

The

Quentaris

Chronicles

Swords of Quentaris



Paul Collins

Series Editors: Michael Pryor and Paul Collins

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Swords of Quentaris

Paul Collins



*To Peter McNamara,
a true champion*

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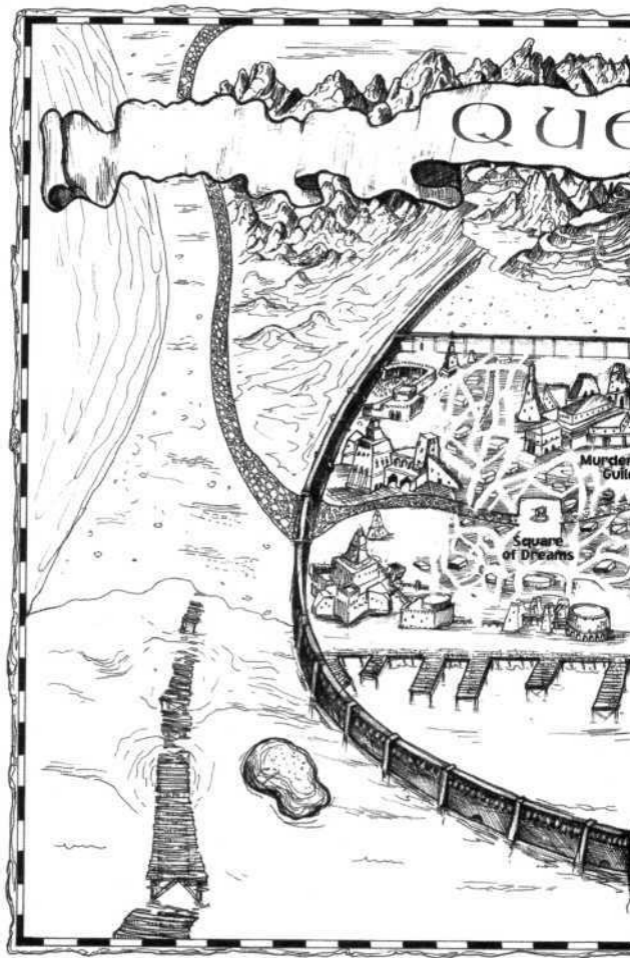
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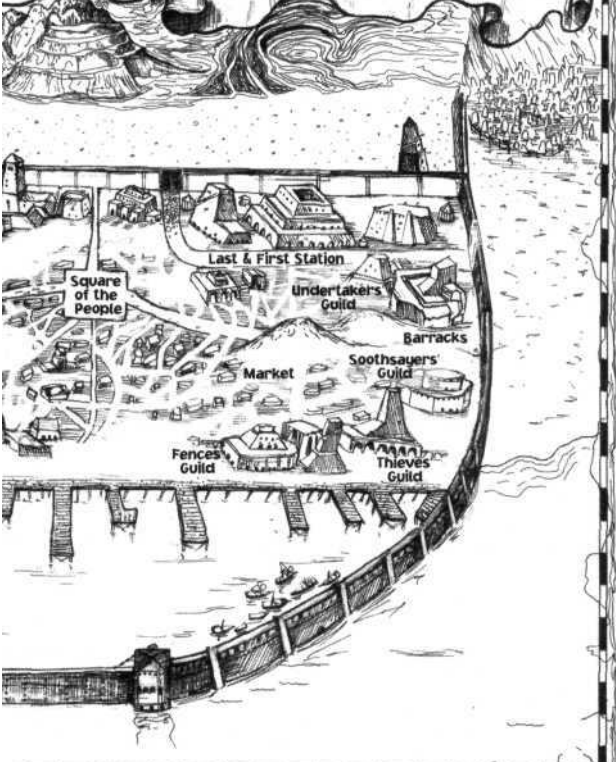
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ANTARIS



Square of the People

Last & First Station

Undertaker's Guild

Barracks

Market

Soothsayers' Guild

Fences' Guild

Thieves' Guild

1. Attack of the Pirates

IT was much like any other day in Quentaris—
glib vendors hawking their dubious wares, the
cries and squeals of excited children, the vowel-
chewing growls of the City Watch as they tried to
keep impossible order, the pervasive reek of day-
old fish intermingled with the cloying aroma of
freshly cut flowers and frying sweetmeats, and
apprentice cutpurses running from victims.

And strange things were happening in the rift caves far above the city.

In an old almost forgotten religion, it was the year of the Warlord, the month of the Witch and the day of ... the Donkey. What this meant was anyone's guess, but according to a few of the market soothsayers, it was a day to be reckoned with. After all, warlords made war, witches cast vile spells ... and donkeys, well, they kicked the unwary.

Rad de La'rel crouched behind a parapet high above the marketplace. This was his usual spot for the night vigil. There were dozens of watchers like himself, all keeping the city safe against invading armies such as the pirates.

He was early as usual—there was no better way to learn the art of thievery than to watch the shadowy members of the Thieves' Guild go about their artful business in the market below. Almost more than anything in the world, Rad wished he were one of them. A cutpurse here, a stall thief there—Rad watched in fascination as Guild members deftly relieved their victims of valuables.

Second only to the thieves, Rad admired the rift guides who plied their trade in Quentaris. After all, he was descended from the greatest guide of them all — Nathine. It was said that Nathine was descended from the Hamil, a race who periodically visited ancient Quentaris and came not only from another world, but from the sky itself.

Momentarily Rad looked skyward. He had as much hope of following in Nathine's footsteps as he had of reaching the sky. There was not one shred of guiding talent in him, nor in his immediate ancestors. Once Nathine was dead, it appeared as though her guiding ingenuity and bloodline had died with her. Except for her 'magical' bracelet, which hadn't worked in Rad's lifetime. He twirled it around his wrist, as he had done on numerous occasions when perplexed.

Thoughts of his famous great-great-grandmother made Rad despondent. It wasn't fair that her guiding ability had not been passed from family member to family member. If a Guides' Guild existed, at least he would have been part of a clan.

As it was now, he was a classless person — eking out an existence among the lowest of the low.

With renewed envy he watched a famous guide, Otlan, gathering provisions for what would no doubt be an epic adventure in one of the rift caves. Mainly adventurers, swordsmen and the like came from the outer lands to try their luck in the famous Quentaran rift caves, although most were too proud to hire guides. More fool them — the rifts could be deadly.

If only Nathine's talent could have been passed on down to her descendants! He idly fingered the artifact he wore about his wrist. It was a dented and pitted Hamilian bracelet. A family heirloom, it came with a prophecy that one day the bracelet would guide a de La'rel to greatness.

Rad had been the butt of many a joke for wearing jewellery, but the bracelet was all that he had to remind him of his famous ancestry. Such was Rad's lot in life. A piece of jewellery normally worn by girls!

He slid back behind the low wall. Becoming a rift cave guide was beyond his wildest imaginings — but becoming a thief was within the bounds of

possibility. Guild membership was hereditary, or you could be nominated by a member. A third alternative, but an unlikely one, was that you could earn your way in. Being a Guildless person, Rad knew it was impossible to steal something without committing a felony against the Thieves' Guild. Only members were allowed to steal on the open market. And since no thief was about to nominate him, his chances of joining their ranks did not look good.

Unless ... Unless Rad stole something so valuable the Thieves' Guild could do nothing but sit back in awe.

Day passed into night and Rad grew alert for any ominous dark splotches cruising the night sky. These darker than dark splotches were usually skycrawlers — skyships commanded by pirates. The brigands set sail from the rift caves and looted and pillaged Quentaris in daring night raids. So it was that Rad stared endlessly at the night sky.

He had never rung a warning bell before, although in his short life he had heard them peal

many times and watched the Quentaran guards fire arrows up at the raiders. He longed to ring a bell, and eyed the rooftop bell with something akin to awe. Each bell had its own distinctive chime, so that the city's defenders knew exactly where the skycrawlers were when a particular bell sounded.

It was perhaps the creaking of the skyship's webbed ladder that made Rad look up. The spider-like webbing hung from the craft like an angry entrail. It whiplashed in the wind and Rad staggered as it disgorged one of its crew.

'Ugh!' Rad gargled and stumbled backwards, too paralysed to run for the bell. He had never seen a pirate in real life, and the pictures he had seen were obviously romanticised. The creature twisted his taut-skinned face inquisitively, as though never having seen a Quentaran before.

'Ugh!' the pirate grunted.

He jumped down to the rooftop, squatted to cushion the impact, then straightened to tower over Rad. The pirate's tusk-like incisors glowed a fungal yellow in the moonlight as he opened his mouth.

Rad almost swooned. The pirate's skeleton stood out in ridges and mounds, as though every muscle had long since died, leaving only a pale, leathery skin stretched tautly over its frame. The misbegotten creature defied every logical thought Rad had ever had regarding rift creatures. This thing should not be alive. Yet it was, and deadly so.

The pirate quickly recovered from his own surprise and swiftly drew a curved sword that had been slung across his armoured back. But in his haste to dispatch the cowering Quentaran, he misjudged his footing. For one perilous moment his skeletal arms windmilled as he fought to maintain balance.

