



Chapter 7

Dubious Dealings

“What’s with the sword?” asked Perian, as the Brittlestars crossed the White Desert. The route to the ancient temple was a familiar one, now. The Brittlestars barely hesitated as they dashed through shadowy dune valleys.

“My spear was taken when I was ambushed,” Katka explained.

“Those crummy dung beetles. So now you’ve got a sword?”

“Not for long, I hope. I’m only level one with a sword.”

“Ouch. And level twelve with a spear?”

“Level thirteen,” said Katka. Ahead, the towering stone arches of the temple pierced the horizon. “Nearly there,” she said. With a cursory glance over the empty sand, Catanna ran for the temple entranceway. The Brittlestars followed.

“Right,” said Katka, as they came to a halt in the looming darkness. “We approach the stronghold together. We’ll be met by a Gutvine guard, but the place will be empty. All we have to do is light a torch, and –”

“Er, Catanna?” Croctordocor stood beside a shattered stained glass window. “I don’t want to alarm you,” he said, “but there is no stronghold.”

“No stronghold?”

Catanna ran to the back of the temple, where a crooked doorway led outside. She stopped just beyond the door. Wind blew sand in graceful arcs through the night air. The stars glittered like jewels.

There was no stronghold. Then, a shout came from inside the temple.

“Ambush!”

Katka’s heart jumped into her throat. Catanna dashed inside, quartz sword drawn and ready.

The Brittlestars clamoured. The darkness was punctuated by flashes of shining swords and flaming arrows. Weapons clanged and raiders roared. Amidst the yelling, Katka heard a voice.

“It’s not an ambush! It’s just me!”

“Xandon? Wait, everyone! Hold your weapons!” Catanna lit a match. The tiny yellow glow made the scene worse somehow. Catanna saw ruined armour and bloody wounds. Pinned against the wall, his black axe raised, was Xandon Gutvine.

“STOP!” Katka yelled.

The Brittlestars stopped still, staring at the damage that they had done to each other. Catanna walked to where Xandon stood against the wall.

“Well, Xandon? Where’s this stronghold we’re meant to be burning down?”

“I came to tell you,” Jaden’s voice said. Considering that he was outnumbered, Katka expected him to sound nervous, but he didn’t. As always, Jaden sounded as if he was laughing at her. “We had to build it somewhere else. Too many burnt strongholds in the same spot would look suspicious.”

“Where is it?”

“The Borderlands.”

Katka looked at her guild. She wished that she knew what they were thinking. In the game, the characters had no body language or facial expressions to offer a hint of their inner thoughts. Katka had to go off what her guild said. Right now, they were silent.

“The Borderlands,” she said, trying to inflate her voice with confidence. “Fine. Lead on.”

“There are bandits roaming the main route,” said Jaden, “so we go by the shadows. I hope you’re feeling stealthy.”

The first part of the journey was straightforward enough. At last, the Brittlestars reached the wasteland at the fringes of the White Desert: the Borderlands. The

Borderlands were dirty and littered with the debris of a long-dead civilisation. It was an easy place for gangs to lurk and leap on unsuspecting travellers.

Katka thought about the ice cloak, still stowed in Catanna’s lootbag. If Catanna were alone, she could wear it and traverse the whole Borderlands, swift and unseen. But there was no sense in one Brittlestar being invisible when the rest were so conspicuous. Besides, it would be cowardly of her to disappear and leave her followers to their fates.

The party crouched behind a mountain of metal piping. It wasn’t much of a hiding place; if anyone came round the corner, the Brittlestars would be spotted instantly. But it would have to do.

“We’re nearly there,” Jaden assured them. “You can see the stronghold beyond the next hill.”

Catanna crept out from the hiding place. In the distance, she could see the misshapen silhouette that she had come to associate with Gutvine strongholds.

“This is Lemonhead territory, so we’ve got to go quickly,” Jaden added.

“Lemonhead?”

“That’s just their guild name. They don’t really have lemons for heads. Actually, they think they’re pirates. Are we all ready?” Jaden addressed the whole group. “Move.”

Catanna sprinted out from behind the junk mountain. Blue capes flapped on either side. The path swerved between a collapsed wall on one side and half a burnt-out truck on the other. Beyond that, the ground fell away. The stronghold was close.

