



Chapter 1

Double Life

The quartz spear was nothing special. Plenty like it at the bazaar, for the right price. The spear's cloudy, white point lay on the workstation, next to the pestle and mortar. It glinted dully.

The workstation wasn't special either – a wooden worktop and a shelf of instruments that had never been used: hammers, pliers, chisels. On the right-hand side was a lever with a gleaming handle. Workstations just like this one were used throughout the White Desert and the Silken City to craft new weapons and armour.

Catanna Brittlestar stood before it. She pounded the

pestle into the bowl beneath, until the substance within was ground to a fine powder. This substance was special: topaz.

Catanna had found the topaz gems in a chest on her last raid. In the gloom of a stronghold basement, she had scooped them into her sack without looking and had run before the enemy guild could capture her. It was only when she had reached the safety of the Brittlestar stronghold that she had taken the time to examine the unusual blue gems.

Topaz was rare. Not as rare as diamond, sunstone or fire opal, but rare enough to make powerful weapons. Rare enough to make Catanna and her Brittlestar guild almost unstoppable.

Almost.

Fire opal weapons would make her truly unstoppable. A guild leader who could equip her followers with fire opal weapons would be revered across the White Desert.

What she wouldn't give to be that leader.

Catanna reached for the lever, gripped the smooth

handle and pulled. A sheet of light engulfed the workstation, and with a *boom* –

“Katka?” shouted a voice from downstairs.

Katka pressed the pause button. On the screen, her character, Catanna, froze in the act of reaching for the topaz spear. The spear lay like a shard of luminous ice, its light glittering on Catanna's braids.

“What, Mum?” Katka called back, pulling off the headset that allowed her to talk to other players. Katka blinked at the bright overhead light. Whenever she played Raider's Peril, she got so involved that she forgot that she was a real girl, sitting in a real bedroom.

“You have to help Milana with her spellings.”

“I'm busy, Mum.”

“Well, so am I.”

Katka rolled her eyes. She pulled the headset back over her ears, squished herself more comfortably into the pillows that were piled on the carpet, and unpaused the game.

Catanna grasped the spear and raised it into the air in triumph. Blue light flashed out, illuminating the sturdy stone walls of the Brittlestar stronghold.

Gripping the controls, Katka directed Catanna through the stronghold corridors and down the spiral staircase to the weapons store. All of the members of the Brittlestar guild were gathered in the flickering torchlight, waiting for their leader. They were raiding tonight.

Perian stood at the front of the group. Her blue Brittlestar cape swished around her shoulders. She had her bow in one hand and a full quiver strapped to her back.

“Ready to teach the Gutvine guild a lesson?” said Perian over the headset.

“Oh, I am so ready.”

“Katka, come down here and help your sister!”

“I'll help after this raid, Mum.”

“How long?”

"Half an hour, promise."

"Who was that?" asked Perian. Katka had forgotten to take off her headset.

"Just my mum, nagging. Come on, we're going to gut those Gutvines."

Katka knew the White Desert better than she knew her twelve times table. She had been playing Raider's Peril for over a year, and had founded the Brittlestar guild last Christmas when her old guild had disbanded. Katka and her loyal followers had criss-crossed the desert together many times, sneaking, sprinting and fighting to reach their target.

Today was no different. The raiders ran close to the sand and dodged between scrubby bushes and trees. They ducked behind a dune as a rival guild passed nearby riding saddled emus.

As the Brittlestars reached the shadow of the Gutvine stronghold, they began to creep. Catanna dashed ahead and crouched in the shadows of an ancient temple.

"It's safe," whispered Katka. The raiders' capes fluttered and sand flew around their feet as, one by

one, they joined her behind the wall. When everyone was gathered, Catanna cautiously peered through a shattered window at their target.

The Gutvine stronghold was ugly – there was no other word for it. It was a sloppily-built castle with lopsided battlements and cock-eyed windows. The walls were built of mismatched stone and there was a door halfway up one tower, which made no sense. For some reason, there was also a model of a pink flamingo perched on the roof.