Rad knew his own life hung in the balance as well and rushed forward. He expected to bounce back with the impact, but to his surprise he almost followed the pirate forward.

The pirate barely had enough time to thrust his sword before Rad barrelled into him and he fluttered backwards like a felled bat, then miraculously snapped the pommel of his sword on Rad's shoulder, and in the same fluid movement drew himself back from the abyss.

Rad tugged backwards, almost tripping over. Barely thinking straight, he dragged his dirk from its sheath. Crouching low, he weaved the air with the blade. This much he had learnt from the many market fights he had witnessed: present as low a target as possible, be ready to spring instantly from left to right, act like an experienced street fighter. *But how can you kill a thing that is all skin and bone?*

Rad's opponent stopped for a moment. Then his sunken, bloodshot eyes seemed to laugh at Rad. The skeletal figure slid forward like oil across a hot plate. Rad jumped back, barely avoiding the razor-sharp scimitar as it sliced the air.

Rad had never seen anything move so swiftly. There was nothing to the pirate — he was wafer-thin, with a sickly pallor — but his reflexes were lightning fast.

It was blind terror that drove Rad back into the bell, which sounded weakly and bounced him forward; and pure luck that he ducked to one side as the pirate lunged with his scimitar. The sword met the bell with a crash and jarred the pirate's gauntleted hand.

The bell rang stridently.

Rad seized the moment. He drove up and into the stunned pirate. He heaved with all his might until they stumbled into the parapet. A swift slash from the pirate's dagger ripped Rad's tunic and sent him reeling backwards. He dodged aside as the pirate slashed the air with his dagger, then rushed forward, using his head as a battering ram.

The pirate uttered something unintelligible as he tripped on the parapet and tumbled backwards.

Rad flinched at the muffled thump as the pirate's body hit the ground. He moved several times and for a wild moment Rad thought he might revive and scale the wall to get back at him, but after a few seconds he grew still.

Rad swung to face the bell — the one that would rouse the city's guards to fill the sky with their deadly arrows. He had barely taken a step toward the bell when the skyship's webbing nudged him as it passed.

Rad craned his neck and swallowed hard. The pirate craft was the size of a galleon, judging by

the stars it blotted out. An elongated balloon held it aloft. Rigging and small aft canvas sails flapped in the night air. Then he heard the fabled thing that powered the skyship — a sound very much like the buzzing of an angry insect. Somewhere up there a gigantic circle of swishing magicked steel would be pushing air against the sails. Or so said Quentaran scholars.

Everything was camouflaged black and Rad strained to make out the ship's full size as he watched it edge away into the night.

The tiny opening in the belly of the outlandish craft beckoned him. Should he chance it? He faced the bell. He would be hailed as a champion bellringer back at the barracks. He looked again at the hovering skyship. Up there could be something worthy of the Thieves' Guild's awe. Besides, the bell had rung twice now, hadn't it?

Bellringer or thief? There really was no question as to his preferred profession.

The webbing moved away from the rooftop. It was already a body length away from the ledge. Rad ran toward the ledge and jumped.

The chasm beneath yawned. Rad's feet paddled and his hands made swimming strokes. But the wind caught the webbing and pulled it from his clutching hands.

'Gah!' Rad screamed. His fingers brushed the silky webbing and for a split second he was afraid. He fell, but somehow his foot became entangled in the tail end of the webbing, causing him to swing upside down like a pendulum. The world below kaleidoscoped.

Rad crunched his stomach and barely caught the third grid. With effort he pulled himself up, his head swimming with dizziness. He looked down — to see the broad expanse of the marketplace. There was no way but up.

Easier said than done! The wind was cold and bit hard, whipping the ladder into a frenzied live thing.

Rad scampered upwards as quickly as he could. Twice he lost his footing, but his firm grip on the webbing saved him.

He pulled himself over the lip of the trapdoor. The night air was gushing past and he knew that at any moment the craft's crew could set upon

him. Rungs rather than stairs led to the upper carriage.

On hands and feet he worked his way across the decking. How could anyone stand and keep their balance when the floor was tilting this way and that? The innards of the craft were strewn with rattling ropes that hung from rafters. Rad gained his footing and crept forward by clutching at ropes. This lower half of the craft looked like a storeroom. To house all their stolen goods, he thought bitterly.

A rafter screeched as the deck tilted. Rad tightened his grip on a dangling rope and instantly felt alarm. The skyship juddered and he nearly tumbled back across the deck and out of the open hatch.

He quickly clasped another rope to steady himself. By the dim lights of the cavernous craft, Rad saw that everything worth stealing was too large to carry. He didn't know what the huge objects were, but gathered by their shiny surfaces that they would be priceless down in Quentaris.

Fearfully, he approached an oblong case,

gripped its strange handle and pulled.

A chamber came out of the larger case and inside lay unusual wreaths of paper. One seemed lit with strange glyphs that made the others look dark in comparison. Reverently, Rad reached out to touch it.

Did he hear bells chiming? No matter — in his hands he held an artifact from a skyship! Now his dreams would be fulfilled ...

If the high-pitched whining from further along the belly of the flying ship broke Rad's reverie, the sudden lurching shattered it. His fingers closed around the magical sheet as the deck tilted alarmingly.

'Ugh!' he yelped.

The skyship lurched and Rad barely steadied himself before looping an arm over a rope.

He could hardly believe that he had stolen an artifact from a skyship. Elation almost swept him away, but the shuddering craft brought him to his senses. He made it to the hatch.

Fear filled Rad's lungs and he screamed it out. Despite the screeching from the skyship, he heard Quentaran arrows thudding into the structure.

The spiralling view of Quentaris through the tiny hatch drew him like a magnet. Rather fall through that than crash inside the belly of a skyship!

On hands and knees now, Rad crawled to the hatch. He slipped his legs over the seal and swung down. Luckily the ladder was still hanging loose. Even as he watched, the webbed appendage began to fly back into some cavity in the hull. Rad scampered down it. Hand over hand, leg over leg. No matter how quickly he descended, the ladder was being tugged from him.

The flapping bottom grid was an arrow's flight from the ground — too far for him to drop to safety — and within reach of Quentaran archers!

As he considered this, a flight of flaming arrows rocketed skyward. They struck into the few timbers of the skyship while others bounced off its hardened black surface.

Flick! Flick! Flick! the flaming missiles went through the air. Each arrow struck home with a *thud*, making Rad flinch. Fire blossomed on the crippled ship, causing it to veer off course. Rad clung tightly as the ship tilted and dived.

He could see shadowy figures firing what appeared to be water cannons at the blazing flames.

A sharp explosion drove hot air downwards to sweep over Rad like a fiery cloth. When it had passed, he looked up, and saw why the sky always appeared to be pitch black whenever the skyships flew over Quentaris. A huge secondary sail carried the ship. It was like the canvas sails he had seen on the ships that plied the Lonely Sea, only they were joined to form a huge oblong shape.

Now part of it was burning. The scurrying figures above were directing the water at it and a veritable waterfall was cascading from the craft. It gave another lurch and Rad almost lost his grip.

A loud *whoosh* erupted above him and Rad dared to look up. What were the pirates doing? They seemed to be setting fire to their own craft! Several of the misshapen creatures were scurrying around a huge cylindrical container. Flames roared from it and seemed to pierce the very innards of the oblong shape above the deck.

The craft rose suddenly. Panic-stricken, Rad

continued to descend the ladder. But no matter how fast he went, the ladder drew inexorably up. Above, he now saw that the fire had been contained to a small compartment in the canvas and as he watched, its dying flames were being extinguished.

Rad's stomach threatened to throw up everything it held. Reality hit him like a shovel.

He had climbed a skyship's ladder and entered its belly. He had actually *flown* in the air like the rift pirates! And now he was about to die. He clenched his eyes shut as though this very act would gently place him on the ground.

But he was being drawn steadily upward. That much he knew. *Away* from the ground to a greater height from which to drop.

Rad was too preoccupied to know it, but the flying ship itself was actually descending. Soon it was skimming across the Quentaran docklands, long curdling black smoke wafting like flotsam in its wake. Only now did Rad see the white tufts of spray as the bottom rung skimmed across the choppy river.

Guttural voices cheered from above. Rad bit

his lip with disappointment. The raiders had extinguished all the flames. Now the craft was gaining height and returning to the rift caves. The mountain range loomed like a mythological beast in the middle distance.

Without conscious thought, Rad released his grip of the ascending ladder and plummeted head over heels. The tangy spray rose up to greet him as he took a deep breath a second before plunging into the dark and icy depths.

2. Gangi-the Fence

THE swim back to the dock wasn't as bad as he might have expected. But it was a wet and sorry Rad that climbed wearily up the muddy bank. Too frozen and exhausted to care, he rolled on to his back and noisily dragged in some fresh river air.

By the time he had stopped gagging on river water, he realised he had a far more pressing

worry. He had abandoned his night vigil. This in itself drew a penalty of fifty public lashes in front of the Hall of Justice. It wouldn't take the City Watch long to realise the skyship's flight path had taken it right over his rooftop post.

Then again, the bell *had* rung twice. Which, of course, fell well short of the prescribed thirty rings.