The Brittlestars bunched together and jostled as the pathway narrowed. Walls loomed on one side, grey and streaked with rust. The truck on the other side stood at an angle that blocked out almost all light. Catanna was at the head of the pack, her quartz sword bouncing in her hands as she ran. She was nearly at the crest of the hill – nearly at the Gutvine’s stronghold.

“Sandlubbers!”

“Get ‘em!”

“YARRR!”

Dark figures erupted from the tattered fabric that covered the van. They held knives and cutlasses, each wore a tricorne hat, and most of them had a strange goggle strapped to one eye.

“Lemonheads,” Jaden muttered.

The Brittlestars whipped out their weapons and pointed them at the strange group. There was a moment’s pause while everyone waited for someone else to make the first move.

A Lemonhead in baggy trousers, a ruffled shirt and a red bandana strode to the front of the group. “What have we here?” she said. Her one goggle extended from her head like a telescope, pointing at Catanna.

“Ah, the Brittlestar guild. And this here’s their leader,” she continued. “Hear that, me hearties?”

The other Lemonheads jeered.

“Armed only with a quartz sword? In Lemonhead land?” The girl tutted. “And you’re not even trained to use it. You’re really not prepared for the Borderlands, are you, sandlubber?”

Katka felt her skin prickle with nervous sweat. She wanted to scratch her arms, but she didn't dare take her hand from the controller. How was the girl doing it? She seemed to know everything about Catanna without even asking. Did the goggle on her eye have some hidden power?

"Don't worry. You won't have that sword for long. Lemonheads, attack!"

"YARRR!"

The Lemonheads screamed and ran at the Brittlestars, cutlasses raised. Catanna lifted her sword and swished it down. But however hard she hit, however carefully she aimed, the sword bounced off, dealing barely a scratch. Catanna couldn't do any real damage. All around her, her guild were getting hit, their health falling. It was hopeless.

Unless...

"Stop," Catanna said. "STOP!" The Lemonheads ignored her, and so did the Brittlestars. "We don't have to fight," Katka gasped, as Catanna dodged and wove between angry blades. "We can trade."

"Why would we trade?" yelled the Lemonhead leader, her ruby cutlass slicing into three Brittlestars with one sweep. "We can just destroy you."

Catanna leapt out the way as the ruby blade flew towards her. "Have you heard of an ice cloak?"

"An ice cloak?" The leader froze, almost as if she'd been turned to ice herself. "All right, stop. STOP, ye scallywags!"

"She's really taking the pirate theme seriously," Perian muttered. She stood close to Catanna, looking bruised but not broken. Several Lemonheads were obviously suffering arrow wounds from Perian's bow.

"You've got an ice cloak, have you?" the Lemonhead girl said, stepping so close to Catanna they almost bumped noses.

"Ye-" Katka started, but Jaden interrupted.

"No!" His character, Xandon, was limping now. He staggered through the crowd to stand beside Catanna.

Katka nearly screamed in frustration. What did Jaden know? Now he was going to ruin her plan.

“Not yet, at least,” said Jaden. “We’re on our way to collect some ice cloaks now. We’ll give you one, if –” Jaden paused to put his axe away. “If,” he continued, “you let us pass through unharmed. There and back.”

Katka’s insides squirmed. She didn’t trust Jaden. Was this another of his tricks?

“So, we let you through,” said the Lemonhead leader. “You pick up these ice cloaks. You come back. You give them to us.”

“One. We give one to you,” said Jaden. There was an ominous pause. Katka’s fingers twitched, ready to fight again.

“All right,” the Lemonhead said at last. “It’s a deal. No sneaking off, though. Or we’ll be after you with our cutlasses.”

Katka took a shaky breath. As Xandon led the Brittlestars out of the narrow passage, Catanna waited to ensure that her guild passed through safely.

Katka watched her raiders limping, bleeding and battered. Guilt stabbed at her guts. She knew that they were only computer-animated wounds. She knew

the injuries would heal by themselves, given time. It didn’t stop Katka feeling responsible for bringing her guild to this place, for unknowingly putting them in harm’s way.

Over the crest, the Gutvine stronghold squatted like a great, wooden beast. It was even bigger, and even uglier, than the last one. Katka guessed that there was no point in making a stronghold look pretty if it was just going to be burned out of existence.

