

SHATTERED STAR



CHILD OF A DISTANT STAR

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The sounds of rioting outside had grown louder. The crowd—a collection of wastrels, afternoon drunks, pirates, and the unemployable—was growing larger. I had thrown another bolt on one of Gundsric's windows, this time at the front of his house, and by opening it just a crack I could see the tumult outside slipping further into pandemonium.

"I have to wonder if Kostin knows what he's doing," I said.

"Well, it did get us inside," Shess said, stuffing a platinum-inlaid Ustalavic icon into her already bulging pouches. The room was rich with neglected treasures, like the ten or so others we had made cursory inspection of since clambering through the window I had left unlocked yesterday—a yesterday that seemed a thousand years ago.

"But will we ever get out again?" I asked, just as I caught site of Kostin again in the crowd, this time with Gyrd next to him—the warrior must have somehow gotten word that Shess was here. Kostin had been alone when he responded to Shess's whistle, a code the two of them had used in the past, after our arrival at Gundsric's house an hour ago. Slipping away from the combined guard forces of the half-orc drug dealer Boss Croat and the official police force of the corrupt but unassailable Overlord Cromarcky, Kostin greeted us with a warm smile and a quip about my appearance.

To be sure, my filthy clothing, rent and bloody shirt, and bruised face certainly hinted at a story, but Kostin was not going to get it from me. Not yet. Irritated by the joke—a jape incongruous with the look of concern in his eyes,

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which only irritated me all the more—I clamped a hand over Shess's mouth as she started to excitedly relate our adventures. "What the hell are you doing here, Kostin?"

He laughed. "Isn't that what I'm supposed to ask you? Well, I've been enjoying the fruits of our labors, putting the scepter to good use." He patted the bundle at his side, the lines of the artifact visible in the old cloak that wrapped it. He had tied a rope to the ends of the bundle, and wore it over one shoulder. "Once I was done bilking dicers, securing loans, selling bargain ships and titles of nobility, and... well, after all that I remembered what you said about the alchemist."

"What did I say about the alchemist?"

He recounted my conversation with Shess the night before—he had been paying more attention to it that she had, it seemed. Gundsric was a drug manufacturer, the man behind gleam, and I was going to have nothing more to do with him—all of which sounded emphatic and certain with Kostin relating it back to me. When I had first said it, though, a little drunk and completely exhausted, scared for my health and confused about what I had learned, it had all seemed more like thinking aloud and not some recitation of cold, hard truth.

Well, Kostin had gone ahead and acted on my cold, hard truth, selling the information to both Croat and Cromarcky in less time than it took for Shess to finish a plate of pickled herring.

He could see the annoyance in my eyes. "Look, the money is *ours*. I looked for you this morning, and you weren't at the Shark. I couldn't ask you anything and... and I was worried. A bit. You said you were done with the bastard, and these guys all want his head. After what he did to you, I'd happily sell his head at a discount."

"Kostin, I need to get in that house." I told him about the unlocked window around the back, and about my real purpose in Gundsric's employ.

His smile vanished. "Ah. I see. In that case... we could always use the scepter to make them let us in, but then we'd have to hold them with it for as long as we were inside." He paced the alley, tapping the scepter in its cloth wrapping. Behind him I could see Gundsric's house looming up like a great slab of weathered stone. "Alright, I think I could distract them, pull them away from the back long enough for you and Green to get inside. She climbs faster than anyone I've seen, and that looks like enough rope to do the trick."

It had been enough rope, but barely. Kostin hadn't been wrong about Shess's skill at climbing, and once the guards had been lured away by Kostin's disturbance—"just a little tussle" he had said—we quickly made our way up the wall and to the third-floor window that had, luckily, remained unlocked.

But with me and Shess no closer to finding the journal of Jan Lortis, Kostin's "tussle" in the street outside was teetering on the edge of a full-scale riot. I could see him now edging

along the margins of the crowd, a worried look on his face that would have been comical if I could laugh at the situation.

He had had the same look when we agreed on the plan and parted ways, Mordimor reluctantly going with him, Kostin trying to mumble out some apology for his stupid comments the night before. He stood there, sheepishly fumbling for words.

