



## A GLEAMING IN THE DARK

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**A**fter an afternoon spent sneaking through the home of my former employer and a night fraught with blood and magic, my only desire was to return to my room at the Sated Shark and get some long-overdue sleep. Or if not sleep, then at least some quiet time reflecting on the ramifications of what I had learned in the run-down warehouse of the Char Street Clippers. Wererats? Gleam? What did either have to do with Gundsric? And more importantly, what did they have to do with me?

But Kostin would have none of it. This was the culmination of his grand heist, and even if things had

not gone according to plan, in the end they had worked out just fine. After I turned Mordimor loose to forage for insects and rodents, I joined my Magnimarian friends in their rather unenthusiastic celebration. The night, of course, belonged to Kostin. From the Watercress where he threw dice and played a dozen hands of Hobgoblin, to the Stolen Rudder which saw him quaff jack after jack of strong Ulfen mead, Kostin managed to retain our company for several hours, all the while seemingly oblivious to our mood while enjoying himself to no end.

Gyrd was the first to leave. Having rapidly achieved a state of drunkenness on Kostin's silver, he suddenly



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kicked back his chair, snatched the bottle of Korvosan brandy we had been sharing from the center of the table, and stomped off, muttering in Skald. Shess explained he was off to look for a fight or a place to sleep, whichever he happened upon first. I believe part of her wanted to go with him, to make sure the big northerner didn't get into too much trouble, but the trauma of having her closest friend nearly murder her earlier that night had put a barrier between them, and subdued the normally unflappable gnome.

"He wouldn't have done it," Kostin said to her at one point later in the evening, trying to brighten her mood. "You know that. Aevy says it can't make people do things that they would never do." He tapped the potent scepter for emphasis. He had wrapped it in an old cloak, but on several occasions I had seen him unravel the cloth for a peek at the magnificent artifact. It was worth a king's ransom for its craftsmanship and material alone, but when one considered its power to coerce and command, the scepter's value became almost incalculable.

It was this power that Kostin alluded to with unchecked enthusiasm throughout the evening, playfully suggesting we use the item on various card dealers, money changers, wait staff, or guards for reasons that ranged from the absurd to the near-diabolical. But Kostin had had a good night, and been lucky enough already, so he took his losses at the gaming table in stride and limited his musings about the scepter to jokes and speculation. For the time being, it stayed wrapped up in its old cloak.

"Just think what we can do with it, Aevy. Talk about smoothing the rough edges—this thing is a long con gold mine. I say we delay our return to Magnimar for a few more weeks at least."

"Don't be a damned fool," Aeventius snapped. His face and lip were painfully swollen where Gyrd had struck him, the skin bruised a livid purple. He had sipped his wine carefully all evening from one side of his mouth, and said very little as we followed Kostin from venue to venue. But this last remark had rekindled his earlier anger. He slammed his hand on the table and stood up, knocking over his half-full glass in a crimson cascade. "Put it in a lock box until we're gone from this wretched town, which can be none too soon." The wizard ignored Kostin's parting remark as he strode away and out the door.

I had not been good company that evening, either, preoccupied as I was with my own problems. I had told Shess about finding the gleam at Gundsric's, and once or twice I had asked her about the drug—after all, her association with the Clippers must have given her some insight into its effects and possible origins. But she said very little, and spent the evening tying and untying knots in a length of sisal twine. I had never seen her like that

before. She seemed somehow less vibrant, her bright palette diluted by lesser pigments.

"D'ja want to hold it, Tal?"

I had been lost in my own thoughts, my hand on the vial of Gundsric's potion in my pouch, not daring to let myself believe my latest suspicions about its contents. It was very late, and other than Shess, Kostin, and I, only a handful of other patrons sat around the common room of the Stolen Rudder. At his slurred statement, I looked up to see Kostin, drunk, with his feet on the table and the unwrapped scepter in his lap. He leered at me, bleary-eyed and suggestive.

"I'd sooner hold a dead rat," I said.

"Tha'sh not how you felt on th' boat." His drunken grin grew wider.