A group of Gutvines stood to one side with empty loot bags.

“Ready to go?” asked Jaden. He strode over to join the other Gutvines.

“Ready.”

“Right. Set it ablaze.”

The Brittlestars hesitated.

“Okay,” said Katka. Catanna lit a torch. She flung it at the stronghold, and it went up in smoke. “Well then.”

“Is that it?” asked Croctordocor.

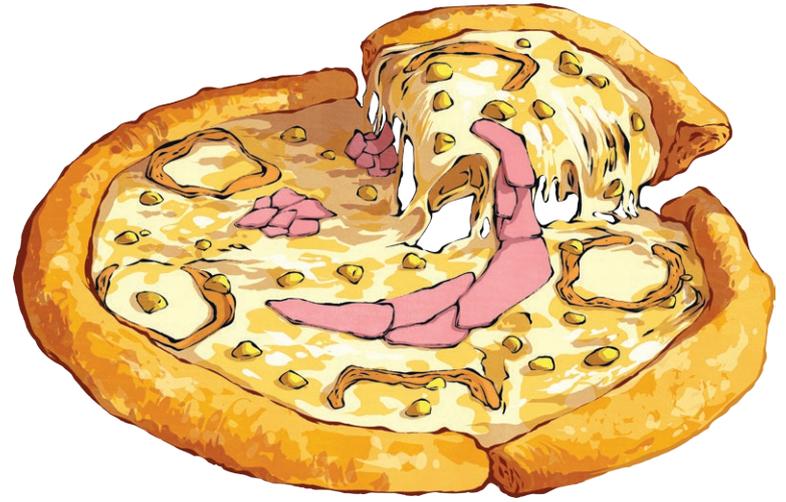
“Er, I suppose so,” Katka replied.

“Your payment will be brought to the Brittlestar stronghold,” one of the Gutvines said.

“Right.” The guilds stood and watched the flames for a minute. No one said anything. As the flames died down, Katka spoke. “Xandon, why did you butt in about the ice cloak? I was handling it.”

“No, you weren’t. If she knew you had an ice cloak on you, she would have just mugged you to get it. I got you safe passage.”

Katka sighed. Jaden was right. She hated that Jaden was right.



Chapter 8 Awesome Pizza

The next evening, a bulging bag of loot appeared on the stone steps of the Brittlestar stronghold. The Brittlestars were in the middle of an argument, and the loot bag didn’t help.

“I’m just saying, there’s no point in all of us going,” said Pinksocks. Pinksocks wore pink all over: pink shoes, clothes of pink velvet and even pink hair. She really liked pink.

“So what do the rest of us do?” demanded Croctordocor. Katka had never made up her mind whether or not she liked Croctordocor’s pointy moustache. Right now,

she hated it.

“We forge weapons, go to the market, catch wild emu,” said Pinksocks. “Whatever. But you only need one person to burn down an undefended Gutvine stronghold.”

“So why bother with a guild at all?” asked Croctordocor. He nocked an arrow and pointed it at the rough stronghold wall. Katka wanted to ask him to put it away, but in the mood Croctordocor was in, he’d shoot her.

“Because,” said Gannymead, backing up Pinksocks as always, “normal raids involve fighting and looting. We need the guild.”

Katka stepped in. “And look at this stuff.” Catanna pulled out the contents of the lootbag. “Amethyst sword, garnet helmet, a pearl bow. The Gutvine job will make us rich. We’ll go back to normal raiding afterwards, I promise.”

“Who gets that bow, then?” asked Croctordocor, pointing at the pearl bow with the tip of his arrow.

“Oh!” Perian said. “Can I have it?” Perian loved shiny weapons.

“Sure,” said Katka.

“Perian gets it?” said Croctordocor, his voice rising suddenly to an unlikely squeak. “She has a good bow already! What about me?”

“Do you want Perian’s old bow?” Katka offered.

“Not the point!” Croctordocor released the bowstring. Catanna ducked, and the arrow burst into pieces on the wall behind.

“Croctor, no!” said Perian, notes of panic in her voice. “You can have the pearl bow. I don’t mind.”

