

Chapter 4 Silken City

Catanna ran through the darkness of the White Desert night. She rarely ventured to the Silken City, and never alone. Despite its soft-sounding name, it was a cut-throat place.

Katka's thumb ached from pressing the forward button as hard as she could. It wouldn't make Catanna move any faster – Katka knew that – but her thumbs wouldn't listen to reason right now. She had to find Xandon and discover what the Gutvines were up to, before they tricked her into destroying her own guild.

The hazy light of the distant city grew brighter by

degrees. Catanna didn't look to the left or right; she just ran – over dunes, through tented encampments, under the shadows of enemy strongholds. She even splashed through an oasis without swerving; her eyes never left that hazy light.

That was how the bandits got her.

Suddenly, flaming arrows rained down from the sky. Her vision flashed red and she staggered as her health bar dropped. She'd been hit. Unfamiliar voices jumbled on her headset.

“Taste it!”

“One more hit.”

“Grab the bag.”

Too late, Catanna readied her spear. But Katka couldn't see who to aim at, and the spear flew, glittering, into the night, landing uselessly in the sand ahead. Catanna tried to follow it, but she was knocked to the ground by another blow. Her health was critical.

“She's out.”

"Taste it!"

"Shut up and search the bag."

"Topaz, nice."

"Who uses spears anyway?"

All Katka could see was black. She pressed every button on the controller, but Catanna just lay there, her health bar blinking a warning. She was helpless as her lootbag was snatched away and the unseen assailants emptied its contents and flung it onto the sand. She heard every thud as they ran away across the desert.

Eventually, her health bar climbed above the danger zone and stopped blinking. Katka let out a breath that she didn't know she'd been holding. Catanna stood, picked up her lootbag, and looked at the contents. Just some useless armour, precision gloves, and something called an ice cloak.

Great.

Catanna shouldered the bag. All that Gutvine loot, gone in seconds because of Katka's own stupidity.

Fantastic.

Catanna limped in circles, searching for her topaz spear. She remembered the exact spot it had landed in, but it wasn't there. The further that Catanna limped, the deeper her heart sank until it dropped right into her stomach. Her spear was gone.

Katka flopped back on her cool pillows. She stared at the ceiling, at the crack that wriggled across it like a road on a map. She was the leader of the Brittlestar guild; despair was not an option. She had to find Xandon and get back what she had lost. With a sigh, she sat upright.

Catanna joined a crowd of raiders, merchants and warriors as she limped closer to the Silken City gates. Guards stood on either side, their formidable weapons ready in case of trouble. Catanna stayed to the middle of the crowd, who jostled and slowed as they reached the bottleneck.

As the bustling chatter and hanging silks of the city came into focus, Catanna was snatched to the side by a guard. The guard's animated face loomed down at Catanna, grinning. His teeth were black.

"Show us your goods, then."

Catanna's lootbag was snatched for the second time that night.

"That's something lovely, that is," said the guard. He held up a piece of fabric that looked as if it was woven of water. As the guard held it up, he seemed to vanish behind it.

How was that possible? Katka tried to work out what was missing from her bag. The copper armour and precision gloves were still there. The only thing missing was... the ice cloak.

Katka looked carefully. The guard's grubby fingers gripped the hem, but his arm was totally invisible behind the translucent fabric. At once, Katka realised what the ice cloak could do.

"Now, you either give me this," said the guard, "as fair payment for entering this fine city, or you don't come in."

Katka made her decision in an instant.

"Give it back," she said to the guard. He threw it down

and spat.

"Fine. But the city gates aren't open to you. Turn back, or this blade finds a home in your belly."

Catanna turned and limped away. She walked around the curving wall until the city gate was out of sight. Then she pulled the ice cloak on.

The effect was instant. The watery fabric clung to Catanna's skin so that she appeared almost invisible. Only the faint, shimmering outline of her arms and legs showed that she existed at all. It was perfect.

As Catanna wove her way back towards the city gates, Katka kept her eyes on the guards either side. She held her breath. The guards gazed this way and that, polishing their weapons with rags. The city was so close, its colour and noise beckoning. Two more steps – three, four – and Catanna was past the guards.

The Silken City was beautiful. Catanna didn't visit it often, so it was easy to forget. Sheets of coloured silk formed a maze of streets and stalls and houses, in bright jewel-like colours: amethyst and amber and ruby.