Rad groaned inwardly. For his troubles he now had a magical object that felt hard to the touch but buckled under pressure. Beneath its milky surface tiny lights flared and died. It was not hard to see that it was a map of some kind, but a map of where? Judging by the squiggly lines that occasionally lit up like lava flows, it could be a map to an important rift cave!

Rad held the map at arm's length. Why did the lights flare then dim? Perhaps the magic was weak. Had everything been for nothing and was this a piece of ill-magicked dung? He silently cursed himself for his foolishness. A treasure trove of pirated wares had been at his fingertips, yet he had chosen a worthless bauble!

Chastened, he soon dragged himself up and

climbed to the crest of the embankment. He knew exactly who to see regarding the worth of his skyship artifact. Once he'd established that, he would take it to the Thieves' Guild as a tribute. Or he might be fed to the fish for wasting everyone's time ...

Rad kept to the rooftops. He knew them like the back of his hand; even so, the rooftop way was like a giant map for those who could read it. Generations of roof crawlers had inscribed cryptic messages for the shortest cuts across Quentaris. The busy laneways below were a much slower alternative.

By now there might be a warrant out for his arrest for failing his night vigil duty. All he needed to do was impress the Thieves' Guild with his stealth and they would protect him from the law.

Squatting above Fences Lane, Rad waited till the traffic below had all but ceased and the fortified, slit-like windows darkened one by one. No-one had entered the House of Gangi, for which Rad was pleased; yet the notorious fence's

rooms remained lit with a yellow glow.

Rad scuttled down the greystone wall and knocked on the scarred oaken door. After what seemed like eternity a bolt slid across and a tiny slit appeared.

'Waddy want? We're closed. Come back tomorrah.'

Rad impetuously stuck his finger in the peephole before it could be closed. 'Look at this! It comes from the skyship!' He waved the map like a flag.

After a pause, a larger bolt was slid across and the door opened a forearm's length. Rad squeezed through and the door quickly shut behind him. A gruff hand shoved him forward and into a darkened corridor. 'Turn left an' be quick 'bout it.'

Rad headed for the guttering light. Although he had witnessed many visitors to the fence's premises, he did not know what lay beyond the black doorway, nor had he seen Gangi. And he wouldn't gain much further insight, for the fence kept to the edge of the light and seemed a man of few words.

'You're not from the Guild,' Gangi said at last.

He tugged at a white-specked, scraggly beard and his bushy eyebrows twitched as he contemplated the boy.

'I could take this elsewhere,' Rad answered. 'Anyone would handle something from a sky-ship!'

The man laughed hoarsely. 'You wouldn't be the first to steal from a sky crawler, lad. An' watch your tongue. I could as well slit ye throat and take all what you got.'

'My friends know I'm here,' Rad lied.

'I doubt it,' Gangi said. 'Now gize a look 'ere.' His hand seemed to materialise within the flame's light.

Reluctantly, Rad held out his hand. He watched the fence turn the map upside down and examine it from every angle. Gangi glanced up at Rad and his jawline tightened. 'Doesn't do much, does it? Pretty thing, lights an' all. A baby's trinket no less an' no more.' He threw it casually on the table — too casually, Rad's instinct told him. 'Fifty silver moons and think yerself lucky I don't hand you over to the Thieves' Guild.'

'It's from a *skyship*,' Rad said. 'That makes it

worth something more than a month's pay for vigil watching. I risked my life for it!

The fence contemplated his words. 'You've got spunk,' he said. 'An' I like a boy with spunk. Could be I have need of ye. Other matters, yes, for which a lad of your talents would do just nicely. Tell you what, fer now. Leave said artifact with me overnight. Come back tomorrah and I'll have it all sussed an' priced. Deal.'

Gangi's gnarled hand magically appeared again as though it were a done deal and Rad had no option but to accept the handshake. Fences were unusually honest — they had to be with criminals. Their lives depended on it.

An' leave by the back way. Can't have scab labour seen leaving me honest abode, ye understand'

3. Vindon on the Make

RAD spent the rest of the night and most of the day hidden in a pigeon loft. The birds were fed twice a day — more regularly than many street urchins — so Rad at least managed to get two meals.

Twice during the twilight he saw the City

Watch combing the streets. They could have been searching for more skyscrapers — especially after they found the body of the crewman Rad had pushed from the rooftop. Or they could be looking for him — a deserter.

Rad sank into despondency. He was actually a hero, come to think of it. Not only had he alerted the City Watch, he had also killed a pirate. He wrestled uncomfortably with his conscience. All right, he had not deliberately accomplished either of these acts, but no-one else knew that!

Playing it safe, Rad sneaked across the rooftops like a wraith. Dogs howled at his passing and guard cats hissed at him as he stealthily passed window sills. He waited cautiously above the fence's front door until he was satisfied that it was safe to knock on it.

He grew anxious when there was no reply. Did Gangi think he could get the artifact for nothing just because he was an urchin, rather than a member of the Thieves' Guild? Rad knocked more forcibly.

Someone cursed from three doors down. A

light flared. Rad quickly climbed the wall and squatted on the lichened roofline. What to do? The slate on the roof was rotted through. Without much effort he could gain access to the fence's house, but what then? Threaten him? Not likely. Go to the City Watch? Less likely.

The minutes trickled by, during which time Rad grew more and more annoyed. His mind finally made up, he ripped up some slate. Scanning the roofscape for prying eyes, he dropped down into the roof cavity.

Soon he found the attic trapdoor and silently removed it. Gangi's place was ill-lit, but despite the gloom Rad knew something was wrong. Chairs had been overturned and documents thrown across the breadth of the room. Rad hung there in indecision. What if the perpetrator of this mess was still present?

Dropping to the floor, he almost screeched in fright. Lying contorted on the threadbare carpet was the fence. His head listed at an unusual angle and there was no doubt as to his permanent ill health!

Rad's stomach rose to his throat. He had known

much death in his lifetime on the streets, but never anything as personal, mysterious and violent as this.

He backed out from the room as though fearing the corpse might leap up and grab him. Quickly, he found the room where Gangi had taken him the night before. This too had been gutted. Rad poked through the mess — realising with every passing second that he had lost the precious map and the hope of ever joining the ranks of the Thieves' Guild. Sunk in despair, he was about to leave when he spotted a tarnished sceptre. It was too valuable a piece for whoever had ransacked this place to leave behind, so it had to be fake.

A floorboard creaked and Rad froze. He could imagine all sorts of things moving: rats, giant spiders, feral cats, shifting piles of ancient, mouldy papers. Even a murderer!

Rad turned to leave, but something, some inexplicable intuition, held him back. He released the bellyful of air that he had been holding and gingerly picked up the sceptre. Even in this poor light he could see where the fake gold paint had

flaked away, leaving exposed dull steel. Rad waved it around, hoping at least it might be useful as a makeshift weapon if nothing else.

He stopped in mid-swing. Something was rattling within the sceptre's casing. He shook it gently and listened. Sure enough, he could hear the faint rustling of something. Caution overrode his inquisitiveness so he stuffed the sceptre into his tunic and returned to the room with the attic trapdoor.

Careful not to touch the body of the fence, he righted a chair and climbed up to the ceiling. He had no sooner pulled up his legs when someone screamed a warning from below. 'The bleeder's in the roof!'

With heart in mouth Rad scabbled through the roof. A jagged piece of slate snagged him.

In his fear-crazed mind he thought someone had grabbed him. He kicked with all his might and popped out of the roof with a squeal.

Someone called out in the street. The Thieves' Guild, Rad realised with a start. No other Guildsmen would roam Fences Lane so readily and expertly. Rad leapt across the narrow cobbled

laneway, and like a nimble rat sprang across another chasm to the neighbouring roof.

Something metallic clattered against the brickwork and a gutting knife skittered across the flashing. Rad crab-crawled upwards and slid down the adjacent roof. Behind, curses and oaths were uttered. The roofline was crawling with villains!

But Rad was no ordinary street urchin. He lived on the roofs and knew every shingle and gutter. No-one, but *no-one*, could have followed him with safety.

Even so, some tried. They came scampering across the uneven roofs like crabs, on hands and knees. The wind bit hard and parched Rad's throat — or was fear drying out his mouth? He moved faster. He slipped once or twice, the night's chill on the slates making haste dangerous. All about him guttural voices hissed and spat.

A villain grabbed Rad's foot and he squealed, lashing out with his other foot. The thief cursed loudly, flailed, and fell. His screaming descent bounced eerily between the stone walls.

Rad didn't stop to look back. He was soon lost

among the sloping, hazardous rooftops. Behind him echoed the oaths and curses of the Thieves' Guild as they floundered about in search of him.

Having returned to the pigeon coop, Rad allowed himself a leisurely look at the sceptre. When he finally found the release pin, the sceptre parted down its length, revealing the skyship map. Rad sighed with relief. Finally something had gone right!

He leaned back against the wooden strut of the pigeon coop. The fence had known what the map was, of course. Gangi's mistake had been to confide in someone else; someone who had either killed him, or had hired assassins to do away with him and to steal the map. Then, Rad guessed, Gangi had fallen while trying to escape through the attic trapdoor, thus eluding his killers. They had obviously failed to find the map and had waited for Rad to return.