The Gutvines weren't the most powerful guild in the White Desert. They didn't have the best equipment, either. But there was a special reason why Katka had targeted them this evening: Jaden Sharp.

Jaden Sharp was in Katka's class at school. He was the sort of boy who annoyed everyone, including his friends. Today, he had been especially irritating.

Mrs Gorman had been teaching them Design and Technology, for once. She had brought in bags and bags of recycling from home, plastic bottles and cardboard boxes. She had dug out all the wires, batteries and motors from the science cupboard and had challenged year six to make a working burglar alarm. Katka had

just got started on a really fantastic idea for an alarm in the shape of a dog that really barked, when Jaden started... well, being Jaden.

"Will you stop clipping crocodile clips to Amanda's ears, please, Jaden?"

"I wasn't, Mrs Gorman."

"I saw you. And take that box off your head."

"It's not on my head."

Katka looked. There was a box on his head, right over his eyes.

"And remove Rick's pencil case from under your jumper, he's going to need that."

"Who's Rick, Mrs Gorman?"

"*Right.*" Mrs Gorman slammed her whiteboard pen onto the table. "Since Jaden can't be sensible, Jaden is responsible for the whole class missing their DT lesson. Tidy away your things, please. We will have silent reading for the rest of the afternoon."

It was the second time that week.

Jaden's Raider's Peril character was a bearded warrior called Xandon Gutvine. Katka spotted him on guard outside the Gutvine stronghold as the Brittlestar party approached. A smirk invaded her face. Payback time.

Xandon wore a copper breastplate and carried an iron axe. Pitiful equipment really, but Katka wasn't going to let that stop her raiding his guild for every last gem she could get. She had been really looking forward to making that barking burglar alarm.

"Perian, let's draw them out," Katka whispered into her microphone. Her hands felt sweaty and her heart was beating fast. This always happened right before a raid. But she knew what she was doing; she'd done it a hundred times.

"On it, Catanna," said Perian. It was strange to think that Perian had been Catanna's second-in-command for so long, and they still didn't know each other's real names. Katka was always very careful when playing online not to give away her name or any information that could connect her avatar to her real life. Over time, the pair had found that they could raid together happily without either one sharing this information,

and a firm friendship had blossomed.

On screen, Perian held out her bow and nocked an arrow. She drew the string back and her cape billowed. *Snick* went the bow as the arrow let fly, and *thwack* as it landed in the sand at Xandon's feet.

The stronghold erupted. Raiders poured from all of the doors, including the door that was halfway up a tower. Some even leapt from the roof. They landed like heavy rain on the sand.

"Go, go, go!" Katka yelled into her microphone. The raiding party streamed forwards. Figures ran this way and that, the blue Brittlestar capes marking out Catanna's allies amid the ragtag Gutvine warriors. Catanna raced to the main entrance, pulled back her topaz spear and flung it straight at the doors. *Crash*. They shivered into pieces and the raiding party ran inside.

Katka had a system carefully worked out, and every guild member knew their role: two raiders ran to loot chests; two headed straight for the weapons store; the rest fought off attackers and cleared an escape route.

Catanna raised her spear and circled the room, ready

to defend her party against Gutvine warriors – but the Gutvines had disappeared.

"Check all the rooms," she said to Perian. "They could be preparing an ambush."

Catanna and Perian crept towards the nearest door.

"One... two... three!" said Perian, and she flung open the door, swinging her bow to face the empty room.

"No one there," said Katka.

They stalked inside. Three more doors came off it in different directions.

"You go left, I'll go right," said Katka.

"Be ready, in case we need to help each other out."

"Always."

Two more doors flung open. Two more empty rooms.

"And no exit from either," said Perian. "Shall we try the last door?"

That door led to a winding staircase. Catanna and Perian tiptoed upstairs. As they stalked through the shadowy passageways, Katka could hear voices over her headset.

"I've emptied the two silver chests."

"Not much here, but I've grabbed what I could. This ruby sword'll sell for hundreds at the bazaar."