I gaped at him, cheeks growing hot. Here was the whole reason I had been avoiding him since we made landing at Riddleport, and he threw it back in my face as if it were some kind of joke. As if our night together had meant nothing more to him than one of his serving wenches or barroom trollops. I stood up, furious but somehow also afraid, not trusting myself to say anything. I pushed in my chair and began walking away, hoping I looked more composed than I felt—not that either of my companions were in any state to notice.

"I'm sh-sorry, Tazza!" I turned back and saw him waving the scepter uncoordinatedly in my direction. "Return t' me, my Exthplorer-Queen!"

I left and did not look back.

The night was a cool breath on my hot skin, and a welcome relief from the beery confines of the alehouse. Raising my hood and loosening my dagger in its sheath, I prepared to take Wharf Street south to my lodgings, where Mordimor would no doubt be waiting for me to let him in. I did not want to think about what had just happened.

"Wait!" piped a child's voice behind me.

Shess trotted up as I turned around. "Can I stay with you?" she asked, looking up at me with her green eyes shimmering in the reflected light of the gas lamps.

I put out my hand. She took it, and together we walked away.

The next day, to my relief, my gnomish friend seemed her old self again. In fact, she was nearly overflowing with information about the Char Street Clippers, their deals with Boss Ziphras's wererat gang, and the various places they had been selling gleam.

"Gleam is real new stuff, and that fat ol' Croat has nothing to do with it." Shess wolfed down her third pickled herring that morning. The herring had followed a sticky bun, a clump of stewed radishes, and half a blood sausage in strange succession on Shess's plate. Not



exactly what I would have chosen to break the fast, but Shess attacked her dishes with evident relish. I limited myself to a few stale bread rolls as she rambled on about the drug trade in the Wharf District.

"It wasn't really my thing, you know," she continued, her meal finished. Leaning back in her chair, she blew on a mug of black Chelish tea and smiled. "I don't think Garso really trusted me yet with that kind of information. Plus, he said people don't like to buy from gnomes—you never know what you're getting. Which is probably true, as I remember this one fella Wallowclip out of Gastleburrow, real tall for a gnome, who *claimed* he had an ointment that could get rid of any kind of rash, any at all, except for the kind that necromancers sometimes get around their—"

"Yes," I interrupted quickly, "that's interesting, Shess, but what about the gleam?"

"Well... I know a few places we could check, where maybe we could find out who the rats get it from. But I'm not sure if Garso ever knew himself, so what those guys can tell us might just be rumors. You're worried it's this dwarf you were working for?"

"I'm not sure. I don't know if he just buys it himself or if... well, he is an alchemist. And completely unscrupulous, as near as I can tell. What I'm really worried about," and here I removed the potion from my pouch and held it up to Shess, not liking the thrill I got at the feeling of the cool glass on my skin, "is that he's been giving it to me in this."

Shess's eyes widened as she saw the faintly glowing solution, and I proceeded to tell her about my time with Gundsric, about the secret door and his undoubted observation of me, and of my discovery of the box of gleam in proximity to the translation potions I had consumed on a daily basis. I told her too of the effects I had experienced under the influence of the potions, and of the difficulty I was having simply refraining from downing the elixir as we spoke. I put the vial away again in the bottom of my pouch, not wanting it to be within easy reach.

"It sounds a bit like gleam, but maybe not. Seeing in the dark, sure, but then again you can see just as good as me when it's dark. The other stuff, like guessing the layout of a place or spotting a secret door—never heard anything like that."

Shess stopped as a yawning Mordimor bumbled down the stairs to join us. The two had bonded last night after a brief conversation in which Shess had effortlessly cast the spell that I myself used to speak with him. As with all of her magic, Shess had no real idea how or why she did this. Her earliest memory of her talent, she told me, had been of speaking with the creatures of the countryside as she played and explored in the wilderness around Whistledown. Mordimor gave me an affectionate nip

before bounding awkwardly up into Shess's lap. She giggled, again seeming a young girl despite being nearly twice my age, hugging the badger while the innkeeper looked on in unconcealed disapproval.

"Have you been drawing?" she asked, taking me aback somewhat. I told her I didn't know what she meant.