But Croctordocor spoke over her. “Know what? I’m out. This guild used to be good. Now you won’t share equipment fairly and we don’t even go on proper raids. This isn’t what Raider’s Peril is about.”

He threw his Brittlestar cape on the ground and stalked from the stronghold. The door slammed shut behind him.

“Good riddance,” said Pinksocks.

But Katka was silent. It stung to lose a guild member, even a bad-tempered one. Pinksocks was right, though.

There was no point in everyone going to burn down an empty, undefended guild.



The Brittlestars slipped into a routine. Each evening, Xandon appeared at the stronghold entrance. He led Catanna and Perian across the White Desert to the new Gutvine location, sometimes as far afield as the Red Plains, Slinkertown or the Falldown Forest.

The journeys were often exciting, taking the pair to places that they weren't used to visiting. The main event soon grew dull, however. The explosion of excitement that Katka had felt the first time she had torched a Gutvine stronghold fizzled daily, until it was no more exciting than emptying the dishwasher.

The next day, bags of loot would materialise on the Brittlestar doorstep. Each time that she saw them, Katka felt a spark of hope, but always it was extinguished.

"Still no fire opal spear," Katka commented on the fourth day, adding yet another amethyst sword to the Brittlestar store. She was getting fed up of waiting. Surely she'd helped Zircon out enough by now.

"Have you asked Zircon for our own magic workstation yet?" asked Perian.

"I haven't seen Zircon," said Katka. "It's like he's vanished." Catanna added a fifth copper breastplate to the breastplate pile, and a third jasper shield to the jasper shield pile. "But there might be a way."



"Jaden," said Katka, taking a seat beside Jaden in their computing lesson the next day. "Can you get a message to Zircon for me?"

Katka and Amanda were improving their website for the girls' football team. Jaden and Vijay's website was called *The Ten Greatest Items in Raider's Peril*.

"Maybe," said Jaden. He copied an image of an ice cloak onto the webpage. "What's the message?"

"Can you ask him if our guild can have one of those special workbenches?"

"Nope." Jaden adjusted the size of the image, then searched for a picture of a diamond axe.

“What?”

“No way. He won’t give you one.”

“Why not?”

“They’re for Gutvines only.”

“Why?”

“Why is the sky green, Katka?”

“It’s not –”

“Why do you have two heads, Katka?”

“Jaden –”

“Why are you asking silly questions, Katka?”

“Fine, act stupid if you want to.” Katka turned back to her computer. She changed the website background so that it matched their red football kit. “Why doesn’t your website have any fire opal weapons? They’re just as powerful as diamond.”

Vijay let out a huff of laughter. “No they’re not.”

“Er,” Katka frowned at Vijay. “What do you mean, they’re not? How would you know? You don’t even play Raider’s Peril.”

Vijay raised his eyebrows disparagingly. “Play more than you.”

Before Katka could tell Vijay exactly how many gaming hours she had clocked up in the last month, Jaden spoke.

“Vijay, Katka is a guild leader. She plays more than I do.”

Vijay looked as if he didn’t believe a word. “Really?”

“Really,” said Katka, determined to speak for herself.

“You don’t look like a gamer.”

“What does that mean?”

“You’re a girl.”

“So?”

“Girls don’t play games like boys do.”

Katka let out a huff of breath. “You want to do a

survey?” she asked. Vijay quickly shook his head, but Katka already had her hand up. “Mrs Gorman? Vijay and Jaden need to do a survey to help with their website.” Jaden giggled and stuffed his hand over his mouth. “They were too embarrassed to ask themselves,” Katka explained.

“Very well,” said Mrs Gorman. “Quiet, year six. Katka?”

Katka stood up. She cleared her throat and spoke as loudly as she could, to cover up Jaden’s uncontrollable snorting laughter.

“This is a survey about who plays games,” she said. “Video games, tablet games and phone games all count. Put your hand up if you’re a gamer.”

Katka watched as almost every hand in the room went up. Even Mrs Gorman raised a finger. The only person with both hands on his lap was Rick.

“What?” he said. Everyone was staring at him. He folded his arms. “Mum and Dad won’t even buy a TV. It’s not my fault.”

“Well, Jaden and Vijay,” said Mrs Gorman. “Is that all you wanted to know?”

Jaden stuffed his fist in his mouth so that he wouldn’t burst into giggles again. Vijay nodded at his shoes. His cheeks were red.