"Gannymead? Pinksocks?" Catanna strode fearlessly down the corridor. Gannymead and Pinksocks were the Brittlestar raiders down for chest looting. "Anyone else up here?"

"Not a soul," said Gannymead's voice. "The Gutvines are all outside. Look."

Across the room, a door swung open into nothingness. This must have been the tower with the door that they had seen from outside. Catanna walked to the opening and looked out.

Across the desert, the Gutvines had gathered. Katka could just make out Xandon's plaited beard and black axe. In the centre of the group stood a man dressed in crimson, clutching an obsidian staff. Obsidian was

rarer than topaz, and more powerful. Katka wanted everyone in her guild to have weapons like that.

"Right, get everything you can, then get out," said Katka. "If the Gutvines are outside, the stronghold's abandoned. We're going to torch it. Perian, spread the word." *Abandoned* had a special meaning in Raider's Peril. It meant that no one was left inside a building. Only abandoned structures could be burned down.

Catanna jumped from the open doorway and landed in a crouch on the desert below. She exchanged her spear for a torch, which she lit with a match scraped against the stronghold wall. As Catanna held the burning torch aloft, Katka felt her heart slow. Warm tingles spread through her chest. This was it. She'd brought her guild through unharmed, and they had the riches of the Gutvines to prove it.

"Kat?" The bedroom door swung open. Katka's sister, Milana, stood there, wearing her panda onesie and clutching her school book bag. "Can we practise spellings now?"

Katka covered her microphone with one hand.

"Two seconds. I'm just about to burn the Gutvines to

the ground.”

“Okay, two seconds.”

Milana padded across the floor and sat on the pillows beside Katka. She sat so close that Katka's elbow brushed against the warm, fluffy fabric whenever she moved, making it hard for Katka to use the controls. Good thing the Gutvines didn't look like they were about to fight back.

“Why aren't they trying to stop us?” asked Perian, as she emerged from the stronghold entrance after a final sweep.

“They're just cowards,” said Katka. “Now run.”

Catanna put the torch to the stronghold's foundations, turned and fled. When she reached the shelter of the temple, she paused to look back.

“It's been two seconds,” said Milana, tugging Katka's arm.

“Don't you want to watch the ugliest stronghold in the White Desert burn to the ground?” Milana turned to the screen, but didn't let go of Katka's sleeve.

The flames roared around the structure, then the whole ugly mess sank slowly into the ground. The pink flamingo was last to go.

Fire was the only way to destroy things completely in Raider's Peril. It turned valuable materials into worthless ash. All that was left of the stronghold was a black heap. Katka grinned. She couldn't help it; it would serve Jaden right for spoiling DT.

“Spellings now?”

“I just need to thank my guild.”

“Spellings *now*.”

“Two actual seconds this time.” Katka adjusted her mic and Catanna turned to face the Brittlestar raiders. “Fantastic. Another successful raid. We got everything the Gutvines had, so –”

“Er, Catanna?” Perian's voice interrupted. “What are they doing?”

Catanna spun round. The Gutvines ran towards the smoking heap, gathered ash into their loot sacks and dashed in the opposite direction. Katka watched

as Xandon flung himself at the ash, gathering so much that his loot bag bulged. Voices clamoured on her headset.

“They’re making for the Silken City.”

“What are they up to?”

“We should follow them.”

“Spellings! Now!” Milana stomped towards the console and jabbed her fingers at the buttons. The warm whirring noise that Katka was so used to became a short whine, before the console spluttered out of life.

“Milana!” Katka grabbed at Milana’s arm, but it was too late. The screen was black.

“I’ve got ten out of ten two weeks in a row. If I get it again, I get the headteacher’s gold star.”

Katka stared at the blank screen. “Fine,” she sighed. She adjusted the pillows on the floor and took the spellings book that Milana handed her. Milana lay opposite, a pencil already poised over a piece of paper. “First word: *money*.”



Chapter 2 Clever Clown

“What was that about?” said Katka, marching into the classroom the next morning. She threw her book bag under her peg and made a beeline for Jaden’s table.