Now to find the Gutvines.

It was when she began to search that Katka realised how hopeless her plan was. The city was huge, the streets twisted and tangled, and she didn't even know where to start.

Unseen, Catanna passed stalls and workshops and inns and street musicians. Her new cloak allowed her to float between traders as though she were made of clear, rippling water. The streets grew busier and Katka realised that she was near the bazaar, the bustling market at the heart of the Silken City.

The bazaar heaved with people who were richly robed, heavily armoured and carrying weapons ranging from wooden staves to ruby daggers. Then, in the throng, Katka spotted a crimson cloak.

Could it be Zircon? Catanna chased the cloak round a corner. The black beard and obsidian sword confirmed it: the Gutvine leader strode through the market not ten paces ahead.

Catanna raced after him as he strode calmly through the crowd. A group of raiders swarmed ahead and Zircon disappeared behind them. Under her new cloak, Catanna charged into their midst, ready to elbow her way through.

CRKRKRK. As Catanna's arm grazed a raider's back, she froze, and a sound like the world ending split Katka's ears. Katka hit the forward button, but nothing happened. On the screen, Catanna's clear, watery skin was hardening into shimmering white ice.

"Why can't I move?" Katka muttered to herself. She pressed every button on the controller again and again, but Catanna didn't react. Crowds of raiders swarmed around her, heedless. Others stopped to stare; Catanna wasn't invisible anymore. Was it that brush with the raider that had turned Catanna to ice?

It seemed like she had been standing there for an age when, at last, a shimmering sound like icicles falling in a cave overwhelmed the burble of the crowd. Ice crystals fell away until Catanna was once more liquid and invisible.

Zircon had vanished. Katka stared down the street ahead. She saw green and blue and purple, but no hint of red. Where had he gone? Catanna dodged and darted through the crowd, careful to touch no one. Alleys flashed by on either side and she glanced down each without stopping.

She nearly missed the glimpse of red, and had to

backtrack. There he was: a cloaked red figure in the deep shadows of a particularly dingy alleyway. Catanna rushed down it as Zircon disappeared through a doorway to one side.

When Catanna reached the doorway, she found a ragged silk curtain. She raised a transparent arm to draw it aside, and inched into the gloom beyond.

Lights flashed and voices clamoured. Inside, the room was crowded with Gutvine warriors. Veiled by her cloak, Catanna stepped back into a shadowy corner, where no one was likely to touch her, and drank it all in.

Loot bags littered the floor. The flashes came from workstations around the walls – five, six, seven of them – but they weren't ordinary workstations. Instead of wood, they were made of something dark and glittery, like granite. But that wasn't the strangest thing about them. Katka watched as Gutvine warriors filled the mortar bowl with ashes. They didn't grind the ashes with the pestle, or even lay weapons on the worktop, like you were supposed to. They simply pulled the lever.

Flash, *crack!* There, on the worktops, appeared gemstones – piles of them, all rare and unusual.

“Is that enough?” said a warrior standing beside a workstation heaped with glittering, multicoloured gems. Katka had never seen such riches in all her time playing Raider's Peril.

Yellow text appeared on the screen. Zircon was typing his reply.

[20:04] Zircon117: NO SUCH THING AS ENOUGH.
KEEP GOING UNTIL THE CHESTS ARE FULL.

It was unusual for players to type messages instead of using a microphone – too time-consuming in the middle of an eventful raid – but some players used it because they didn't have microphones. Was Zircon one of those players?

[20:04] Zircon117: WE NEED DIAMOND. LOTS
OF IT.

What were these magical workstations that created precious gems from ashes? And where could Katka get one for her guild?

[20:05] Zircon117: AND DON'T FORGET WE NEED
THE FIRE OPAL CHEST FULL BY TONIGHT.

Katka's heart fluttered. Fire opal?

Zircon strode to an unmanned table.

[20:05] Zircon117: WHY IS NO ONE AT THIS WORKSTATION? WE'RE NOT WORKING AT FULL CAPACITY.

"Sorry, Zircon," came a voice that Katka recognised. Jaden was here. "Just checking the chests. Did you know that we have plenty of diamond already? Enough to make my axe..."

