it because the story she has chosen for herself demands it.

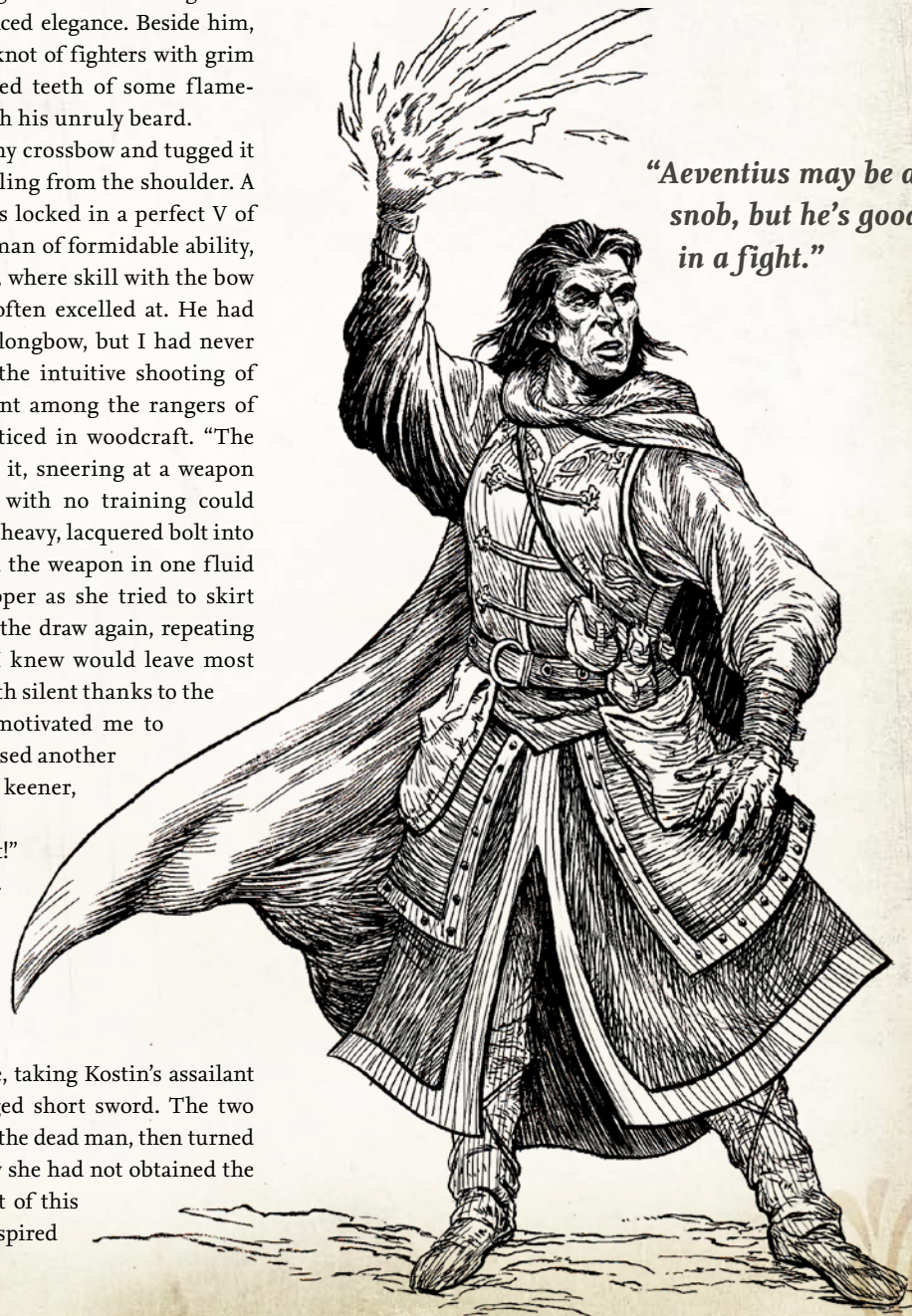
The room was large; we had come upon the warehouse proper. Where once crates and casks and the goods of a dozen port towns must have been stacked almost to the ceiling, now there was an enormous empty space, its far corners concealed by darkness, its walls reverberating with the sounds of killing. The Clippers were fighting the black-clad visitors, the combat thickest around the large sack the newcomers had brought with them, which now lay on the floor. A flash of light drew my attention toward the front of the building—Aeventius firing bolts from his fingertips with a practiced elegance. Beside him, Gyrd hacked his way through a knot of fighters with grim efficiency, a smile like the bared teeth of some flame-haired predator showing through his unruly beard.