Jaden had a large rubber and a pair of safety scissors on the desk in front of him. He was attempting to hack the rubber into some sort of shape with the blunt blades.

“What was what about?” he said, not looking at Katka. His black hair was too long and it hung over his face, which probably made not looking at people loads easier. He twisted the handles of the scissors so

hard that the rubber pinged out and nearly hit Katka in the eye.

"Last night on Raider's Peril," Katka persisted, grabbing the mutilated rubber before Jaden could. "You just stood back and let the Gutvine stronghold burn to the ground. What are you, stupid or something? Scared?"

Jaden laughed. "The Gutvines aren't scared of anything." He made a lunge for the rubber in Katka's hand, but she jumped backwards. "It's the Brittlestars who are cowards, raiding a stronghold that's not even defended."

"You *chose* not to defend it. We expected you to fight back. We're not cowards."

"Still, not exactly a great win, is it? Torching an undefended stronghold." Jaden actually looked up at her. The smug glint in his brown eyes made Katka feel like the glory of last night was leaking out through her toes.

"But why didn't you defend it? It was a brutal defeat. You lost everything."

Jaden smiled. "We got exactly what we wanted. All

part of Zircon's plan. Now give me that." He lunged for the rubber again. Katka took another step back and nearly crashed into Dom and Vijay, who were rushing to sit down.

"Who's Zircon? And what's his plan?"

"Why would I tell someone who's stupid enough to score an own goal?"

Heat rushed to Katka's face and her skin tingled.

"That's got nothing to do with –" she spluttered. "And anyway, I wouldn't have, if –"

But Jaden didn't let her finish. "Gutvine business, isn't it?"

"Fine." Katka took a deep breath. Jaden was never going to let that own goal go. "What is this meant to be, anyway?"

"I'm carving a diamond axe. Give."

"Looks more like a mutant toothbrush."

"Katka, give it back before –"

The classroom door clicked open. Katka tossed the rubber onto Jaden's desk. It bounced on the blue tabletop and Jaden snatched it.

"Yes!"

"*Jaden.*" Mrs Gorman stood in the doorway, her face as red as their school sweatshirts.

"Uh oh." Katka darted across the classroom to her own seat. When she looked back at Jaden, his hair completely covered his face and his hands were tucked guiltily beneath the desk.

"You will hand over whatever you are hiding immediately," said Mrs Gorman, striding to Jaden's desk with her hand held out.

"I'm not hiding anything," he said, leaning back defensively.

"It's a rubber, Mrs Gorman," said Amanda, who had the misfortune of sitting next to Jaden. Mrs Gorman raised her eyebrows and waited.

"Oh, look, how did that get there?" said Jaden, lifting the rubber out from under the table. "I don't know how

it got all cut up, Mrs Gorman, I just found it, honest."

Mrs Gorman took the rubber, silently walked to her desk and threw it in the waste bin.

"Jaden will be staying in at break to write a letter to the headteacher. In the letter, he will discuss why he is not allowed to destroy school property, and explain how he intends to pay the school back this time. Now line up. Our first lesson is in the computer suite."

As the class pushed their seats under their desks and shuffled to the door, Katka noticed Jaden dart to Mrs Gorman's desk. He reached into the bin and slipped the rubber into his pocket.

Great – Jaden was going to ruin their computing lesson, too.

Katka liked the computer suite. It was cooler and less cluttered than the rest of the school. Today, the class was starting a new unit on programming websites.

"Does anyone know what HTML stands for?" said Mrs Gorman, writing the letters on the board. Only one hand went up: Jaden's.

Mrs Gorman looked at Jaden. She pursed her lips. Jaden wiggled his fingers a little and waited. Mrs Gorman turned to the rest of the class. "Why doesn't everyone tell a partner what they think HTML might stand for?" she said.

Everyone spoke at once.

"How To Make... Lemonade," suggested Rick, who was sitting on Katka's left.

"No, How To Make Lasers," said Vijay, on her other side. His eyes shone wide with anticipation.

"Happy Tortoises..." said Katka. She chewed her lip and thought. "...Meow Loudly."