[20:06] Zircon117: FORGET YOUR AXE, XANDON. FIRE OPAL IS OUR TOP PRIORITY. GET WORKING.

"As if getting the stronghold burnt down wasn't enough," Jaden muttered. His character, Xandon, shuffled to the empty workstation and filled the bowl with ash.

The Gutvines could craft fire opal? Perhaps this was Catanna's chance to steal some and make her own fire opal spear. After all, she was weaponless. And if she had equipment like that, Brittlestar raids would be a piece of cake. Soon the Brittlestars would be feared in

every corner of the White Desert.

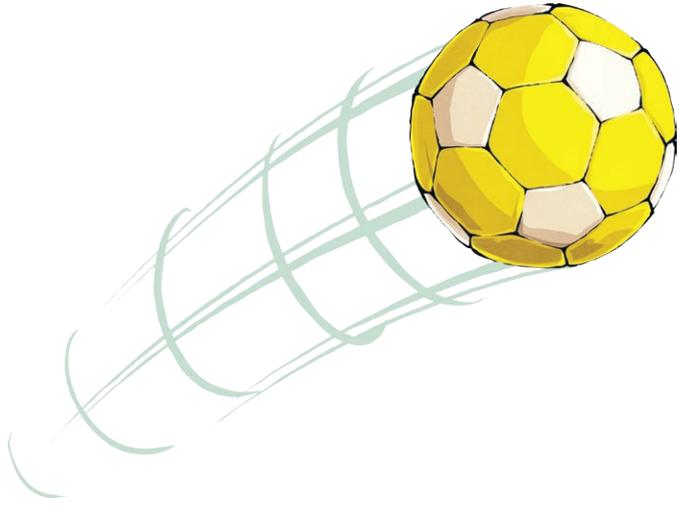
Catanna crept forwards. The fire opal chest was in the opposite corner. If she could just reach it, maybe she could steal the gems and run before anyone caught her. But as she inched over the floor, a warrior carrying a sack of ash ran across the room. Catanna jumped to the side, and flew straight into Zircon.

At the *CRKRKRK* of her skin turning to ice, Katka nearly dropped her controller.

[20:08] Zircon117: A SPY!

Katka pressed her thumbs on the buttons, but there was nothing she could do until her skin melted. An axe flew towards her, and crash! Her ice skin shattered. Her health fell to half. She wasn't ice, she wasn't water, and the whole horde of Gutvines could see her. But at least she could move.

Before the Gutvines could ready their weapons, Catanna fled through the door and dashed into the sprawling maze of the Silken City.



Chapter 5

Unsatisfying Answers

Katka stood beside the football pitch as a neon-yellow football sailed overhead. She tensed, ready to chase after it, then stopped herself. They boys never let her play any more.

It was year six versus year five. Jaden was there but Katka didn't think he was really playing either. He was just getting in everyone's way. It was Jaden who had kicked the ball off the pitch, and she was sure that he had done it on purpose. The boys still let *him* play though.

Vijay ran after the ball and lobbed it back towards his teammates. Jaden went in for a tackle, even though

he was tackling his own side. Rick laughed, shoved him, and kicked the ball towards the goal. It flew past the goalie's ear, bounced between the two jumpers marking out goalposts, and hit the fence with a clang. Water droplets showered down from the tree above and splattered onto the goalie's head.

"GOOAAAL!" yelled Rick. He ran a lap of the pitch as the other year six boys leapt on him.

Jaden didn't bother celebrating. He kicked at a puddle and sprayed water halfway up his trouser leg. As far as Katka knew, Jaden didn't really like football. He wasn't any good at it.

Katka leaned on the cool metal bench. She knew that she shouldn't be here. She was just torturing herself, watching the boys play when they wouldn't let her join. But she needed to ask Jaden something.

"Jaden!" she called, as he loped over to grab his water bottle from the bench.

"I'm busy."

"You're not even playing properly. You're not meant to tackle your own team."

"Well at least I haven't scored any own goals," he said. He sucked hard on his bottle, then let the air back in with a squelch. "Go play with your own friends."

"I need to ask you about something," said Katka.

"Well, don't bother." Jaden plonked his water bottle on the bench.

"It's about Raider's Peril."

"Not interested," he yelled as he ran onto the pitch, intercepted the ball and kicked it straight up into the air, where it spun like a neon sun. Katka couldn't tell whether he did it on purpose or not.