Rad spent many hours that night studying the map with its shifting graphics. When he finally succumbed to sleep, his dreams became tortured nightmares. He was running, but the

faster he ran the slower he went. It was as though he was wading through gluggy pea soup. He pushed and pushed but finally exhaustion drew him deeper into the mire.

He turned frantically to his pursuers. These were bobbing lights that danced defiantly over the swamp into which Rad found himself sinking. The twinkling lights drew closer till they hovered over him, laughing at his helplessness.

'Save me! Pull me out!' he screamed. But the lights just winked knowingly.

A mass exodus of pigeons woke him from his fitful sleep. At first he thought that the people outside the coop were part of his nightmare.

'Easy,' whispered a rasping voice. 'I know he's in there. The little scratchnik. Don't forget! I get the spotter's fee. His head's mine!'

Rad clutched the sceptre to his chest. He'd get the first one to stick his head in the coop, but that would still leave the others. He fingered his dirk — a mere pig-sticker! Not a hope against these odds! Without further hesitation he flew out of the coop, much as the pigeons had moments before.

'Get him!' someone screeched.

Rad half-fell, half-climbed down a rusting drainpipe. A short sword swirled past his head and twanged into the crumbling wall. Its deadly intent lent impetus to Rad's escape, but his pursuers, less hardy or roof-wise, decided not to follow. One threw caution to the wind and gripped the already weakened drainpipe. Its wall bracket screeched loudly.

Rad clung to the brickwork as the thief dropped screaming past him. He had thirty seconds headstart on the other thieves, who were now yelling venomous threats. Taking off across the cobblestones, Rad ducked around the vendors as they set up their stalls. With split-second timing, he glanced about and then hurried up to his aunt's second-floor apartment.

He fumbled above the lintel. The key! It was always there! He tried again, both hands patting the dusty ledge. Not there! Where had the old biddy put it? He spun around and pushed his back against the door, frantic with indecision.

Something prodded him. He jerked around. The key! His aunt had left it in the lock. Rad

sighed with relief, turned it, then entered the small apartment and locked the door.

He fled to the window and scanned the street below for pursuit. There appeared to be none. The Order of the Humble was causing its own turmoil, though. The improbable sect members walked backwards wherever they went, for they believed in loss of ego and leaving behind all possessions. They wanted for nothing, and owned nothing. Walking backwards seemed to cause more problems than it solved, to Rad's mind.

It was said that the ancient sect descended from the Hamil. Rad hoped this wasn't true. How would he feel knowing that his own lineage had something to do with such a pack of wastrels?

So intent was he on watching the spectacle below, Rad did not see Vindon Nibhelline cross the street and storm into the stairwell. The sudden pounding on the door left no doubt in his mind that he had been caught day-dreaming. He recognised Vindon's voice demanding he open the door. That was partly good news. At least he wasn't going to be killed. Roughed up a little, perhaps, and the sceptre

and its cargo would definitely be stolen.

How had Vindon become involved in this? It was definitely him — Rad would recognise that braying voice anywhere. A voice belonging to someone who always got what he wanted. Rad's mind spun. Was Vindon Nibhelline involved with the Thieves' Guild? More likely he had heard that Rad had something valuable and he wanted his share.

Rad looked anxiously down at the two-storey drop below. Did he *really* want to break both legs to escape?

From beyond the door Vindon yelled, 'You're a gutless wonder, Raddy!' in his hee-hawing voice. 'Come out and fight like a man!'

It made Rad fume with impotence. A gutless wonder, gah! The thug was only twice his size! If his friend Hulk Duelp had been there, he would gladly confront Vindon. But then again, if Hulk were present, Vindon wouldn't have dared come to his aunt's door in the first place.

The drop was only two storeys, Rad told himself. But the last time he had jumped, he had torn the sausage vendor's canvas awning. A solid

hiding from the merchant and the loss of two months' pay from vigil watching had taught him one thing—jumping from windows to elude a bully was not advisable.

Still, monetary loss and a strapping from a sausage merchant paled into insignificance next to losing the map *and* getting thumped by Vindon Nibhelline. He looked again at the bustling street below. According to some, yesterday had been the day of the Donkey. Donkeys kicked when least expected. He eyed the door. It seemed to be imploding from Vindon's sledgehammer thumps. Would a donkey care about facing such a monster? Probably not. In the short term, the donkey would remain unscathed. But of course, anyone suffering humiliation from a kicking might exact their revenge.

And the day of the Donkey had been yesterday, not today.

All of these things raced through Rad's mind as Vindon ranted and raged behind the shuddering door.

Rad quickly scanned the map in his shaking hands. The fiftieth reading of it gave no more

insight about its authenticity than the other forty-nine. It was a map of the rift caves — more importantly, *one* particular rift cave. A rocky fissure etched into the granite high up in the cliff known as the Scar. Few, if any, adventurers bothered with it, because there were many more accessible rift caves than this one.

Rad squinted again. The winking lights were indecipherable — of course, if they were centuries old, that was understandable. He mumbled the spidery words that were scrawled in squid ink in the margin of the map. All the while came the poundings on the door, punctuated by unspeakable oaths.

In the time before the Crull swept across the desert like a plague of locusts and laid waste the venerable northern cities of H'lice, Vrilotol and Matrine, and long before the dark plague that made day into night—long before all these things — there lived a Race called the Hamil.

Such was their power, no blight dark—ened their world; no warlord, no being

neither natural nor unnatural could usurp them. So godly were the Hamil that they visited this world at whim and treated its people as their own.

Till this day they can be spied in the night skies, winking their eyes at the follies of their subjects, the people of Quentaris.

Mere mortals be warned: a creature of terrible power stands guard within the Scar. Unleash its fury at your own peril — for only one of virtue who passes the three tests may reclaim the legacy of the Hamil.

Rad looked up from the map. The door caved in, and Vindon Nibhelline tumbled through the shattered doorway.

Rad threw the sceptre at Vindon and, without waiting to check the accuracy of his aim, scrambled over the window sill and jumped. The awning saved him once again. The sausage vendor's eyes popped as his stall became enveloped by canvas. 'I'll kill you!' he threatened as Rad untangled himself and limped into the gathered crowd.

Torn between saving his sausages from the ravenous peasants and their even more ravenous dogs, the sausage merchant, livid with rage, threw a salami at Rad. Someone from the crowd reached out for it before it could hit its victim and the crowd surged forward.

Rad thanked his lucky gods a moment too soon. He couldn't resist a glance at the irate vendor as the crowds flocked to his shattered stall. In those seconds someone crept up behind him and suddenly dragged him backwards and up. He kicked air and went nowhere.

'Gotcha!' rasped a voice.

Rad kicked backwards with all his might. His left foot missed the man's shin, but the right didn't and Rad dropped to the ground. He spun to face his assailant. It wasn't Vindon Nibhelline. Rad looked over the man's shoulder. Two of his accomplices were scattering people in their haste to reach him. Rad took flight.

Like all good street urchins, Rad knew the alleyways almost as well as he did the rooftops. He flew through a fishmonger's cart, exacting oaths of revenge, and kept running. Coffin Alley was

perhaps the best in which to hide, since the more superstitious citizens believed that you only entered Coffin Alley in a casket. Certainly the Undertakers' Guild did their best to keep that particular legend alive.

Panting, and dearly in need of time to think, Rad hid behind a row of exquisitely designed coffins. He knew one of his followers by face only. He was a member of the Thieves' Guild. It followed, of course, that his companions were also Guild members. Surely the map was worth more than he could ever have imagined!

Ever since he had gained possession of the wretched map he had been on the run. The fact that the fence had been killed for it spoke volumes. Now *he* was on someone's death list. Vindon Nibhelline was obviously a lackey paid to apprehend him. The Nibhellines' arch-enemies, the Duelpths, would grant him sanctuary, but then he would be a political pawn. Offering the map to the Thieves' Guild was no longer an option.

The map was a magical object of considerable value — which made Rad uncomfortable. Magic

had a habit of creating disaster, especially in the hands of a commoner.

A scraping sound intensified until it drowned his befuddled thoughts. Rad barely had time to fold the map and hide it within his tunic before the standing coffins in front of him toppled like dominoes. He scurried out from behind them as the last casket thundered to the ground.

An undertaker dressed in black screamed abuse at him. All along Coffin Alley figures wearing voluminous dark robes left their parlours to join in the pursuit.

Rad scurried up a drainpipe, clawed his way across the shingled roof of an inn's stables, and dropped down onto a haystack. Fleeing across the dark, half-mucked stables he blindly stood on a fallen pitchfork. Snapping up like a sprung trap, it knocked Rad clean off his feet.

He woke moments later when a bucket of water was thrown over his face. The world spun in lazy circles and he closed his eyes immediately. The spinning stopped, but the next bucket of water didn't.

'Call the City Watch,' a gruff voice commanded.

'I'll explain,' Rad spluttered. 'My head!' Then instinctively he clutched at his chest to ensure the map was still beneath his tunic. It wasn't. He collapsed back and groaned.

'Enough of the theatrics,' growled the voice. 'Explain yourself, and fast.'

Rad forced his eyes open. He tried to blend five images into one. Finally, he settled on two of the images and spoke to both of them. 'I fell from the roof,' he explained, waving in the general direction of the guttering.