Katka watched Amanda try six different fonts for their website title. None of them looked right. Katka gazed at Jaden’s screen. Somehow Jaden had made his website look really slick. The colour scheme made you think about Raider’s Peril. The website slid from page to page whenever a link was clicked. It made Katka’s website look like something that a year one could make.

“What are you staring at?” Jaden asked. Katka, unwilling to let Jaden know that she was admiring his website, had to think quickly.

“Can’t you at least ask Zircon about the magic workstation?” she said. “Even if you think he’ll say no?”

“Katka, it’s pointless. He hasn’t even given me my diamond axe yet. And he promised it to me weeks ago.”

“He probably just doesn’t have enough diamond yet,” said Katka. “It’s really rare.”

Jaden added another picture to his website. “You saw

how much diamond those workstations pump out. Zircon definitely has enough. There you go, Katka.” Jaden refreshed his website. “I’ve added a fire opal spear to the site. Just for you.”



That afternoon, Katka’s mum collected her daughters from school in her work uniform.

“The café is hosting a party this evening. Somebody’s sixtieth, so I’ll be late home,” she explained. Mum managed a café known for its gluten-free and vegan cake collection. “Katka, you know how to heat up pizza, so you are responsible. Don’t forget to turn the oven off! And I’ve left my mobile number by the phone.”

“I know it off by heart, Mum,” Katka said.

“Well, I’ve left it just in case. And Gran’s number too.”

“What kind of pizza?” asked Milana.

“Chicken,” said Mum. “I think. And Katka, help Milana with her homework please. She has a spelling test tomorrow.”

“Yay, chicken pizza!” Milana said, and she skipped through the front gate and down the concrete path to the front door. Mum unlocked the door and Katka trailed in behind. Helping Milana with spellings was not on her list of things to do tonight.

“Remember to turn off the oven!” Mum yelled again, slamming the door closed behind her.

Katka threw her school bag down in the hallway and headed for the stairs. If Jaden wouldn’t speak to Zircon, she supposed she ought to find him herself.

Milana stood at the bottom of the stairs, her hands clasped together. “Where are you going?”

“To play Raider’s Peril,” Katka replied, wearily wondering whether to hunt for Zircon in the Silken City before or after torching the Gutvine’s latest stronghold.

“But I’m not allowed to cook pizza on my own,” said Milana. She opened her eyes wide, in a way that many grown-ups had told her was adorable. Katka stopped. Her stomach grumbled. She was hungry too, and the pizza wouldn’t cook itself.

“Fine.”

“Yay!”

When Milana picked up the pizza box from the kitchen table, tragedy struck. “Katka, I want chicken. This is cheese and tomato.”

“But you like cheese and tomato,” Katka sighed, turning on the oven. On the front was a sticky note that read:



“Yes, Mum,” Katka sighed.

“I just really, really want chicken,” Milana wailed. Her face went red and Katka could tell that she was on the verge of a tantrum.

Katka grabbed the box and pulled the pizza out. “We’re going to have something better than chicken pizza,” she promised. “We’re going to have Awesome Pizza. Get out everything tasty from the fridge.”

Ten minutes later, the Awesome Pizza was covered in orange pepper and canned sweetcorn and extra grated cheese – orange cheese for Katka and yellow for Milana. Milana put on the finishing touches with torn-up slices of ham.

“I’m making a smiley face,” she explained. “You get the eyes, I get the smile.”

“We have to cook it for twelve minutes,” Katka said, reading the box.

“That’s exactly one episode of Rainbow Charm Twins!” said Milana.

“You put the TV on,” said Katka, “and I’ll put the pizza in.”

Milana ran into the living room. Katka hovered by the oven, pizza in hand, and watched Milana through the door as she loaded the episode.

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

Katka started to count down. “Three, two, one.” She pushed the pizza into the oven and slammed the oven door just as Milana pressed play. As the sparkly music of Rainbow Charm Twins started to play, Katka flung herself on the sofa so hard that Milana bounced up, shrieking with laughter.

When Mum arrived home later that night, she found the girls dozing together on the sofa. Milana held a pencil in one hand, and Katka was using Milana’s spelling book as a tiny blanket. Mum put the TV on standby, and went into the kitchen to check the oven. It was turned off.