"Don't," I said, wanting him to stop talking, wanting him to understand that if he owed me an apology, then I owed him one in return for shutting him out these last few weeks. He met my eyes, and suddenly it was that night on the ship all over again, with the others still asleep belowdecks. Kostin and I had shared a bottle of Chelish red he had rescued from Gyrd's drunken predation. Riddleport was in our future, as was all of Golarion to hear Kostin speak of it. The moon had turned the sea to silver, and we talked of our childhood together, almost as two strangers comparing parallel lives. Then we had spoken a different language, one that needed no words.

"Kalashar the Unvanquishable, Deadliest Blade in All Casmaron, apologizes to no one," I said, placing a hand on his chest and pushing him gently away. "Go on already before I lose my nerve."

Kostin grinned, nodding his head. "Kalashar does, however, make the occasional exception for Great Tazza of Arcadia, explorer of sea and land." Mordimor padded over to him, his face a mirror of Kostin's own concern. "Be safe," Kostin said before trotting off, the scepter already in his hand.

"Tal, you know you have a lot of room in that pouch still."

Shess's voice brought me back to the present, and I turned to see Shess, her every purse and pocket already bulging with stolen objects, trying to squeeze a disk-shaped Mwangi sky calendar down the front of her tight leather armor. "Maybe we could come back later?"

The banging on the door downstairs was all the answer we needed to that question, and together Shess and I hurried through more rooms, racing past yet more forgotten glories. How many years and how much coin had the dwarf spent on this collection, only to let it fall into ruin? We came back to the room on the second floor that contained Gundsric's library, a room full of books and scrolls tossed negligently into shelves and boxes.

There was so much more of the house to inspect, but here was a room too ripe with promise to ignore a second time. I began to scan the volumes, ignoring bound ones as best I could. The journals would be a loose collection, the pages tied or pinned together, the cover more a waterproof purse than proper boards. This much at least I knew from the Heidmarchs' description. I told Shess what to look for and we searched the shelves.

There was so much to go through, so much that had value. I could only hope that whoever ended up with this collection treated it with more respect than the mad dwarf.

Many times I came upon volumes I myself had worked on, and they felt like old friends in my hand. The many hours I had spent in the room just across the secret hall from here had been rewarding, stimulating. For once I had felt like the scholar I had set out to be, someone making a real contribution. Someone privy to secret knowledge.

“Um, Tal, you should see this,” Shess said.

I glanced at what she held and knew it instantly, a folio edition of an old Taldan prayer book I had myself translated and annotated just a few days ago. “Keep looking, Shess,” I said, turning back to a jumble of scrolls in an urn at the foot of one of the shelves. “That was one of mine.”

“In that case, Tal, you *really* need to see this.”

Something in the tone of her voice chilled my blood. I walked over to her and took the volume in my hands. But when I saw what was written there, not only seeing it but *remembering* it, the book slipped through my fingers and smacked facedown onto the dusty floorboards.

The leaves scattered. A few were pentameter verse in Taldane. The rest, done in a hand I recognized as my own, was the scribbled madness of a gleam addict. Whirls and lines like a Minkai sand garden ran alongside cryptic runes in no language I knew, as incomprehensible as those on the Cyphergate. And through it all, repeated again and again, was the asymmetric ten-pointed star that was the symbol of gleam.

“We must try to be innocent of the future when telling our tales. By shaping our story according to the dictates of the moment, we make writing into a second act of discovery.” Master Shaine had said that, always maintaining that storytelling was an art as difficult and as powerful as magic, something with which it had much in common. He warned of the dangers of confusing life with art, and art with truth, and truth with power. So many subtleties lost on us initiates, and probably outside the consideration of many confirmed Pathfinders as well.

But how can we retell a moment when it is lost to us as soon as it happens? How can we truly make it a second act of discovery, when so much of our past is colored by all of the layers of time, all of the subsequent moments, that have come since? I have written almost the entirety of this account in an effort to discover what it was I felt, saw, knew, feared, and loved in the exact moment that I looked down upon that jumble of parchment. Looked down on it while removing Gundsric’s potion from my pouch, uncorking it with a faint pop, and downing the luminous substance in one quick swallow.

“Taldara!” Shess said, concerned and puzzled.