Jaden couldn't avoid Katka forever. In maths, Mrs Gorman sorted them into groups to conduct a survey. Jaden and Katka were in the same group.

"Jaden, what were those workstations?"

"What workstations?" Jaden muttered. He was in charge of the clipboard that they were using for data gathering.

"The weird, dark workstations."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "Angel, what's your favourite pizza topping?"

Angel was clutching her own clipboard. Her group's survey was about ice cream flavours, but Angel seemed more interested in doodling pictures of smiling ice cream cones than collecting data.

"Erm," she said, putting the end of her pink highlighter to her head. "Veggie supreme."

"That's not actually an option," said Jaden. "I'll just put you down for 'cabbage and rotten egg'."

"Gross," Angel made a face. "That's not a pizza flavour."

"Well, it's on here, so it must be. Or do you prefer 'garlic snail'?"

"You're disgusting."

"Jaden." Katka pulled the pencil from his hand so that he had to listen. "You *do* know. Those magic workstations that turn ashes into diamonds and fire opals and stuff. Where did the Gutvines get them?"

"So you admit to sneaking into our workshop to spy?"

Jaden turned and flopped his hair back to stare at her. "Better hope the Brittlestar stronghold is well defended. Zircon will be very interested when I tell him that I know who you are. Might even upgrade my axe from onyx to diamond." Jaden reached down to pick up another pencil from one of the desks. It wasn't his desk or his pencil, but that didn't stop him.

"I looked in the Raider's Peril handbook and I searched the message boards. I tried about a hundred search terms. That workstation is nowhere. It doesn't exist."

"It obviously does exist," said Jaden. "The Gutvines have seven. Nadiyah, what's your favourite pizza topping?"

"Cheese and tomato."

"I'll put you down for our special 'nothing, not even bread' pizza." Jaden made a mark on his sheet, and marched towards the book corner.

"Is that why you keep letting us burn your strongholds down?" Katka said, almost tripping over a chair as she tried to keep up with him. "To get the ashes? For your magic workstations?"

"They're not magic," said Jaden. He thumped the

clipboard down on top of the bookcase, knocking down Mrs Gorman's display of Crime and Punishment books. "They're just a mod. Zircon took the standard workstation, he modified the code a bit, and now it turns ash into rare gems. No big deal. People make mods all the time."

"I know," Katka frowned. "Why are you getting defensive?"

"No reason. Felix, what's your favourite pizza?"

Katka peered over Jaden's arm at the piece of paper on the clipboard. He hadn't written down 'cabbage and rotten egg', or 'garlic snails'. He just had a list of ordinary pizza toppings, with one tally mark beside 'veggie', and another mark beside 'cheese and tomato'.

There wasn't much to do that lesson, except trail around after Jaden. He did all the asking, and wouldn't let Katka touch the clipboard, so she had plenty of time to think. She thought about what her guild could do with a modified workstation. They could make hundreds of rare gems and equip every Brittlestar with powerful armour and weapons. Each raider could have their own gemstone: Gannymead could have emerald, and Pinksocks could have red beryl. Perian, as second in

command, would get diamond, but Katka would save fire opal for herself.

Of course, first they would have to burn something.

"Jaden?"

"What?" His tally chart was nearly complete now. Once their data was gathered, they had to calculate each option as a percentage and make a pie chart.

"How come the Gutvines don't burn their own strongholds down?"

Jaden counted up each tally and wrote the total at the end of the column. Katka waited. He didn't reply.

"Jaden?" She sat in the chair next to him and picked up a calculator. "You need ash, right? Why not burn stuff yourself? Why wait for us to come along?"

"We tried burning our own stronghold," Jaden said. "Lucky I wasn't the guy holding the torch. He got banned."

"Banned?"

"Yeah, it was bogus. Apparently it's against the rules to burn your own stronghold or something." Jaden stabbed the pencil onto the clipboard and the lead snapped. He tossed the pencil away. "Why? It's our stronghold, you'd think we could burn it if we wanted to."

"Why would he be banned?"

"I told you, he shouldn't. It was stupid."

"But they don't ban people for no reason." Katka chewed her lip, and typed some more numbers into the calculator. Then Jaden made a grab for it.

"Hey, I know how to calculate percentages. Let me do something," said Katka.