Chapter 9 Clashing Blades

“You weren’t on Raider’s Peril last night,” Jaden said, as they were clearing away the art equipment.

“No,” Katka replied. “I had to look after my sister.” Mrs Gorman had put Katka in charge of washing up the paint pots, because Mrs Gorman knew that she could be trusted. It was a point of pride for Katka that she almost always got the best jobs.

Jaden, however, wasn’t supposed to come within ten paces of the sink. “Don’t do it again, all right?” he said sharply.

Katka frowned. “Why not?”

Jaden held a pot of green paint under the running tap. “You’ll get into trouble,” he warned. Water gushed over the sides of the paint pot, and green paint splattered the fronts of their shirts.

“Hey!” said Katka.

Jaden dropped the pot. “Oh no,” he yelled, pulling at his sodden shirt. “Alien goo! Eurgh, I’m mutating!” He tumbled backwards and writhed on the classroom carpet. “I’m turning into an alien.”

Katka didn’t watch Jaden with the rest of the class. Everything had to be a performance with him. “Jaden can’t tell me what to do,” she muttered to herself, dabbing at the paint on her shirt with a wet sponge.



“I got ten out of ten in spellings again,” Milana bragged as they walked home from school. “Even Bella only got nine. Mum, can we have Awesome Pizza again, like Katka made last night?”

“I don’t know,” said Mum, laughing. “What are the ingredients for Awesome Pizza?”

“Well, first you get an ordinary pizza, and then you get everything from the fridge, and you pile it all on top.”

“Even yoghurts? Even olives?”

“Eurgh, no, not olives,” Milana insisted. “Only nice things.”

Katka was only half listening. In her mind, she was replaying the conversation with Jaden. What did he mean, *trouble*?

When they reached home, Katka threw her bag down in the usual spot in the hallway and sprinted up the stairs. She wanted to play Raider’s Peril right now. Whenever she closed her eyes, she saw Catanna running across the vast landscape of the White Desert, like the image was imprinted on the back of her eyelids. Raider’s Peril was the place where Katka felt most at home.

In the bedroom, Katka threw the pillows from the bunk beds into her squashy heap on the floor. She bounced down onto them and started up the game. As the stronghold faded up, Katka saw frantic movement and

heard clashing blades. The stronghold was overrun. Katka knew at once that it was a raid, and that Catanna had landed in the middle of it.

Zircon's last payment had included a tiger's eye spear, and Catanna equipped herself with it now. She surveyed the hall. Blades swung and arrows blurred overhead. A dagger flashed beside Catanna and she dodged it, slaloming between Brittlestars and their assailants.

At the side of the room, Catanna turned and stood with her back to the wall. If anyone attacked her now, at least she would see them coming. She readied her spear, identified a target, adjusted her aim and flung it – *smash* – into an enemy raider. The man staggered back as his health dropped. Catanna ran to collect her spear.

She looked around again. All the Brittlestars were here, fighting with every ounce of their stamina. Pinksocks and Gannymead stood back to back, swinging their swords. Catanna flung her spear once more – *crash* – before spotting Perian on the stairs. Perian's arrows shot overhead, knocking enemies back as they closed in.

Katka's heart pumped against her ribs. She felt thrilled and terrified all at once. Battles like this were what Raider's Peril was all about – but the Brittlestar stronghold hadn't been raided in months. They were too well defended.

That was scary. It meant that whatever guild they were fighting was powerful enough to destroy their barricades. The raiders had good weapons – topaz, onyx, ruby – and good armour, too.

Spin, throw, flash. Catanna threw her spear again and again. Once, as she ran to fetch it, she was struck from behind. Her health tumbled, but not enough to slow her down. She thought about every footfall, every duck and dodge, and made it to the wall again, safe.

"They're heading for the weapons store," Perian yelled over the headset.

"Cut them off," Katka ordered.

Brittlestars surged towards the doorway. Sword-wielders hacked at the enemy's front line, while archers shot at those behind. The Brittlestars pressed close, but not close enough. Through the swish of blue capes, Catanna caught a glimpse of unfamiliar studded

armour, as two raiders slipped through the crush.