I smiled at her, trying to convey a confidence that I was uncertain I felt. “We need to follow this through, Shess. Finish it. I had thought you were the one who set this stone rolling downhill,” I touched a strand of her emerald hair—impossibly bright, impossibly green when seen through

gleaming eyes—as she looked at me in confusion. I held up the empty vial, faintly glowing from the residue of the potion. “But it was this. The moment I first had gleam, the whole story was set in motion. Time to end it.”

I bade her follow me, and we moved through the house, going downward. I led the way as if it were my own home, for I knew it intimately now. It was as if every room, corridor, door, and secret were outline in glowing bands of fire. I had a map of the place in my mind, and I had to fight to keep it in focus—for I knew my map was much larger than Gundsric’s home. If I gave in to the temptation to explore, to fly along the fiery pathways the map laid out for me, I might have seen all of Riddleport, from the creaking tenements and crowded harbor bristling with a hundred masts, to the great buildings at its heart—the octagonal pyramid of Calistria’s brothel-temple; the drowning bowl of Besmara teeming with ever-hungry life; the arena, throbbing with the pulse of death; Cromarcky’s fortress isle warded and guarded; and the dingy Gas Forges crouching over the secrets of the earth, converting poison into power. Everything was there, all of the city, all of Varisia, and all of Golarion too—so much that I feared that to relax my concentration for even a moment would send my mind skittering out into the world, never to return.

The sounds of the rioting grew louder as we reached the first floor, then vanished completely once we entered the alchemist’s basement laboratory. The door was triple-locked, and Shess snapped a pair of picks as she worked the tumblers. She remarked that she wished Aeventius was there with one of his lock-opening spells, and Gyrd and Kostin, too. I agreed, though my apprehension was of a different source than hers. For I was hearing voices—voices of light.

They began as a whisper, seemingly the hint of a stray thought or half-remembered phrase. As we moved downstairs, they grew louder. When Shess finally clicked the last of the locks on Gundsric’s laboratory open, the chatter of voices rose in a tumult, a cacophony of pleas, shouts, prayers, and confessions. A thousand lost voices calling out in the dark, unable even to hear one another, alone and anonymous in the midst of their own multitude.

“What is it?” Shess asked when I almost staggered from the weight of voices.

I didn’t answer; what could I say? I merely collected myself and led the way down. It was bright now, painfully so, the carbauxine torches on the stairwell blazing at full strength, their radiance increased by back-reflecting mirrors. A dozen smells assaulted us, sour and sweet, chemical and earthy, fertile and rotten, and Shess pinched her nose at the unpleasant commingling of odors. At the landing we turned and entered the lab proper, its interior as bright as a star and hotter than the summer air outside.

The place was large enough and well equipped enough for a dozen alchemists. Stone slabs spanned the hexagonal

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outer walls of dressed limestone, and heaped upon them was a dizzying array of equipment, the purpose of which I could only guess at. Everywhere was glass—spun glass tubes through which dark fluids dripped, specialized glass containers with scorched bottoms, heavy glass jars stoppered tight, containing solutions ranging over all the colors of the rainbow. As arresting as the sight of Gundsric's alchemical array was, however, it was the horror at the center of the laboratory that drew our attention.

Tables had been pushed aside, fine glassware smashed in haste. On the floor was a kind of summoning circle, the familiar whirls and lines of the gleam vision, the ubiquitous asymmetric star rune at the center. At four points within the circle, enormous glass containers filled with a luminous solution stood bright as columns of sunlight. These lines on the floor were no mere charcoal scribbles, however. They glowed with an almost painful radiance, white as the hottest part of a fire. They pulled at me, and I could feel the pressure in my eyes building as I stared. It was gleam itself, but not the debased powder that had been in one of Shess's envelopes. Not even the potion-diluted substance I had just ingested. This was pure, and it was *alien*.

And then the pattern itself snapped into focus. These things were not random, at least not in their higher form. All the frenzied scratchings on the walls of Riddleport's gleam dens were but a pale reflection of this, like a misremembered face. This was a map. A map and a road, one leading through uncharted spaces, to the farthest reaches of the universe. I knew because I was seeing through gleaming eyes. I knew because the pattern on the floor was one that I had discovered and recorded as I worked diligently in Gundsric's upstairs room, lost in the fog of a trance.

"What does it mean?" Shess asked, her voice low and reverent.

"It means he's coming," I said, without thought.