"Gleamers are always scribbling," she said, scratching Mordimor behind the ears, turning his eyes into slits of contentment. "Go to one of their dens and there's stuff all over the walls, patterns and spirals and things. You see it on buildings too, sometimes. It's how you know they're around."

I told her I hadn't done anything like that and she seemed to relax. Leaving some silvers on the table, we readied ourselves to leave, Shess having promised to take me to a few likely spots to get some information. While my own possible exposure to gleam was still uppermost on my mind, my desire for information about its source was not entirely due to health concerns. The idea occurred to me that, if Gundsric was indeed the origin of the drug and his fortune was due to its sale rather than some fabled underground wealth he was rumored to have unearthed, such information could be used as leverage against him. Leverage enough to obtain the journals of Jan Lortis, or whatever information the dwarf might be hiding as to their whereabouts. If I were to ever look the Heidmarchs in the eyes again, I would have to at least make the attempt.

Unscrupulous as it was to deal with a drug peddler, it was still a more elegant plan than trying to break into Gundsric's house through an unlocked window. And maybe—just maybe—once I had what I wanted, I could double-cross him. Wouldn't he do the same to me if he could?

Shess, having more to say, interrupted my train of thought. "Well, glad you weren't doing those drawings then, because that's the worst thing. They say once the gleamers start that, it isn't long before they go blind."

"Blind?" A lump of ice suddenly formed in the pit of my stomach. "You mean I could lose my eyesight?"

Shess looked at me in surprise. "You mean you didn't know? Gleamers don't go nearsighted or anything. They go dead. Dead with their eyes scooped out of their faces. Happens to all of them eventually, though they sure don't tell you that when they're trying to sell you the stuff."

We walked out of there and into the morning heat. All I could think about was the threat the wererat bitch had made the night before. She had promised to take my eyes when the time came.

And she had seemed certain it was to come soon.

We spent the morning bouncing from place to place, not really finding anything of value. Many of the people



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Shess had expected to see at various dives, dens, and hangouts around the Wharf District were gone without a trace, and more than a few of the ones we could find were understandably distrustful or downright hostile. At one point we came upon a runner for the Clippers getting a beating from a trio of thugs from a rival gang. We were investigating a brothel the Clippers used as a staging area for gleam distribution when the sounds of the thrashing prompted us to look in the dingy alley running behind it. Shess didn't hesitate, and after whispering a few words in what sounded more like Gnome than the arcane tongue of magic, called into being a convincingly real—and convincingly menacing—illusion of one of the Overlord's gendarmes. The assailants took one look at the brawny fighter walking slowly in their direction, a spiked mace in his fist, and ran off down the alley. Shess laughed as the gendarme winked out of existence, though not before the illusory enforcer aimed a rude gesture at the backs of the departing gang.

The runner knew nothing of gleam, though his gratitude was genuine enough. He had been sent by one of the Clippers' minor lieutenants in an effort to secure the continued loyalty of the brothel madam—a septuagenarian halfling who had apparently gotten wind of Garso's death last night and fled with her girls and everything else of value in the place. The runner's eyes widened when Shess outlined the events of the prior evening for him, leaving out a few of the more incriminating details.

"Forget all this Clipper stuff and go get on the first ship outta here," Shess said. "You know, being a pirate is actually pretty fun if you have the right hat." She flipped the startled boy—he could hardly be older than fifteen—her Galtan tricorne.

"You should probably take that ear off first," I said to him as he turned to go. He looked down, embarrassed, at the single ear that hung from a thong around his neck. Tugging it off and dropping it in the street, he thanked us again before darting off.

The Clippers, it seemed, were going the way of an ant colony that had lost its queen. If we were to find anyone with useful information, we would have to find them soon.

It was while poking around in a run-down bunkhouse on Gill Street that we finally did. The place was badly kept. From the outside, the flaking away of the graying shingled walls made the bunkhouse look like a dead fish shedding its scales. It had once been a lodging for workers at a nearby sailmaker, before the money dried up and the business folded under pressure from one boss or another.