“We’ve been infiltrated,” Katka announced. “I’ll follow. Perian too.” Catanna and Perian dashed down the dark passageway. As they reached the storeroom, Catanna raised her spear.

“Grab the weapons and go,” said one of the raiders. She seized the amethyst swords, while the other swiped a silver pike and a bloodstone shield. “Don’t leave a thing behind. Zircon wanted every piece returned.”

“Zircon?” said Katka. Her thumb hovered over the throw button. Both raiders turned to look at her.

“Quick. Move it,” one raider said. Katka pressed down, and the spear spun into one raider’s back, at the same instant that Perian loosed an arrow at the other raider.

“Take that, you fluff-covered jelly beans!” yelled Perian, as the pair collapsed to the floor. “Now tell us what guild you’re in.”

“You must be stupid,” said an unfamiliar girl’s voice over Katka’s headset. “You don’t make a deal with Zircon and then bail. Why didn’t you burn our stronghold last night? We lost a whole day of work.”

“We have lives, you know,” said Perian. “Parents. Hobbies. We can’t be on here all the time.”

“That’s not how Zircon sees it,” said the girl. “If you don’t do what he wants... well, you’ve seen what happens. Now let us go.”

“Not until you give us back our loot,” said Katka.

“It’s not yours,” said the girl. “It’s Zircon’s. Move it. I’m warning you.”

“No,” said Katka. Perian drew her bowstring back.

But before she could shoot, the girl drew an item that Katka didn’t recognise from her lootbag. It looked like a crystal orb. With a violent swipe, she smashed it against the stronghold floor.

Sound filled Katka’s ears: a sound like a cliff giving way and smashing on the rocks below. The screen flashed white, then black.

Silence.

When Catanna awoke, she awoke to stars. She stood up and looked around. Katka’s heart sunk like a stone

thrown into a lake. She was alone, and the stronghold was in ruins.



Rebuilding the Brittlestar stronghold wasn't a job for one night. The Brittlestars needed to gather resources and buy equipment, which cost money – and to get money, they had to sell loot. Fortunately, two Brittlestar treasure chests had escaped the blast from the crystal orb. *Unfortunately*, they didn't hold much worth selling.

"How dare they?" ranted Pinksocks, as she and Catanna trekked to the covered market to sell bronze bars and quartz crystals. "They made a deal with us, then they raided us and stole back everything we earned. It wasn't theirs to take!"

Catanna paced alongside, looking warily left to right. Katka was more paranoid than usual. They had lost too much.

"We can earn it back," Katka promised. "We just have to burn down a few more strongholds. We'll have all that equipment from Zircon in no time."

Pinksocks stopped dead. "You don't mean you want to carry on with this stupid arrangement?"

"Well, what's the difference?" Katka knew she sounded impatient, but she couldn't help it. She was exhausted. She had spent a sleepless night thinking over every option, and she couldn't see any other way. "The Gutvines can raid us whether we're on their side or not. At least this way they'll give us good equipment first, so we stand a chance to defend ourselves."

"There are other ways to get equipment," argued Pinksocks. "We could play the game properly, do what we're good at. We could raid!"

"We will," said Katka. She tapped the thumbstick, impatient to keep walking. "This thing with Zircon isn't going to last much longer. We'll earn back what they took, get the really good weapons we were promised at the beginning, and then break off the deal. And it's perfect, because once we're equipped with fire opal, they'll have no chance to raid us again."

Pinksocks didn't move. "Oh, wake up Catanna," she said. "When are you going to get a clue?"

Katka winced. She was used to trash talk from other

guilds. That was the bad side of gaming. She wasn't used to that sort of tone from Pinksocks.

"Zircon is never going to give you a fire opal spear," Pinksocks went on. "It's all talk. He knows that if he ever did give you a fire opal spear, you'd stop helping him. And he's right. You would."

Katka felt shaky. Blood pumped in her head, and she was glad that Pinksocks couldn't see her face burning up in humiliation.

"No, I've thought about –" Katka tried to say, but her voice wobbled. She coughed. Her throat closed up. She didn't want to speak again, in case Pinksocks heard how upset she was.

"Whatever," said Pinksocks. "Croctor was right. This guild isn't what it used to be. See you never."

Still holding her bag of Brittlestar loot, Pinksocks walked away across the desert, leaving Catanna standing alone.