"Fine. Here." Jaden shoved the tally chart across.

But Katka's eyes stared through the paper. "Jaden, they don't ban people from Raider's Peril for no reason," she said. "I know they don't."

Jaden shrugged.

"Maybe something weird is going on," Katka continued. "No one knows the workstations exist, they're crazy

powerful and they're getting people banned. I think Zircon might be up to something.”



Chapter 6 **Zircon's Promise**

“Where were you?!”

Katka was in her bedroom. Her maths homework lay to one side. Percentage word problems were a cruel and unusual form of torture, but at last they were done. When Katka had logged onto Raider's Peril, she had hoped to finally relax. But now, Perian was shouting at her.

“You just abandoned me. And where's the Gutvine loot? Did you sell it?”

It was strange to watch the impassive face of Perian-

the-character on the screen, while Perian-the-player yelled down the headset.

Katka stared at the calm face before her, willing her own heart to slow, willing her voice to stay low, calm, leader-like.

"I was mugged. Perian, let me explain."

"You lost the loot? You abandoned me and then you lost the loot?"

Katka imagined that she was a gentle breeze wafting over the desert. Stay calm, she told herself. Breathe.

"Perian, listen. I know what the Gutvines are up to."

"I thought we were friends."

"We are –"

"Later, Catanna. I'm too upset to talk right now."

The serene figure of Perian dissolved from the weapons store – that meant that the player had logged out. Katka sighed and closed her eyes. Her bedroom was too cold and the pillows felt lumpy beneath her. She stood,

dragged the duvet from her bed and wrapped it around herself like a hug as she sat back down on the floor.

She would wait, Katka decided, until Perian logged back on. All night, if she had to. She just needed to explain.

Catanna searched through the weapons in the store room. Without her topaz spear, she was defenceless. The best spear in the store was tin – barely worth carrying. A quartz sword hung on the wall, but Catanna wasn't levelled-up in sword fighting. Perhaps now was her chance to gain some new skills.

Catanna equipped herself with the sword, and swished it about in the empty room. She remembered that there were training grounds in the desert. Maybe Catanna should head there for the night and level up.

As she stepped out from the stronghold into the dusk, she saw a blood-red figure loitering near the stronghold.

Zircon?

Catanna slipped back into the doorway. If Zircon was here, perhaps the Gutvines were planning a revenge attack. But he was here alone, as far as she could tell.

Catanna retreated to the entrance hall. As long as she was inside the stronghold, it wasn't classified as abandoned. That meant that Zircon couldn't burn it down. She wished that Perian were there to help.

Catanna watched, unmoving, from the entrance. Zircon strode across the sand in front of the stronghold. He paused, turned, and strode back. Katka didn't let her eyes dart away, even for a second.

Eventually, Zircon walked directly towards the front door. Catanna held her quartz sword ready. With no experience, she was guaranteed to lose if it came to a fight, but Zircon didn't need to know that. He just had to see that she was armed.

Suddenly, Zircon was standing in the doorway. His cloak flapped elegantly and his face wore an expression of poise. He looked every inch a guild leader. But he was silent. Just like in the workshop, yellow text appeared at the bottom of Katka's screen. She wondered again why he didn't use a microphone.

[19:53] Zircon117: CATANNA? ARE YOU IN CHARGE?

Now that she was alone with Zircon, not hearing the player's voice through her headset made Katka more

uneasy than she had expected. Even though players didn't use their real names in the game, Katka could always hear her friends' voices over her headset, which gave her some clues as to who the human behind their avatars was. All she knew about Zircon was that his avatar was a man. She had no way of knowing who she was really talking to, and it wasn't really the way that she liked to play. She quickly weighed up her options.

"I am the leader," Katka replied out loud.

[19:53] Zircon117: GOOD. YOU KNOW MY GUILD, YES? THE GUTVINES.

Katka started to reply, but almost immediately, another message from Zircon appeared on her screen. Then another, and another. He was typing fast.

[19:53] Zircon117: I BELIEVE YOU KNOW ABOUT OUR NEW WORKSTATIONS. THIS IS A RARE NEW TECHNOLOGY. VERY SECRET. BUT I CAN LET YOU IN ON THE SECRET.