'Running from the Undertakers' Guild,' the double-image said. 'I saw them looking this way and that. Was it your mother who crossed to the afterlife? Your father?'

Rad took a big breath. 'I couldn't just let them put poor mama in an unmarked grave,' he whispered. 'She deserved better.'

'Bloodsuckers,' the voice said.

'That they are,' Rad said, rubbing his eyes. He pushed his fingers against his pupils and forced the two images into one. As he had thought, it was the lean stables' manager, old Stanas, himself. Craggy, stooped, and somewhat addled, he hadn't

recognised Rad. Unfortunately, his new stable-hand, the leather-aproned Tulcia, had. She stood there, fiery red hair all ablaze and her freckled face looking pinched and wary.

'I'll take the poor boy out front and let him go,' Tulcia said, 'shall I?'

Old Stanas nodded distractedly. The two white tufts of hair on his otherwise bald pate flapped like wings. 'Be off with you boy, and mind, next time you'll be handed over to the Watch. Blood-suckers or not, all manner of merchants deserve to be paid for their toil.'

'Thank you, Stanas,' Rad said. He quickly realised his mistake and allowed Tulcia to steer him through the stables.

'My luck must be changing,' Rad mumbled, realising how close he had come to joining his friend Hulk Duelph in Lord Chalm's dungeons.

I don't think so,' Tulcia said. She waved the rolled map regally.

'You give that back!' Rad demanded.

Not only was Tulcia built like a brick outhouse, but once her mind was made up, nothing and no-one, changed it. Rad's futile attempts at

wrestling it from her were met with ill-contained merriment. 'Try snatching it one more time Rad de La'rel and I'll swat you as I would a dung fly.'

'It's mine,' Rad said miserably.

'You probably filched it.'

'Didn't.'

'Did.'

'Even if I did, it still means it's mine. Possession is nine-tenths of the law.'

'It's mine,' Tulcia said. 'If possession is nine-tenths of the law.'

Rad frowned. He couldn't argue with that reasoning, since it was his, after all.

Tulcia waved the map like a wand. It's a strange piece of magicked parchment, all faint and flickering.' She regarded him evenly. 'Yet you care for it like it was valuable.'

'It was my dear mother's,' Rad said. 'It's the only thing I have left of her.'

'You're a motherless street urchin, Rad de La'rel. Tell me one more lie and I'll knock you on the head.' She ran a critical eye over the map. 'By the look of it, it's a map of the mountains. Perhaps even the caves themselves. But much of it is

missing. Make all the lights shine.' She handed the map to him. 'And if you run you'll be sorry you did.'

Crestfallen, Rad admitted that he was as dumbfounded as she. Tulcia snatched back the faintly glowing map. She frowned at its milky interior. 'It's probably a fake, anyway.' She looked up at the mountain, and could barely see the Scar — a pencil-fine fissure in the cliff face above Quentaris. 'Everyone knows that the Scar is so narrow that no-one could fit into it. Besides, no-one can get to it. Save birds and the like.'

'Land moves,' Rad said with little authority. 'Over centuries, what might seem small now could have been large once. Oceans get smaller and continents come closer—sometimes joining and becoming one.'

Tulcia rolled her eyes then inspected Rad's head. 'Nasty bump.'

'If it's a fake,' Rad said impatiently, 'then why would someone bother to make it? That writing is one of the old languages, and the strange parchment—it's a rare and skilled piece of work, make no

mistake of it. No-one but a master magician could have made that thing.'

'You'd get life in Lord Chalm's dungeons for even talking about this,' Tulcia said. 'But that aside, why do you think anyone would want to go to the Scar? To gain *what!*'

This had Rad stumped. When in doubt, let your tongue loose. 'Perhaps there's a creature up there that needs to be fed. Perhaps human sacrifices were made to it by the Hamil. When they left, there were no more sacrifices so they circulated the scroll to ensure a steady flow of humans to its lair.'

'Teh!' Tulcia sighed. 'Don't you suppose that there's *treasure* to be found?'

'There must be a treasure otherwise the creature wouldn't be guarding anything.' Rad gingerly touched his head in search of wet blood. Lucidly it had congealed and his wound was now simply a throbbing headache. 'If there was nothing to guard, then it would be free to come down into Quentaris and get its fill of sacrificial virgins.'

'You're either as stupid as they say or you're a

genius,' Tulcia said. And please, forget the sacrificial virgin bit. You sound really childish.'

'Just give it back to me,' Rad said. 'I don't need your help.'

'Oh yes you do.'

Rad followed Tulcia's gaze and groaned.

Vindon Nibhelline spat into his plate-sized hands. His head was bandaged and he didn't look happy about it. 'I'm coming for you, Raddy.'

'This isn't right,' Rad said. I don't even have the artifact and I'm still having bad luck!'

'It just changed,' Tulcia said, shoving him behind her and wrenching a pitchfork from a silage pit.

'I have no quarrel with you, Tulcia,' Vindon cajoled. He stood in combat mode, feet shoulder-width apart and his hands just wider. He was armed, but had to fight for his confidence—he knew Tulcia's reputation only too well.

Tulcia looked at the tiny blade in Vindon's hand and smiled. 'Come and get it, Vindon.' Her red-hued eyes went wild. She stalked forward. 'Let's play, Vinny. Just you and me!' She waved the pitchfork like a scythe.

That was enough for Vindon. He fled the courtyard. Tulcia hefted the pitchfork like a javelin but the gesture was wasted on Vindon's scurrying back. 'I'll be back, Horseface!' he yelled from a safe distance.

Tulcia prodded the air with two fingers. 'Dung beetle!' she screamed after him. She turned to Rad, who was still cowering behind her, his face chalk-white. 'Now where were we?' Her face lightened. 'That's right. The Scar. How do you think we'll get in there?'

4. Rad's New Accomplice

WE? Rad queried, holding out his hand for the map clenched firmly in Tulcia's hand. If I needed partners I'd call on my own.'

Aiyee!' Tulcia said through clenched teeth. She stared thoughtfully at the pitchfork that until just recently had been pointed at Vindon Nibhelline. 'You would rather have street rats snapping at your heels, would you?' She stuffed the map inside her leather jerkin.

'Now, with just the right amount of wheedling, I *might* invite you to join me on this adventure. Not as a partner, mind, more a companion.'

'It's *my* map!' Rad said hotly.

'Possession is —'

'That's not what it means,' Rad interrupted. Monstered by Tulcia's size and determination, Rad simmered. 'Look, it's probably a lot of old codswallop, you know? Some ancient got bored and decided to play a trick. I bet there are hundreds of trick maps waiting to be discovered by some wide-eyed idiot just dying to be conned into some perilous adventure.'

'Is that what you are?' Tulcia raised an eyebrow. 'A wide-eyed idiot just dying —'

'I stole it from a skyship,' Rad said reluctantly. No way would Tulcia believe *that*.

But Tulcia's eyes widened in admiration. 'Perhaps you're not such a wastrel after all.' She considered for a moment. 'Was it the ship that was driven off last night?'

Rad nodded, thinking of his narrow escape and the death of the pirate.

'Well, well, well,' Tulcia said, foot tapping, and a smile spread across her freckled face. 'This sheds a whole new light on the matter. No wonder Vindon Nibhelline is after you. But what made you steal a faulty piece of shiny parchment from a skyship? Surely there were more precious things to steal! Gems? Weapons?'

Rad took a deep breath and related how he had visited Gangi and subsequently found the fence murdered, presumably for the map. No way was he going to impart the news that the Thieves' Guild was also after him—or that the City Watch might be, too.

'Then you'll need all the help you can get, won't you?'

'Okay,' Rad said, resigned. 'We'll be partners, but I give the orders. When is my bad luck going to end?' he moaned.

'Keep that up, Raddy, and your bad luck will have only just begun ...'

Preparations for the adventure began in earnest. A trip to the rift caves was not to be rushed. Many adventurers spent days gathering sup-

plies, weapons, good-luck amulets and a host of accoutrements to assist in their pilgrimage. On leaving civilisation as they knew it, some adventurers had going-away ceremonies — the more affluent of them even hired a band to see them off.

Rad used the Nibhelline clan as his reason for hiding in the stables — unbeknown to old Stanas — while Tulcia performed the arduous chore of buying provisions. So far as Rad was concerned, they couldn't leave early enough.

However, Vindon Nibhelline was a dangerous enemy to make. As a member of one of the two main political parties in Quentaris, he not only had friends in high places, but in low places as well.

Had Rad known of the mysterious ways of the highborn, he would not have stayed overlong in the stables. His safety lay in the grounds he knew best, the slate and shingle rooftops.

He was an easy catch for the likes of the Thieves' Guild. Their accomplishments included raiding Lord Chalm's bedchambers while he slept, robbing the Duelphs and placing the

stolen goods in Nibhelline hands to cause civil unrest, and wresting the very eyepiece from the sculpture over the gates to the Cathedral of the Holy Benefactor Mushin.

Rad tossed in his sleep. He had slept on worse floors than the hay-strewn loft, but the straw kept prickling his back, and he found it impossible to keep it from tickling his nose. Down below a horse whinnied and snorted. Another horse further along stamped its hoofs. Something skittered across the slate roof. Rats don't come that big, Rad's drowsy mind told him.