I hooked the draw winch on my crossbow and tugged it back in one smooth motion, pulling from the shoulder. A click told me that the string was locked in a perfect V of tension. My father was a marksman of formidable ability, admired even among his people, where skill with the bow was a widespread art and one often excelled at. He had taught me the use of the elven longbow, but I had never taken to it, preferring instead the intuitive shooting of the crossbow, a weapon prevalent among the rangers of Nirmathas where I had apprenticed in woodcraft. “The machine,” my father had called it, sneering at a weapon even a stupid human peasant with no training could wield with some effect. Fitting a heavy, lacquered bolt into the crossbow’s channel, I raised the weapon in one fluid motion and felled another Clipper as she tried to skirt around Kostin’s flank. I hooked the draw again, repeating the motion with a speed that I knew would leave most archers fumbling to keep up. With silent thanks to the father whose disapproval had motivated me to perfect my skill, I loaded and loosed another bolt. My vision had never been keener, my mind never more focused.

“You need to teach me to do that!” said a familiar voice to my left. Materializing out of the shadows was the green and girlish shape of Shess, the chance sighting of whom had set me upon this whole adventure. Before I could respond, she raced past me, taking Kostin’s assailant from behind with her keen-edged short sword. The two exchanged a cheery greeting over the dead man, then turned to face separate attackers. Clearly she had not obtained the scepter that was the whole object of this heist, and what exactly had transpired

to turn a simple bit of burglary into a three-way battle was not yet clear.

The ranks of the Clippers and the black-clad strangers were growing thin, and it seemed our intervention had turned the tables on both. Gyrd and Aeventius had won through to the center of the room, leaving a trail of dead and dying behind them. Kostin and Shess each fought black-cowled swordsmen, and it was only then that I noticed the change that had come over the second gang. Hunched as they were, garbed and hooded in black, it had been difficult to spot at first. But beneath each cowl the pointed snout of a rat now chattered, yellow wedge-teeth gnashing together like pairs of dull-edged chisels.



“Aeventius may be a snob, but he’s good in a fight.”

SHATTERED STAR

"Wererats!" I cried out, rushing to close the distance with Kostin. Mordimor bounded along at my heels, barking and snarling, weighing his need to protect me with his deep instincts to fight. "Don't let them bite you!"

"No shit!" Kostin shot back, turning aside a sword thrust from one of the shape-changers. The creature grew more ratlike by the second, even as it fought: its posture hunching, hands melding into claws, and a worm-skin tail snaking out from beneath its tunic. With a wild lunge, it fastened onto Kostin and bore him down, raking him with its back legs and snapping at his face.

I raised my crossbow and sighted along its length just as a voice like a clap of thunder echoed across the chamber.

"Cease this warring and obey your lord and master!"

It was as if every impulse, every instinct of mine toward obedience, had been pulled taut by the hand of a master

puppeteer. My arms trembled and my aim wavered. A voice deep inside of me demanded that I stop, that I obey. To disregard the command would be to fly in the face of everything I held sacred, everything I loved or cared about, to throw away whatever scrap of honor or shred of self-respect I possessed. To disobey would be a worse sin than that of a daughter who shirked her father's expectations, a scholar who lied to gain access to the home of a dying dwarf, or a Pathfinder who spent more time consorting with thieves and cheats than doing her duty. It was an imperative I could not, must not, ignore.

But ignore it I did.

I loosed the bolt, hitting the wererat in the shoulder. It rolled off of Kostin, hissing and spitting. Kostin regained his feet, his leather armor hanging in rents from the wererat's clawing attack.

"Seize those two!" The commanding voice belonged to a big man in rusty half-plate. He was dark-skinned and weathered like most of the pirate crews around Riddleport, as if he had spent a lifetime exposed to wind and sun. Around his neck hung a gruesome necklace of humanoid ears. All across the chamber the fighting had stopped, and only my friends and I and a handful of the Clippers and wererats remained. The pirate strode over the bodies of the fallen toward the center of the room, a scepter raised high in his left hand. It was magnificent, its mere possession seeming proof of the man's authority, and even though I had resisted his command, I still felt compelled by the artifact's inherent force. Here was the thing we had come to steal from the boss of the Clippers—no mere royal bauble but an artifact of enormous power.

"Yes, master," rasped the wererat to my left as she locked her claws around my upper arm. I tried to pull away, clumsily striking at her with my crossbow. Her fur was black as night, and a crescent scar left a hairless patch of red flesh beneath one eye. The scepter had turned her into a servant of the Clipper boss as surely as if she been born into his service. She slapped my weapon from my grasp and it clattered to the ground.

"Sorry, Tal," Kostin said, grabbing me by the other arm as I struggled. I stared at him in disbelief, my desire to resist draining away. He seemed hollow somehow, numbed with shock, but I could still see the pain in his eyes, the revulsion at his own behavior.

"Gotta do what the man says," he whispered.

"Silence that wizard," the Clipper boss roared, dim light refracting from the jewel-encrusted rod he brandished. Aeventius must have resisted the commands of the scepter as well, and I could hear him forming the harsh syllables of a spell over to my left. I strained in the grasp of the wererat and my friend, and turned to see the wizard.

Before Aeventius could finish his utterance, Gyrd—who already had a restraining arm locked around



"So this is the treasure that brought Kostin to Riddleport."