It was then that I noticed that the point of light at each intersection of the gleam lines was a brightly glowing eyeball. The large glass containers themselves contained hundreds of such orbs, suspended in a glowing solution.

At the center of the circle was a beaker of fine green glass. I stepped into the circle to better see it.

"I'm not sure I like this," Shess said. "Who did you say was coming, again?"

"The Bright One," a ghostly voice answered. I turned toward it and saw a thick vapor coalescing just inside the doorway. At first it seemed a mere parody of humanoid form, but then the gray mist solidified into the form of Gundsric, bloody and scorched from head to foot from his recent fight.

"The Child of Light comes this day," he coughed through bloody lips. On his shoulder, Carchima chirped agreement and flexed his tattered wings. "You thought you could shut me out with guards and that riotous crowd? No." He pulled the sealskin bag from his hip and flung it

to the ground, where its grotesque contents spilled over the floor. "And we don't even need them, now. Not with you here. I thank you, elf. Your arrival was perfectly timed."

I knew instinctively it was true. Gundsric had needed a certain amount of saturation, a certain amount of reflected light from all of those who had seen with these gleaming eyes—seen things illuminated by the light of a distant star. It was all around me, now, the chorus loud enough to reach the far ends of space and time. The Shining Child was coming, and if I listened closely, I could almost hear my own voice crying out for his arrival.

Then I heard a different sound: that of the upstairs door crashing open in a splintering boom, followed by a tumult of angry shouts filling the hall.

Shess lunged at Gundsric, bright blade in her tiny fist, but the dwarf's misshapen familiar intercepted her, flapping into her face. Gundsric hesitated, torn between defending his home from the rioters and confronting



"Kostin's grown a bit too fond of that thing."

me in the center of the summoning circle. I locked eyes with him, eyes bright as his, and snatched the green glass potion from the center of the floor.

“Give that to me,” he roared, bloody spittle exploding from his mouth. He lumbered forward into the circle, and the world grew brighter. In truth I was uncertain what to do with the potion—smash it or drink it? Either course could spell disaster.

He locked his hands around my wrist, his earlier, mutagen-infused strength gone but replaced by the power of desperation. We crashed to the ground, the gleam feeling like hot ash where it touched my skin. We rolled once and he drove his thick skull against my jaw, raving manically, bloody drool falling into my face and leaving a black splatter in the white lines on the floor.

And then a commanding, irresistible voice broke through the chaos.

“Step away from her, you beardless freak.” Kostin’s magic rod was brilliant in his hand. Gyrd stood next to him, sword drawn, and I could see a grim Aeventius behind them both. Rioters flanked the trio like an honor guard. At Kostin’s feet, Mordimor bounced eagerly, bristling for a fight.

Gundsric moved to obey, a hysterical keening somewhere in the back of his throat. I stood, inching away, green-glass potion still in my hand. A wounded Carchima had flapped away from Shess, to shelter behind a tangle of retorts and glassware at the far corner of the room.

“We’ll have to figure out what to do with you, dwarf. Maybe an auction, with Croat and Cromarcky in attendance.” Behind Kostin the rioters snickered. Then he turned to me, voice softening. “Are you hurt, Tal?”

Before I could answer, something changed. The scepter, one second a flawless length of gemstone-encrusted platinum and steel, turned dull, then black, then crumbled to dust in the hands of an astonished Kostin.

Gundsric was quick to react, snatching the potion from my grasp in the same instant he brought another to his lips. I lunged at him, and saw Shess doing the same from the other side of the circle. Gundsric finished the potion in one swift gulp, wiped his lips with the back of his hand, and smiled.

And then the dwarf vomited a gout of hornets in a black and angry swarm.

It was as if a sandstorm raged over us. I could see nothing through the horde of insects. They stung me again and again, a thousand hot pinpricks of pain, and flowed down my shirt, caught in my hair, clogged my nose and mouth. I flailed at them, smashing them by the hundreds as they lanced my hands with their envenomed stingers.