He sat up groggily. This was impossible. How much easier it would have been for Tulcia to have smuggled him next door into the Old Tree Guesthouse. They always had vacant rooms. At worst he could have hidden in the cosy attic.

He looked out through a gaping hole beneath an eave. His befuddled mind told him that something wasn't right. Was someone sneaking across the Old Tree's roof? He rubbed his eyes but the apparition had disappeared.

Rad crawled closer to the hole and peered out. Nothing moved. Smoke from several chimneys

lingered until the night breeze caught it and carried it off. Maybe he had imagined it. No local would dare try to rob the owner of the Old Tree Guesthouse. Arna was a formidable person to cross. And outsiders would find their throats slit if they dared rob anyone without the Thieves' Guild's consent.

Sudden realisation brought him fully awake. That meant only one thing!

Before the 'one thing' solidified for him, someone threw a sack over his head. He kicked and scratched, but a sudden blow to the head knocked him senseless. He was suffocating inside the hessian sack, but that wasn't the worst of his problems, his failing mind told him. A cloth of herbs was being rammed against his nose. Almost at once he lost consciousness.

5. Rad on the Run

RAD woke to the sound of whispering voices. One of them uttered a password. Even though dazed, Rad realised that anyone speaking nonsense like 'It's an ill wind that blows from the west', was seeking admission somewhere. A harsh voice replied, 'From the *south*, dolt!'

'It's the *west*!' came a sharp reply. 'Anyway, you know me! It's Le'ard. Now open the door before I kick it down!'

Rad's mind reeled. Only thieves would have ridiculous passwords and then argue about them. He'd been abducted by the Thieves' Guild!

A door opened and Rad's head bumped against the jamb as his abductors entered the establishment. Rad uttered a muted yowl, but the numbness from the herb pack saved him from the more intense pain that he might otherwise have felt.

He bumped against someone's back as they starting climbing up a flight of winding stairs. He was upside down, he now realised. No wonder his head felt numb with dizziness!

The person carrying him shrugged and Rad rose and fell within the sack. 'Giz us a hand,' grumbled a muffled voice. 'He's a heavy one.'

Rad felt his neck muscles grind as his head was shoved at an odd angle. His mind screamed out in agony, but he kept his hurt there. Whatever was to come, he might need an element of surprise.

Finally his assailants reached even footing. A balcony, Rad realised, trying desperately to

remember all the twists and turns but finally acknowledging that he would be truly lost in this place.

Another door squeaked open and a rush of voices broke out.

'Up-end him, then!' someone said.

Rad cushioned his head with his hands and rolled as the sack hit the floorboards. Hands grabbed and pulled at it, and Rad let himself fall limply to the ground.

'Our little sparrow plays games,' said a familiar voice. It was the one who had been carrying him.

'Unless you gave him too large a dose of hockshead,' a querulous voice grumbled. 'We've not got all night, Le'ard.'

'Bloodletting always wakes them in a hurry,' said Le'ard. 'Around the throat does the trick fastest.'

Rad heard the rasp of a sword. The sack was suddenly removed and he was on his back looking up at a yellow light flickering from a candle-wheel that hung from distant rafters. Rad blinked in confusion.

The room erupted into laughter which was cut

short abruptly when a wispy-bearded villain dressed in a black robe slashed the air with his hands. He was the only one seated and the others — six of them — seemingly revered him. The underlings were a motley crew, each sporting gross tattoos, scarred faces and other oddities such as missing ears, livid skin and eyepatches.

'Now little one,' the seated thief began sibilantly. 'You have a treasure that belongs to us.'

Rad willed his heart to stop pounding his ribs. He swallowed hard and forced his parched mouth to speak. 'It's mine. It's my inheritance.'

Le'ard aimed a kick at him but the master thief coughed almost politely. Le'ard drew back his foot but his glare struck harder than any boot.

'That is a very interesting concept,' the master thief said. He inspected his fingernails and, having found something to his disliking, nicked at it with a dirk. 'Since it was in Gangi's possession, it belonged to him. And since we pledged a bid and there were no other takers, I feel the item belongs to us.'

There were cries of vehement agreement.

While this exchange was taking place, Rad's mind raced. One door. No windows. The rafters high above offered some hope, but with no ladder he would never reach them. Seven thieves. No chance of escape. But he had a trick up his sleeve.

He swallowed saliva. 'The fence never paid me for the map. Nor did I seek recompense. I wanted it solely to join the Thieves' Guild. Gangi—'

Several thieves began disputing Rad's words at once. It took the master thief several seconds to restore order by repeatedly thumping the haft of his dirk on the table. 'Let the boy have his say!' His thin scabrous lips curved in a quick smile. 'I find him amusing.'

Rad tried to compose himself. There was no good reason why he should try stalling, for his predicament was all but hopeless. Still, he clung to some hope that the master thief might have pity on him.

'You were saying?' the man prompted.

'I told Gangi of my hopes to join your ranks, myself being guildless.' Rad faltered when several thieves cursed beneath their breath. 'He said he

would do his best and present the map to you as a token of my ability to steal.'

'You stole without the consent of the Thieves' Guild?' the master thief said. 'That in itself is a serious crime against the Guild.'

'I seized an opportunity that gave no chance to seek permission, honoured thief,' Rad grovelled in a quavering voice.

And yet you ran from my colleagues when they sought its whereabouts?'

'I was not to know who was on the premises, nor who killed Gangi—' Rad began.

'Why, you little rat!' Le'ard snapped. '*You* did him in!'

It would have turned ugly then but again the master thief demanded order. This time he rose from his chair and cursed loudly at the others for silence. When at last he had commanded everyone's attention, he went to Rad and hefted him up on to the table top.

'My men would string you up by your feet and bleed the life out of you till you divulged the map's whereabouts.'

The master thief circled the table as Rad stood

beneath the flickering lights of the chandelier. The other thieves fanned out as though knowing what to expect next.

'I myself,' the master thief continued solemnly, 'am averse to wanton bloodshed. Therefore I will ask you a series of questions. Every time you lie, someone will deal you a blow. My first question is this: if we didn't kill Gangi, and you say *you* didn't, then who did?'

'I—' Rad flinched knowing what was to come. 'How should I know?'

A fist slammed into his thigh, instantly corking it. Pain flared up his leg and Rad flailed his arms to keep his balance.

'I ask the questions, street urchin,' the master thief continued. 'I have already summoned the person I feel responsible for Gangi's death.' He stopped in front of Rad. 'The only question I need really ask you is this — and please consider it carefully before answering — where is the map now?'

Rad's mind froze. Tulcia had the map. She was a keen scrapper, but against the likes of the Thieves' Guild she wouldn't have a chance.

Another fist slammed into his thigh. This time he toppled from the table but quick hands caught him and pushed him back up. He reached out for the chandelier to steady himself.

Candle wax spilled and scorched his scalp. He clenched his teeth at the pain.

'I forgot to tell you,' the master thief said casually. 'You have ten seconds with which to carefully consider the question. I shall ask again: where is the map?'

'The stables!' Rad cried. 'It's in the stables.'

The master thief shook his head as one of his minions went to strike Rad in the thigh. 'It might well be,' he said almost to himself. 'My men are searching them as we speak.' He wagged a finger at Rad. 'I should have been more precise with my question. *Exactly* where is the map right now?'

Rad sniffed back his tears. It wouldn't matter what he told them. They would soon find out that he was lying. And if he told the truth, they would simply kill Tulcia as well, and anyone who sought to help her, like Stanas, or Arna.

Suddenly a commotion downstairs made the master thief pause. 'I believe Vindon Nibhelline

has arrived.' He signed for Le'ard to fetch him upstairs, but before the thief could move, the door burst open.

Vindon had arrived, all right, but he was not alone. He had brought half his clan with him.

The thieves drew their shortswords and daggers as more frenzied shouts erupted from the vestibule. The thieves' house was alive with scurrying figures. Somewhere a thief bell rang stridently.

Vindon rushed into the room and his men surged behind him. No-one dared make the first move. At such close quarters a bloodbath would ensue. Vastly outnumbered, the Nibhellines were clearly not here for serious trouble. It only took Rad a second to realise just why Vindon *was* here. And it wasn't because the Thieves' Guild had summoned him — the Nibhellines virtually ruled Quentaris, even if the Thieves' Guild refused to acknowledge the fact.

Seizing the moment, Rad closed his eyes against the dripping candle wax, bent his knees and sprang, hooking his feet around the wrought-iron frame of the chandelier.

The room pitched with uncertain light as the candles spluttered and spat. One fell and a thief cursed. Rad had no time to think about the confusion down in the room. More deftly than he could expect, he pulled himself through the chandelier and squeezed past the thick chains that held it.

'After him!' someone cried.

Rad kicked at more candles. The light shimmered then died. Someone panicked and attacked an opponent who retaliated immediately. Clashing swords obliterated further talk.

Hand over hand, Rad pulled himself up the ceiling chain until he passed a sizeable rafter. With some effort he swung the chandelier left, then right. Gaining a little momentum he finally let go and clutched at the wooden beam. His leg throbbed but the after-effects of the herb pack dulled the pain.