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him—smashed a fist into Aeventius's mouth. One hammer blow was enough to drop the spellcaster in a heap at the northman's feet.

I cried out then, and renewed my struggle, pulling Kostin and the wererat with me. From the corner of my eye I saw Mordimor raise his head above the corpse of a Clipper and take in the scene, before he ducked back down again. The sight of him gave me hope, though the wererat I had just wounded with my bolt swiveled his head suspiciously in Mordimor's direction.

The Clipper boss was laughing, as were his underlings, all of them wholly absorbed in the spectacle of the warrior and the wizard. "Oh, and he was a friend of yours, yes? You two fought well together, really thinned out my herd. But that just means the cut from all this gleam will be that much bigger for the rest of us." At that, his men cheered and roared his name: "Garso, Garso, Garso!"

"Yeah, yeah. Enough!" Garso strode over to Gyrd. The Clippers quieted, and their boss looked the big Ulfen up and down as if pricing a horse. "You know, I wonder if I even need the rod for the likes of you. Bet a pouch full of silver would be enough to get you to knife everyone in the room.

"Shess," the gang boss continued, wheeling on the gnome and pointing the scepter at her like a liege lord commanding a knight. "If that is your real name. Drop that sword and come over here."

Shess obeyed, walking toward him with an unnatural, jerky gait.

"I don't have time to figure every damn thing that went on here tonight, but if you hadn't tried to steal *this*"—Garso shook the scepter at her as his eyes bulged in rage—"we would have never had this fight with Ziphra's rats in the first place. I don't know if I can ever patch this up again, or where I'm gonna get more gleam. You've ruined us.

The leering boss turned back to Gyrd. "You," he said, and tapped Gyrd's mailed chest with the scepter. "Bring me the head of this little thief—and the rest of you stay where you are!"

Kostin's hand clenched tighter around my arm, and I could feel his body tense as if straining against fetters of steel. I fought to get myself free, and my wererat captor dealt me a smack to the back of the head that sent me to my knees.

Gyrd, his wide-bladed Ulfen sword in his hand, looked at the Clipper boss through eyes like slits. He took a step toward Shess, close enough now to strike. The gnome stood passively, gazing up at her friend, looking so small and vulnerable in the shadow of that mountain of iron and muscle. On her cheek I could see the glint of tears, even through the blur of my own.

Raising the chipped, bloody sword, Gyrd stood frozen, his face as red as his blade, his mouth a rictus of pain.

"It's n-not your f-fault, Gyrd," Shess said.

"Do it!" Garso screamed, but not so loudly that all in the room did not hear the feral snarl of Mordimor as he launched himself against the boss's upraised arm.

The scepter was knocked from Garso's hand, and clattered to the floorboards.

At once all was chaos. Gyrd, bellowing in rage, wheeled upon Garso and buried his blade halfway into the man's skull. As the boss went down I saw Mordimor dart away, eager to avoid the murderous onslaught of the viking, who struck the Clipper again and again.

The wererats were quick to recover. Next to me, Kostin was bowled over by the charge of the wounded wererat, while the female who had hold of my arm wrenched me to my feet. I put out a hand to fend off her attack, but instead she drew me close, her vermin snout an inch from my face. Her hot breath smelled of sewer trash and raw meat.

She inhaled, taking my scent, inspecting me as if I were an intended meal. "The smell is strong on you. When the time comes, I'll pluck your pretty eyes myself." I pulled back just as she released me of her own accord, and I toppled backward. With a final hiss, she darted off, running down the hallway from which Kostin and I had entered, seeming to grow smaller and more ratlike as she vanished into the dark.

As I regained my feet I could see that the Clippers and wererats had all fled. Kostin was at my side, his arm red to the elbow with the blood of the wererat he had just slain. In the center of the room, Gyrd helped a groaning Aeventius to his feet. The wizard's face was already swelling, and he tore his arm away from the Ulfen and tottered over to lean against the large sack that seemed to have been the object of the fight. Shess sat not far away, dejected.

A gentle pressure against my leg announced Mordimor's presence. I bent down and scooped him into my arms.

"So that's why this thing is so important." Kostin, having walked over to where the scepter had fallen after Mordimor's attack, held the artifact up reverently. "Just think what the *kapteo* could do with this. Hell, just think what *we* could do with it."

Aeventius snarled, kicking over the heavy sack and spinning to shake a fist at Kostin. "I will not spend the rest of my life on the run from some pig-stinking Sczarni boss because you couldn't refrain from playing with that toy. Leave it alone."

They began to argue, but I didn't hear it. Instead, my eyes were fixed on the contents of the sack, the dozens of flat, rectangular boxes that had spilled out when the wizard had kicked the bag over. I had seen this exact sort of box before. This very afternoon, in fact.

I had seen it on a table in Gundsríc's house, its lopsided, ten-pointed star the same as on the potions I drank daily—potions that now stared back at me from each opened box of gleam.