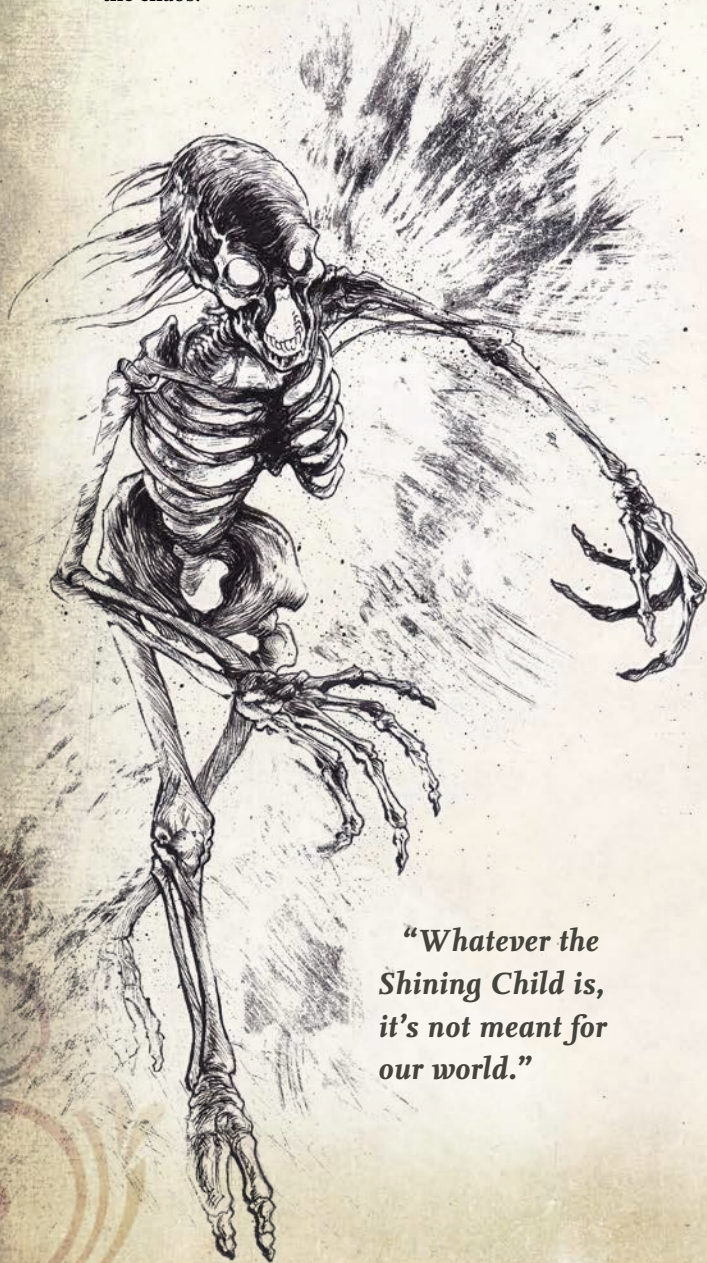
But even the droning of the swarm could not drown out the radiant choir screaming in my mind, and the sudden change in its chorus was proof enough that Gundsric had drunk the potion that had rested at the center of the circle. He had called the Burning One, the Shining Child, and it was coming.

Somewhere in the deep universe, a voice answered the call.

My body burned to a cinder and disintegrated, blown away on furnace-hot winds. The world was white, whiter than white, the white of the heart of a star. The Child was there, probing, playing with pieces of my memories.

Gundsric was with us, laughing in triumph. I saw him then, saw his past as vividly as if it were my own. The moment long ago when he had first found it, the fallen stone that contained within it a potent piece of star stuff. Gundsric, breathing laboriously through the bellows-mask he wore, deep in the poison dark of the tunnels beneath the Gas Forges. Gundsric making it his obsession, killing the fellow miner who learned of it, making the death look like an accident.

The alchemist had removed the stone under cover of night, taking it home, cracking open its secrets and growing



“Whatever the Shining Child is, it’s not meant for our world.”

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strong on the knowledge. He searched for more, charting the hidden depths of the mines, but never finding another such bright and terrible stone. But the gleam had kept him alive despite the black lung, and it could do so much more. The star stuff itself was alive, part of a being that yearned to rejoin it, yearned to be whole again after a impossible gulf of time.

And Gundsric yearned for something too—yearned to destroy. To burn his enemies, burn the whole world to a dead ball of ash and spit his last bloody breath on its corpse.