He crawled along the joist. There was a dull thud beside him and a wicked blade jutted from a beam a hand's width from his face. He scabbled faster. Behind him someone was mounting the chandelier. Agile and experienced, his pursuer

climbed the chain and ran along the joist with the confidence of a rat.

Below, the clashing of swords intensified. It seemed reinforcements for both parties had arrived. Rad squeezed through a narrow structure. He wriggled through the tiniest spaces, praying feverishly that his pursuer might get stuck.

Rad crab-crawled sideways through a wall cavity. Cobwebs cloaked him like a veil, but whatever venomous spiders they housed, nothing could be worse than what he was escaping.

Finally he saw moonlight ahead. A skylight! The battle dimmed as he left one section of the thieves' house and emerged over the threshold of another room. He stood quickly. The joist crossing beneath the skylight was barely wide enough to cross, but if he doubted his balancing ability, his pursuer's appearance made up his mind.

'Gotcha!' a gravelly voice crowed.

Rad was yanked backwards. He cried out as his feet trod air. He stared helplessly at Le'ard, whose face twisted with sadistic delight.

'Could let you drop, urchin.' His grip on Rad's collar loosened and Rad dropped several inches. 'The map. Where is it?'

'I'm falling!' Rad gasped. 'Help me!'

Le'ard's eyes sparkled. 'The map!' he snarled.

Rad's feet beat in mid-air. He reached up and grabbed the joist with his right hand. Surprisingly the thief allowed him this brief respite, and that was his undoing.

Rad swung his left hand up and caught the thief by his own collar. Rad tugged while propelling himself up.

Le'ard uttered a startled yell and lost his balance. He barely caught hold of the joist as he swung out over the room.

Rad clawed himself up and sat panting, his legs straddling the timber. Beside him, Le'ard reached up and gained a better purchase on the joist.

Then the door below swung open.

'Here!' a voice called. 'He's in here!'

Rad stood quickly. With his arms out wide to balance himself, he made it to the skylight. He barely acknowledged the fact that Le'ard had

now hooked a leg over the joist and was pulling himself up.

Rad ripped a piece from his shirt and wrapped it around his knuckles. He punched the glass three times before it shattered. Shards fell like raining knives.

'Back! Back!' someone screamed below.

Rad hoisted himself up over the lip. He was vaguely aware of how sticky his hands were as he pushed himself down the steep, saw-toothed roof. He slid faster and faster on the seat of his pants.

Le'ard appeared through the skylight then howled and fell back down below the roofline.

Rad hit the guttering with the impact of a runaway cart. The gutter gave way and shattered on the street below. Catching hold of some spouting, Rad held on as that too began to buckle with his weight. Slowly, but gaining momentum, it thundered down to the laneway.

Rad picked himself up, dazed and battered, but far from safe. Even now he could hear the sound of pursuers on the roof. He hobbled as

fast as his numb thigh and new injuries would allow, and within minutes had climbed a set of rusting fire-escape stairs. He was on his home territory again—the rooftops.

6. The Scar

RAD took a circuitous route back to the Old Tree Guesthouse. It seemed that every thief and Nibhelline had been roused to search for him. The City Watch, apparently on full alert, were also stalking the narrow laneways, questioning anyone they came across.

Rad eased himself on to a window ledge and tapped gently on the leadlight. He was about to knock more forcibly when the window opened suddenly.

Rad's hands windmilled as the window struck him. "Tulcia! It's me!" He caught the frame and hung precariously over the laneway.

Tulcia rubbed her weary eyes. 'What are you doing out there in the middle of the night?'

'Trying to get in,' Rad seethed. 'Help me. Please.'

Tulcia reached out and dragged him in. After taking a quick look outside, she closed the window and drew the curtains. Now fully awake, she lit an oil lamp. She turned to berate him for waking her but the words caught in her mouth. 'Rad! What's happened to your shirt? And the *blood!* It's all over you!'

Rad felt the room turn in lazy circles. 'All of that,' he agreed. 'And I suspect half of Quentaris is after me, too.'

Tulcia went to the washbasin and poured in some water from a pitcher. 'While you tell me everything we should look at your hand.' She

frowned crossly. 'And don't get blood all over the sheets. Arna charges for stains.'

While Tulcia washed and dressed Rad's slashed hand, he related how the Thieves' Guild had abducted him and taken him to their headquarters. Tulcia listened intently, and although she shook her head from time to time, she kept quiet until Rad had finished his tale.

'Right,' she said. 'We're not sure what game Vinny's playing, but you say he somehow found out that Gangi had the map. You think he probably arrived at the fence's place with several heavies, only Gangi was one step ahead of him and tried escaping through the ceiling. But Gangi was too old for such work, and fell and broke his scrawny neck. When Vinny couldn't find the map, he left, or maybe fled when the Thieves' Guild turned up. Either way, it looks like he set you up by letting it be known where you were holed up.'

Rad stopped kneading his injured thigh. 'But that doesn't make sense. If he knew where I was, why didn't he and his men get me themselves?'

'Maybe the lesser of two evils,' Tulcia surmised.

'Stanias may be old, but he's a water magician. No-one in their right mind would willingly cross him. He can dry out anyone's well — cause droughts and ruin crops. No, easier to let the Thieves' Guild kidnap you, then waylay them. Only something went wrong.'

Rad clicked his fingers. 'The master thief had sent his men to fetch Vindon. Maybe he himself was waylaid, and had to call in reinforcements.'

Tulcia pouted in thought. It doesn't matter. Suffice to say you now have some powerful enemies.'

She pulled the curtains aside and peeped out at the pencil-fine light on the horizon. 'Well, I'll not be getting back to sleep now. And you won't either.' She sighed heavily. 'Now's as good a time as any to get going.' She turned to face the sorry-looking Rad. 'Are you up to it?'

"What about provisions? Horses? Weapons?"

Tulcia shook her head. 'What do you think I've been doing these past two days?' She reached under her bed and fetched out two leather bags. 'I'm ready when you are. No way will the Thieves' Guild expect you to return to the

stables. And if they do, they had better look out.'

Rad smiled weakly. He had no doubt that whoever tackled Tulcia right now would come off second best.

The rift caves. The cliffs were full of them. Some of them were tiny apertures in the granite through which doorways to other worlds opened and shut as they pleased. Others were large enough for the pirates to launch their airborne ships from.

Some adventurers returned wealthy beyond compare, while others returned mad. Some simply didn't return; others opened the way for hordes of rampaging creatures. These were met by the army at the Last and First Station.

The regulars were supplemented by the City Watch. This was a voluntary militia whose ranks mostly comprised those just turned eighteen winters. Many saw this stint as an excellent start in life, for their coffers were fuelled by funds deposited by swordsmen and other adventurers who sought admission to the rift caves. It was also known that soldiers who saved wealthy adven-

turers from the caves were recompensed handsomely, but perhaps these were only myths. It was not uncommon for nobility to come to Quentaris in search of excitement.

Tulcia stood back from her horse, Aspen Gold, and counted off her supplies. '... rope, grappling hooks, flint, candles, food, skin bags, dagger, Whispering Amber — my longsword,' she added for Rad's information, 'amulet of Rys,' she said, fingering the good-luck charm hanging around her neck, 'and of course the map.'

'You've done well,' Rad said. Although I'm not sure about naming your *sword*.'

'More fool you,' Tulcia said, mounting up. 'It is said in the legends of Crull the Conqueror that giving your sword a birthright forms a bond between mortal and steel.' She snorted when Rad buckled a sword to his hip. 'Even if it *is* a borrowed sword.'

'Those tales are so much codswallop,' Rad said, unperturbed. He gingerly straddled the steed Tulcia had lent him — a pedigree with blue-blooded lineage, according to his new friend. 'Night-time stories to send children to sleep.'

Everyone knows that unless a magician channels magic through steel, a sword is a sword is a sword.'

Tulcia smiled cryptically. Her hand rested on the pommel of Whispering Amber. 'As it so happens,' she said, digging stirrup into flank, "Whispering Amber was my poor deceased father's. He was once a rift cave guide — back in the days before the pompous guides got more people killed than they saved.'

'So you're saying your father was famous. Not as famous as the legendary Nathine, I bet! She never lost a client. She — '

But Tulcia was already putting distance between them. Rad cursed beneath his breath and strove to close the gap. Despite his eagerness to match Tulcia's independence, he was coming to realise that without her alliance, he would not have had a hope of accomplishing this adventure. The girl had already proven herself to be a formidable fighter. Still, without him, she would never have had the opportunity to follow in her father's footsteps — an ambition she had no doubt secretly harboured all her life.

Rad drove his heels into his mount's flanks. How come *she* was leading the way?

But foreboding soon sank Rad's spirits like water dousing a fire. It was barely after cockcrow and the eddying Quentaran fog curled around their horses' fetlocks as though chaining them to the dank flagstones. The air itself was damp and rain-laden. The horses, perhaps sensing some ominous portent, seemed reluctant to drag their weary legs across the cobbled streets.