"That has nothing to do with computers," said Rick.

"Neither does lemonade," she retorted.

"And tortoises don't meow," added Vijay.

"I know that."

"Happy Tortoises Munch Loudly would make sense," Vijay continued. "I used to have a pet tortoise. She did

a lot of munching."

When the class fell silent, Jaden was still the only one with his hand up.

"Yes, Jaden?" said Mrs Gorman warily.

"HTML stands for Hypertext Markup Language," he said.

"That's... right. Well done, Jaden." Katka could tell Mrs Gorman was surprised by the careful rise and fall of her voice. Mrs Gorman wrote *Hypertext Markup Language* on the board. "And what does HTML do?" Jaden's hand was the only one raised, again.

"Go on..." said Mrs Gorman.

"It's how you programme a webpage to show words and pictures and links and stuff."

"You know Jaden, it's taken seven years but at last, you've found your calling. Jaden is correct, class, and today we're going to be learning some basic HTML to make our own websites."

It was a good lesson. Katka paired up with Amanda,

and they created almost an entire page about the girls' football team. Afterwards, she looked for Jaden. To Katka's surprise, the rubber had stayed a misshapen lump against his thigh – he hadn't touched it once. Katka almost felt sorry for reducing his guild stronghold to ash.

The feeling didn't last. After break, they had maths. As Katka attempted a long multiplication question involving decimals, a crack disturbed the low chatter in the classroom.

Jaden sat, stunned. The rubber lay on the desk before him, looking even less like a diamond axe and even more like a mutant toothbrush. In his hands, Jaden held the two halves of the safety scissors which had mysteriously snapped in two.

"You'll be paying for new scissors as well as a new rubber, then," said Mrs Gorman, confiscating both and shutting them in her desk drawer. "I hope you've saved up plenty of pocket money, Jaden. You're going to need it."



Chapter 3

Worthless Ash

Catanna took out her topaz spear. It was a quiet night in the stronghold – just her and Perian. The other members were all busy with their real lives: chess club, history homework, birthday parties. Catanna aimed her spear through a slit window. If she got the angle just right, she could probably hit one of those palm trees outside.

"I've stashed the gems," said Perian. She was sorting through the Gutvine loot. Two bags sat side by side on the flagstones. "This bag is full of weapons to sell. Nothing we don't already have. And this is full of other equipment: armour, boots, cloaks."

Catanna put her spear away and they each picked a bag. "Ready?"

"Ready."

They left the stronghold, bound for the covered market: a small collection of stalls halfway across the White Desert. Business wasn't as brisk there as in the Silken City bazaar, but they could often charge a higher price. The desert was quiet. Only the regular tramp of their feet in the sand disturbed the cricket song.

Crash. Katka's bedroom door banged open and the handle slammed into the wall, chipping away another flake of blue paint.

"And this is my bedroom, and that's my sister." Milana stood in the doorway with another six-year-old girl. They looked almost identical in their school uniforms, except that Milana's friend had dark hair instead of the white-blond colour that Katka shared with her sister. "She's always playing that game," Milana explained. "She's obsessed or something. Do you like dressing up?"

Katka squashed the spongy earpieces into her ears and ramped up the volume, in an attempt to block out

their voices. It didn't work.

"You're on the football team, aren't you?" Milana's friend asked. "You went up in assembly."

Katka grunted.

"She's not very good," said Milana, rolling her eyes. She dug out a princess dress from under the bed and threw it onto the top bunk, which was hers. "Everyone knows she scored that own goal. Remember?"

Katka flung the headset off. "That was one time," she barked. "And it wasn't even in a match, *and* I scored the most goals of any player last term. Real goals, not own goals."

Milana raised her eyebrows and pulled a face exactly like their mum did when she was unimpressed.

"Well, no one thinks she's any good anymore," said Milana in a loud whisper. She picked up her fairy wings and her panda onesie. "Bella, do you want to be the fairy princess or the bear?"

Katka huffed. What would it take to make that stupid own goal story die? Loads of people scored own goals,

and the whole school never got to hear about it. Why her?