"Couple of street-level dealers stay here. I thought one or the other of them might still be around." Shess

inspected the mess. The place wasn't just empty; it had been tossed, the meager possessions of the inhabitants strewn around the floor in a broken array. On the walls the telltale scribbblings of the gleam-addicted caught my attention. Here, in charcoal, chalk, and what I suspected was blood, was a whole panoply of strange symbols. There were whirls and abstract shapes that seemed to follow no known schema, and runes and ciphers unlike anything I had ever seen—with one exception.

Here and there, peeking from the mass of mad art, were the ten-pointed runes that topped every box of gleam, shining forth like a constellation of sooty stars. Without noticing, my fingers had crept to Gundsric's potion where it lay buried in my pouch. I snatched my hand away.



*"Shess never fails to keep things interesting."*



A few clipped barks from Mordimor drew my attention. With a start, I turned to see Shess, sword in hand, prying up a floorboard against the far wall while Mordimor alternately sniffed and snarled at the floor beneath her.

Shess revealed the handle of a secret hatch while Mordimor danced around its edges in excitement. She took hold and hauled it open, exposing a dark recess under the house. As the light hit the figure below the floor, it let out a pitiful wail.

"Idrek!" Shess said, seemingly familiar with the man who huddled in the space under the floor.

"Ah, it's you!" the man shrieked. "Don't kill me!" He stared at Shess with luminous, red-rimmed eyes, peering through tangles of unkempt black hair. I noticed that he had elven blood, same as I did.

"Idrek, why would I kill you? Look how dirty your fingernails are."

Idrek cocked his head to one side, much as I had seen Mordimor do, and looked at Shess in confusion.

"How about you answer some questions for my friend and me?" she said.

"I didn't tell them nothing!" he pleaded, eyes shifting furtively in the dark. He flinched as I drew nearer, and I put my hands up so he could see I bore no weapons.

Shess made a *tsking* sound and rummaged through her belt pouch. She produced a parchment envelope, which she then waved in Idrek's face.

It was gleam. I hadn't seen her take it last night, and perhaps she hadn't. We had debated what to do with the drug, finally opting to dump it in the shallow waters of the bay outside the Clippers' headquarters. Not even Kostin had wanted to risk trying to sell it after Shess had explained that possession of that much of the stuff would be a death sentence from both Cromarcky and Croat, whoever caught you first. Assuming, of course, that every other two-copper thug, cutpurse, pirate, and thief in Riddleport somehow missed us in the meantime.

Idrek reached a trembling hand out for the drug, and Shess pulled it back with a giggle. She could be cruel sometimes.

"Flowers need water, Idrek, same as fish. First you gotta tell me who was here. What did you tell them?" She shook the packet for emphasis.

Idrek, eyes fixed on the envelope of gleam with such intensity that I almost expected it to burst into flame, choked back a sob before answering. "Hrushgak... I think. And a bunch more."

"Croat's boys? They messed this place up good. And what did you tell the big, bad half-orcs?"

"Nothing! They didn't find me." Idrek glanced at Mordimor, who had kept the addict in his steely gaze the whole time. "But maybe they'll come back?"

"Don't worry!" Shess beamed, patting Idrek on the head with the flat of her sword. He flinched, crouching half upright in the crawl space, clad pathetically in clothes that were little more than rags. "Bet you're confused, though," she said, and proceeded to tell Idrek an abbreviated version of the fall of the Char Street Clippers. In this new version, however, it seemed that Aeventius—described by Shess as "Aroden's Tall, Dark, and Chosen One"—had destroyed the gang single-handedly. Shess's own involvement was left out.

"So," she finished, "you need to tell us where we can find some answers about gleam. And just maybe we're the only ones that can keep it on the street now that Garso is gone. Besides, you know what they say about gnomes, Idrek."

Idrek looked blankly at Shess, his eyes straying to the packet in her hand.



*"What does Idrek know?"*



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“They say that we’re only as tall as we need to be—but that’s really only half true. So where’s the place that Garso never talked about? I know every den, front, and flophouse the Clippers ever ran gleam out of, but there’s something else that was a big secret. I know you know what it is.”

Idrek’s eyes darted around the room as if he sought a way out of a trap. But always they returned to the gleam. Shess started humming a popular pirate shanty, swaying and dipping the envelope in her hand to match the rhythm of her song.

“Garso is gone, Idrek,” I said as gently as I could, “and the Clippers with him. Why keep their secrets?”