[19:53] Zircon117: GUTVINES NEED AN ALLY. XANDON HAS TOLD YOU WE CANNOT BURN OUR OWN STRONGHOLDS. WE CANNOT AFFORD MORE WARRIORS GETTING BANNED.

[19:54] Zircon117: THIS IS WHERE YOU COME IN. GUTVINES BUILD. BRITTLESTARS BURN. GUTVINES TRANSFORM THE ASH INTO RARE GEMS. WE ALL SHARE THE BOUNTY.

[19:54] Zircon117: BOTH OUR GUILDS PROFIT, AND NO ONE GETS BANNED.

[19:54] Zircon117: YOUR GUILD WILL REVERE YOU.

Suddenly, Katka felt full of energy. This was the answer. She could restore all of the lost loot to her guild and more. They would have the most powerful weapons in the White Desert. Their guild would be famed among Raider's Peril players the world over.

[19:55] Zircon117: WE HAVE A DEAL?

"Yes," she gasped.

[19:55] Zircon117: FIRST ASSIGNMENT IS TOMORROW. WE WILL HAVE STRONGHOLD READY FOR BURNING. A FIRE OPAL SWORD WILL BE YOURS SOON.

"A spear," said Katka quickly. "I usually use a spear."

[19:55] Zircon117: THEN A FIRE OPAL SPEAR WILL BE YOURS.

Zircon spun in the doorway and walked away across the desert. Catanna sheathed the sword. She wouldn't be needing it for much longer.



The next night, the Brittlestars gathered in the stronghold's weapons store. As Katka looked around at the raiders' matching blue capes, she felt her chest inflate with pride. She had brought each of these players together. She had earned their trust and they repaid her with loyalty. Any player here would leap into combat for the sake of the guild; Katka knew that. And now, she would be able to repay them.

"Brittlestars! Something really exciting has happened. Yesterday, the Gutvine leader, Zircon, visited the stronghold." Mutters and whispers broke out over the headset. "He didn't come to attack or raid," Katka went on, loud enough to drown the mutters out. "He came to form an alliance."

"You didn't accept, did you?" said Pinksocks. "We hate

the Gutvines.”

“Ah, but wait till you hear what the Gutvines can do for us,” said Katka. She scanned her assembled group. Perian stood to one side. She and Katka hadn't spoken since their fight yesterday. It wasn't like Perian to be so quiet.

Katka explained everything: the Gutvines' magic workstations that turned ash into rare gems, and the task given to the Brittlestars, to burn strongholds as fast as the Gutvines could rebuild them.

“And in return, we get powerful weapons. Emerald swords and diamond bows. A fire opal spear.”

“Why don't we just ask for our own magic workstation?” asked Croctordocor.

“Well...” Katka felt like she'd fumbled the ball. Of course she should have asked Zircon for a workstation! “I didn't discuss it with Zircon. But I'll ask later,” she added quickly. “I'm sure he'll agree.”

“This is the start of something huge. It will take the Brittlestars up a level. We won't be just another desert guild anymore. We'll build a palace, stable emus, buy

a headquarters in the city. The Brittlestars are going to be big.”

The raiders burst into chatter again, but now their voices buzzed with excitement.

“Have you seen those palaces made of rare gems? Red beryl roofs and quartz windows and emerald walls? We could have a palace like that.”

“Forget matching capes, we could all wear matching armour with the Brittlestar crest.”

“If we get hold of diamond, we can start making magical items. I've heard there are wands that shoot bolts of ice or fire.”

Katka stayed silent. She sent Catanna wandering about the room, listening in on conversations as she passed. This was exactly what she had hoped for. Her guild were as excited as she was.

At last, she reached Perian. Perian turned to look at Catanna. Catanna stood still and looked back.

“Sounds like you got a good deal,” Perian said.

"It'll make up for the lost loot, I hope," said Katka. She took a deep breath. A good leader owned up to her mistakes. "I'm sorry, Perian. I shouldn't have disappeared. I should have come with you to the market."

"Well, I'm sorry too," Perian replied. "Sorry I didn't listen yesterday. You did a good job."

"Thanks," Katka whispered.

"So, are we off to burn down whatever ugly creation the Gutvines have sprung up, or what?"

Alone in her room, Katka grinned.

"Brittlestars!" she yelled into the mic. "Grab your weapons. The Gutvines are getting burned tonight!"