The Child answered the call, and I could feel us moving back the way we had come. Somewhere I felt the painful throbbing of my body, heard the swarm, the chaos of fighting. We were drifting back to our world, and Gundsric sang with joy. I could see it through his eyes, his anticipation of Riddleport in flames, all of Varisia consumed in the blaze of a hundred raging fires. The Child would do it, without care or thought—it sought only to reunite with the star stuff, the gleam.

You don't have to do it, I thought, and the Child swept its pitiless gaze over me. *You can refuse*.

I offered my mind up to it, and it took it. All of it. The scholar who was a thief. The daughter who said no to the father, again and again, always doing the opposite of what he had planned for her. The disobedient initiate who won the respect of her Masters when she followed her own conscience. The little girl who snuck out of her mother's home to play at swords and spells with the willful Varisian boy, her bad influence and greatest friend.

But there were forces at work, rules that could not be broken. The Child rode a tide of fire, and it would come. I could see the planned arrival now from Gundsric's perspective, see one of the eyes in the glass containers exploding outward in a portal of light as the Shining Child stepped through. Once in our world it would be bound, stuck there under Gundsric's command for as long as the dwarf could hold it.

We were so close now. I could feel my body lying on the circle of gleam, my flesh hot from the star stuff, hot from the stings of the insects that wandered over me in a mass. I understood everything at that last moment, and through aching blaze of my mind showed the Child the choice it could make. Its first and last in my world.

Somewhere in the bright space our minds shared, the Child showed me it understood.

My eyes snapped open. Kostin was there, swatting the wasps off of me, saying something I couldn't hear. I looked across the circle at Gundsric, his glowing eyes darting from container to container, wondering which of the gleam-saturated orbs would suddenly blossom into a portal of fire and give birth to his revenge. Gundsric, smiling his bloody smile.

And then his head exploded.

It was over in a flash. A pinpoint of heat and light, the slightest hint of fear on the alchemist's face, and then an

expanding halo of white-hot flame that collapsed back in on itself. In that brief instant I could see the Child, see its sun-bright eyes peering into our world with curiosity and incomprehension. I wonder if the Child saw me, and what that meant to it; if the choice I had shone it—that of manifesting in the eye of Gundsric himself, and thus freeing the Child of any obligations to its summoner—was something it could feel any gratitude for. Or did it just assume that everything was a part of its own story?

The logic of my own tale demands that it end here, with the burning headless body of Gundsric on the center of the bare floor of his lab, the scorched wasps falling from the air like black snow all around us. The gleam had vanished, sucked back through space in an instant, and even the grotesque collection of eyes had lost the luster of their inner glow. The choir was silent, its conductor dead.

We pushed our way out of the place, Kostin trying to warn the looters of the danger they faced while Gyrd—Shess cradled in the crook of one thick arm—cleared a path for us with the flat of his blade. Without the rod, however, the mob cared nothing for Kostin's word, and so some two score or more of them were left in the house as we made our escape.

Left in the house when the raging fires in the lab finally touched the carbauxine stores and the air in the place detonated in a firestorm. The upper story of Gundsric's home blew up and out, throwing stone and wood and a king's fortune in valuables far into the sky. In my delirium I fancied it looked quiet a bit like Gundsric's head.

"Did you guys see that thing?!" a breathless Shess asked as Gyrd set her gently to her feet. "It sucked up all the gleam! Was that a star through the portal? I mean through the dwarf's, er, head? Maybe you didn't see that. Were you talking to it, Tal? What did it say? Can I maybe talk to it too sometime, or is it gone for good?" She started rummaging in her overstuffed pouches as an excited Mordimor bounced by her side, but every packet of gleam Shess found was empty.

Aeventius, a frown on his bruised face, toed a smoldering book across the cobbles. "Well, this is depressing. Please tell me you grabbed a few volumes before blowing that alchemist's house to pieces."

I felt sick, unsteady, the ordeal with the Shining Child having sapped my strength more thoroughly than even the hornet swarm. Hopeful looters still filled the streets, though they had moved well back of the burning house. I wobbled over to Kostin where he stood with his head down, gazing hopelessly at the lump of hard ash in his hand—all that was left of the scepter he had been sent to steal.

"Let's go," I said to him, slipping a hand into his. "Tomorrow is another story."

The street was littered with scorched treasures as we made our way out of Rot Gut, but not one of us bothered to pick them up.