She knew the answer: Jaden. Katka pulled the headset back over her ears and turned the volume right up.

In the desert, Catanna hurried to catch up with her second-in-command. Perian was past the palm trees, striding through a clump of tents. She was nearly at the ancient temple.

"Sorry, Perian. My sister invaded the bedroom."

"I'm glad I don't have a sister."

Katka grunted. "She's all right sometimes, but definitely not when she's telling me how bad I am at football."

"If I did have a sister," Perian mused, "and she told me I was bad at football, she would be a thousand percent right. Sport is my absolute worst thing."

This was another strange thing about Perian. At school, all of Katka's friends were on the football team, but online, Perian was her best friend and it didn't matter that Katka was sporty and Perian wasn't. They both cared about the guild. That was all that mattered.

"Hey, Catanna. We're right by the Gutvine stronghold. Want to check out the ruins?"

A vengeful flame flickered alight in Katka's chest. She did want to see the Gutvine stronghold. She wanted to gloat.

"Yeah, I guess we could check it out," she said, trying to sound not-that-interested. Gloating wasn't something a good leader should do, even if she really wanted to.

"Just to make sure it's really as burnt as we remember," said Perian, a laugh in her voice.

When they reached the temple, it was in shadow. That was strange. The moon cast a white glow over the desert around them like a floodlight. But before them, a huge, lumpy blackness rose from the sand, blocking the light.

"What is that?" said Katka.

"It's not –"

"Let's get closer."

"I'll eat you!" screamed Milana. Bella ran in front of

Katka in the princess dress, blocking her view. Milana chased after Bella in the onesie, roaring.

"Get out of the way!" yelled Katka, but the girls pursued each other in circles around her so that it was impossible to see the screen. "Go and be a bear somewhere else."

"Eek! A horrible, nasty ogre," Milana shrieked. She grabbed Bella by the wings and dragged her from the room in a fit of screaming giggles. The door slammed shut behind them.

Katka realised that Perian had just finished speaking.

"Sorry?" she said, wriggling deeper into the pillows on the floor. At last, she had the room to herself. She could concentrate.

"It's a new stronghold. Look."

Katka quickly pressed the arrows on the controller, and Catanna ran out from the shadows. From there, Katka could see the vast wooden walls, the mismatched windows and the Gutvine flags flying from three twisted towers on the roof.

"It's even uglier than the last one," said Katka.

"How did they do it so fast?"

"No idea. Hang on, is that...?" Catanna stepped closer to the door, where a warrior stood on guard. The axe and breastplate were new – made of dark gemstone – but the warrior's face was unmistakable.

"Xandon," said Katka.

"Look who it is," said Jaden's voice. Katka winced. She wasn't prepared to hear Jaden speaking at twice his usual volume, while she sat safe in her own bedroom.

"What are you doing here?" she asked. Catanna stepped forward and pulled out her spear.

"Keeping watch on the stronghold. Zircon's got everyone else at work in the city."

"You mean you're the only one here?" asked Perian, her bowstring drawn.

"The only one," said Jaden. There was a pause. An animated breeze ruffled the sand and their Brittlestar capes fluttered. "Why, you thinking of burning us

down again?"

"No," said Catanna quickly. Xandon's new axe looked nasty. "Where did you get the resources to build it?"

"Gutvine secret, isn't it?" said Jaden. Katka might have been imagining it, but even Xandon's animated face looked smug. He wore a self-satisfied smile behind his enormous beard.

"But we took everything," Katka persisted. "All your gems and stones. We've got your weapons in these loot bags. It doesn't make sense. Where did you get that new axe?"

"Oh, this?" Xandon swished the axe. A fwip sound filled Katka's ears and she hurriedly pressed the back button so Catanna stepped away. But Xandon hadn't been aiming for her; he was just showing off.

"Gift from Zircon. He's promised me a diamond axe too, but it's not ready yet. Better than a mutant toothbrush, anyway."