He swallowed once, hard, and nodded his head. “The Forty Fathoms.”

Idrek reached an arm out for the envelope and Shess smacked it away.

“A cheap alehouse in Rotgut? It’s not even Clippers’ territory.”

“Shows what you know!” Idrek, angry now, straightened up out of his hiding spot and shook a knobby finger at Shess. “That’s where they take them. Would have taken me if I didn’t have the right friends on the street. That’s where Gleamers go to die blind and screaming, the light of the universe burning out their eyes!”

He advanced on Shess, fingers hooked into claws, madness in his bright eyes. I could see his withered chest clearly, the rags barely covering it. Carved there in the pale skin, weeping blood where the scabs had cracked open, was the ubiquitous ten-pointed star.

Mordimor snarled. Shess raised her sword and took a quick hop backward, flinging the packet of gleam at Idrek as she did so.

He stopped, all menace in him gone. Slumping to the floor, he clutched the envelope in bony hands and sobbed. Idrek’s head hung low, his hair drooping down like the filthy seaweed that roped the pylons of the dockyards. The tips of his ears, so like mine, could clearly be seen protruding from the black snarl.

“Thank you, Idrek,” I said softly, placing a restraining hand on Shess’s shoulder. “I wish we had more for you. I suspect you’re heading for a tough time, so try to make that last.”

As we walked out of the bunkhouse, Idrek’s hollow laughter spilled out after us, running up my spine like an arctic wind. I looked back and saw the twin lamps of his eyes glowing in the dark. He nodded at me as if in formal farewell—or was it recognition?—and I wondered what it was he saw in my own eyes.

Shess knew every shortcut and alleyway in Riddleport’s seedy shoreside, and it wasn’t long before we found ourselves on the verges of the Rotgut district, mere blocks from Gundsríc’s home. Could the location be simple

coincidence? If the alchemist were somehow connected to the gleam trade, it would explain why he might desire to live in such a squalid section of town. I thought then of my last encounter with him: Had I really stumbled upon some hidden, ugly truth, or just panicked over my own transgressions? And even if the dwarf was connected to gleam, even if he had been giving it to me for whatever twisted purpose, was digging through every Clipper hideout and drug den in the city really going to get me any closer to the journal of Jan Lortis? Shouldn’t I have just kept to my appointments in his home, waiting for another chance to search for it undetected?

No, I decided. This was the story I had chosen for myself, and its irresistible pull was all the evidence I needed to know I was on the right track.

The Forty Fathoms alehouse leaned drunkenly at the end of a row of run-down, three-story buildings, all faintly out of square. This was fairly typical of construction in the poorer sections of town. It was said that, on a windy day, parts of Riddleport creaked as much as any pirate brig under full sail. As we drew closer, we could see light flickering through the thick, cheap glass of the windows. We slowed, moving against the walls of the neighboring buildings, not wanting to be seen by anyone inside the Forty Fathoms.

But the place was empty.

We waited, peering through the windows, staying low. Passersby seemed unfazed by this—perhaps such clandestine behavior was a common sight in Rotgut. The common room of the Forty Fathoms was a jumble of rude benches and tables presided over by a single flickering lantern, but details were difficult to discern through the distortion of the glass.

“Someone had to light that lantern,” I said to Shess, and she nodded. After a time we grew tired of waiting for some hint of movement within, and decided to go inside.

The door was unlocked, but I didn’t stop to wonder why an unlocked alehouse should be empty at this time of day. It opened outward, and I stepped inside ahead of Mordimor and Shess, my eyes scanning the far sides of the room. It was dark and still, the single lantern just enough to reveal the tomb-thick coating of dust that clung to the furniture and battered bar top.

But the dust on the floor told a different story, one of multiple footprints and a maelstrom of drag marks. I started forward, intent on the tale written in dust and grime there on the planks, curious about the bare section of floor immediately in front of me.

I heard Shess’s warning shout just as I took the step that triggered the device. With a click like the snap of bone, the floor gave way beneath me, pivoting upward on the far side of a fulcrum as it dropped under my feet. I flailed futilely for the lip of the hole and fell into darkness.