"What's it made of?" asked Perian. Her bow was still drawn, but she hadn't reacted like Katka had, or Xandon might have had an arrow sticking out of him.

"Bloodstone?"

"Onyx," said Jaden. "Not bad, for now. A step up from topaz."

Katka's hands flinched on the controller, and Catanna's topaz spear twitched. Just talking to Jaden was making Katka jumpy.

"So, are you burning this place down, or what?" he asked.

"You sound like you want us to," said Perian.

"I can't stop you," Jaden said. "You're not scared, are you?"

"Course not," said Katka. Her fingers pricked with sweat. She was ready, just in case she needed to throw her spear at Xandon and finish him off.

"So burn it."

They stood in silence. Katka's mind skipped like a skimmed stone over memories of lessons that Jaden had spoiled. It plopped down on the worst memory of all...

A rainy PE lesson. On the field, Mrs Gorman splits the class in half to play football. The ball speeds towards Katka's feet and she fumbles it. It glances off, and rolls the wrong way down the pitch towards Katka's own goal. But it's not travelling fast. Even if no one intercepts it, the goalie should have no trouble stopping the ball. One tap of his foot will do the job. No one intercepts. Katka looks at the goalie, her chest tight.

Jaden stands in goal, but he's not even watching the pitch. He's got his back to the match and he stares, in a dream, at the vines climbing through the playground fence.

The ball rolls over the line. Katka's team erupts in groans. Jaden turns at last, and he stares at Katka. Katka stares at him. This moment will change everything.

"Own goal! Katka scored an own goal," Jaden shouts, loud enough for the whole class to hear. "Katka thinks she's so good at football, but she doesn't even know which goal to shoot at."

"It's a trap," said Perian in Katka's earpiece. Katka took a breath. She was in the dark blue solitude of her bedroom. She was playing Raider's Peril.

"No trap," Jaden said. "Burn it." His voice had a laugh in it, but only Jaden knew what the joke was.

"Come on, Catanna," said Perian. "We have to get to the market."

"Here, I've even got a torch you can use," said Jaden. Xandon shouldered his axe and pulled an unlit torch from his pack. He threw it on the ground.

"Why are you doing this?" asked Katka. It made no sense. Maybe Perian was right. Maybe it was a trap. But the stronghold was deserted. There was nothing to stop her burning it.

"It's just kind of funny," said Jaden, actually laughing now. And it was the sort of thing Jaden would find funny, thought Katka. He loved destroying things. Rubbers, DT projects, football...

Well, fine.

She picked up the torch.

"Catanna, what if it's a trap?"

"It's not a trap." Catanna lit a match, and the torch

was engulfed in flame.

“Now remember,” Jaden said, as Xandon backed away from the flame. “The stronghold you want is this one. Don’t go burning down any others. We don’t want another own goal.”

That was it.

Catanna flung the torch in a high arc. She stood and watched the flame flicker against the deep blue sky and vanish behind one of the deformed towers.

“Catanna, quick!” Perian was already racing away across the desert. In the distance, the coloured lights of the covered market hung in a glittering rainbow. Unhurriedly, Catanna began to follow. But as her avatar jogged over the uneven dunes, Katka heard Jaden’s faint laughter beneath the sound of crackling flames. She stopped and looked back.

Fire, like a great orange beast, devoured the stronghold. Silhouetted against the moon, the tiny figure of Xandon stood and watched. Catanna didn’t move. She didn’t know what Jaden was up to, but she was sure it was nothing good.

All at once, doubts crawled into her brain like a plague of insects. Jaden was up to something, and Katka had played right into his hands. What if the Gutvines destroyed her guild, her friends, everything she had worked so hard to build?

Alone in her bedroom, Katka put her hands to her burning cheeks. She felt a fool.

As the last flames sank into glowing red embers and then blackness, Xandon approached the mound of ash and scooped handfuls into his loot bag until it could hold no more, just like last time. As soon as his bag was full, he ran in the opposite direction, towards the glowing haze of the Silken City.

Perian and the market could wait. Katka had to know what Jaden was doing, before he destroyed everything.