Rad suspected on more than one occasion that they were being followed. Not only by Vindon Nibhelline, but by others too. Rad scoured the rooftops for telltale signs. But no, these people were professionals. The Thieves' Guild had probably kept watch on the stables. Or maybe their pursuers were from the Murderers' Guild?

As they wove their way through the maze-like backstreets and laneways, Rad imagined all kinds of horrific ambushes that lay in wait: poisoned arrows fired from any number of grimy windows, hair-fine wire strung across the lanes to decapitate the unwary rider, cutthroats ready to lunge out at them from behind piles of refuse rotting in

the gutters. Alarm spread through him like poison.

He hunched forward and spurred his horse again but the sudden canter was little comfort. Rad felt that he was hastening to meet his doom.

Although Tulcia knew the surest and safest way to the rift caves, it took them the best part of the morning to reach the thick granite walls manned by the army. It seemed that no thoroughfare was safe from the prying eyes of the Thieves' Guild and the Nibhelline family, who in fact owned entire slabs of Quentaris.

'Hail!' said Tulcia to the fresh-faced guards.

The guards, in bronzed-leather cuirasses, swaggered over, appraising the latest adventurers. There was no set fee for entering the rift caves; each adventurer was assessed as to how much they could afford. The red-haired girl and her street rat companion appeared to be slim pickings.

'Nice horse,' one of them said to Tulcia. The other barely glanced at Rad's old stallion. 'Two gold royals plus your horses if you don't return within a week,' the first one bargained.

The chill air snatched at Tulcia's throat. She

glanced at Rad before replying. 'His horse if we don't return within the week.'

'Wait on!' Rad said. 'Randoff's a purebred. He sired Misty Oak, winner of the Quentaran Cup three times running! Didn't he, Tulcia?'

One of the guards raised an eyebrow. 'When was that?'

At Tulcia's silence, Rad said, 'It was a while ago, maybe. But still, the bloodline is there.'

'This hack hasn't bred in a long time, is too old even for dog food and I doubt a learner's school would waste agistment on him,' the second guard replied. 'Both horses, and two gold royals.'

While Rad glared at her for her deceit, Tulcia closed her eyes in concentration. 'Both our horses if we don't return within three days. That's the best we can do. Gold royals — aiye! — are out of the question. Where would we get gold royals?' She squinted and leaned forward in her saddle. 'You're new recruits, aren't you? Perhaps you should call the regulars so we can sort this out.'

The conscripts exchanged fleeting glances. 'Right you are! Sign here,' one of them said, indicating an 'x' on a piece of parchment.

Tulcia signed her name where it said 'horses'. 'You must have quite a stable,' she said wryly.

The guard snatched the parchment and quill from her and passed them to Rad for his signature. 'Horses are decoys. When the likes of you release evil from the rifts, we send in the horses first. While the rift creatures let loose their usual blood-bath, we flank them and attack. Works every time.'

Tulcia blanched. She had better return within three days. If her father's best mare was turned into alien fodder, she had better stay in the rift cave. As for Rad's, *it* would be on its way to the knackery any day now.

'Away you go,' the guard said. 'Three days, mind. Not a moment more. Stay undercover where you can — the Zolka are about.'

'The Zolka!' Tulcia scoffed and grinned at Rad. 'My partner's more than a match for them, hey, Rad?' She laughed at the guard's puzzled look and dug heels to flanks.

Together, the adventurers cantered up the winding path. They passed Elfin Cave, Deadly Cave, Lucky-dip Cave, and a host of others with

outlandish names. They rode past a few adventurers coming back from rifts. Some were wounded and barely alive, others hurried down the paths laden with what Tulcia and Rad assumed was treasure.

Soon the path became a thin line of rubble, barely discernible. The last wooden sign they had passed declared that beyond it there were no more caves, only fissures in the rock that led nowhere.

Tulcia unfolded the map, squinting against the rising sun. 'We have precisely two hours to reach the spot marked as the pointer. When the sun reaches its zenith, the Scar will point to the entrance of the rift we're looking for.'

Rad glowered. I've read the cursed map more times than I care to remember. If you don't get a move on, we'll be camping out here overnight!

Tulcia shook her head. 'That's what I get for going slowly for you.' She clucked her horse into motion and moved off the thin ledge. The action loosed pebbles and Rad's mount shied.

Rad managed to control him and with some difficulty urged the trembling horse up the incline.

When he reached the crest of the next ledge he reined his horse in. Already they were further from the most travelled paths than was advised. Here, the pebble-strewn pathway emerged onto a barren escarpment. He dismounted.

Rad found Tulcia on her backside, shielding her eyes. 'Take a look at that,' she whispered. 'Such a breathtaking sight you will never see again.'

Rad followed her gaze and almost plunged headlong down the steep decline.

'It helps if you sit,' Tulcia advised him calmly.

Rad plonked himself down, starting a miniature avalanche that tumbled out of sight beneath an overhang. Beyond the ridge lay Quentaris. The golden minarets on the Cathedral of the Holy Benefactor gleamed like giant candles; the towers of Lord Chalm's palace stood like sentinels against the forces of evil; the cobblestoned laneways and main thoroughfares of the city appeared to twist and turn, serpent-like — all this rising from beneath a shroud of dissipating fog that was rolling in from the river.

'It's Quentaris,' Rad said simply. 'No-one in

their right mind would come all this way to see it. Not when you can see it close up like we have done every day of our lives.'

Tulcia sighed heavily. 'That's the trouble with boys,' she said. 'No soul. Can't you smell the freshness of the air? Or see the beauty below? The colouring of the marshlands to the west, the cemetery and the desert beyond to the east. And surrounding us on the horizons, the states of Hadran, Simesian, Tolrush and Brunt — all shrouded in the purple and orange mist of distance.'

Shading his eyes, Rad faced the sunlit city and beyond, where the horizon curved like a burning scythe. He shrugged. 'I can. But since I have no desire to travel to distant climes, I see no reason why anyone would want to stare at them. Besides, that's what paintings are for.'

Tulcia frowned and shielded her eyes. 'Seems like there's trouble down at the Last and First Station,' she said.

Although Rad couldn't see too clearly at this distance, he could guess who was causing problems; either Vindon Nibhelline or the Thieves'

Guild. Neither would want to pay a toll —Vindon Nibhelline because his clan thought they owned the city, and the Thieves' Guild because if someone didn't bow to their bidding, they would threaten to steal the very bed from under them. Since the guards feared their commanders more than they feared the Nibhellines, and didn't worry about the thieves because they had nothing worth stealing, Rad could well imagine the cause of the problems below. The sooner he and Tulcia got out of here the better he'd feel.

He stood up and brushed himself down. 'Probably someone who wants a cheap adventure with no frills,' he joked.

Tulcia sighed and rose as well. Without further comment, she led her mount forward as though walking on a tightrope, her hands out to either side. She turned, keeping a firm rein on her horse. 'One wrong step and it's goodnight Rad and Tulcia. Place one foot directly in front of the other and keep your horse dead centre. And hold him by the bit, not the rein.'

'I'm not a pleb!' Rad fumed. He got up and changed his footing and his grip on the horse.

'No, you're not,' Tulcia observed. 'But you'll do as you're told.'

Rad shut his mouth. He would soon teach the show-off a lesson or two. She might know more about horses and pitchforks, but when it came to swordplay, he, Rad de La'rel, was more than adequately trained. Hulk Duelpf had promised to buy him a shortsword but the City Watch had thrown Hulk in the dungeons on the two hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Begonias.

Rad caressed his sword's pommel and lifted the steel an inch from its uncoiled scabbard. Perhaps he should name it? He wouldn't tell anyone. He could just name it for himself. How about Death Slayer? Or Death Bringer? Something with 'Death' in it, anyway.

With Tulcia leading the way, the pair headed for a boulder that was marked on the map. 'I think this is it, although it looks bigger and grander on the map.'

Rad frowned. 'This is a pebble by comparison. It can't be right.'

Tulcia pulled a spyglass from her saddlebag. After a quick scout around, she shrugged. 'There's

nothing else vaguely similar. This map could have been made centuries ago. Perhaps bits have fallen off the rock over time.'

'The labels could've been written by that rogue Jael just last year.'

Tulcia shook her head. 'I've been thinking about that. Jael's the best forger in Quentaris, and he wouldn't have wanted it known that he'd swindled anyone in power. He pays both the Nibhelline and the Duelph families protection money. And since the map might have fallen into either of their hands, he would have been doubly cursed. No, the writing didn't come from his quill.'

Rad shaded his eyes against the harsh sun. 'The shadow from the Scar, look!'

Tulcia put her spyglass away. A dark shadow was crawling along the cliff. Soon, it turned a golden orange, and burst so brightly that both Tulcia and Rad had to shield their eyes.

'Mark it!' Rad shouted, rubbing the stars from his eyes.

'Just to the left of that rock shaped like a finger,' Tulcia said excitedly. 'That must be it!'

The entrance to the Scar!

Rad froze.

'Rad?'

'Look at the map!' he gasped. It's flaring. As though it knows where it is ...'

Tulcia blinked at the brightness and quickly rolled it up. 'Pray this map was only ensorcelled by a Quentaran mage, Rad. You know what rift magic can do.'

'It's not rift magic,' Rad scoffed. 'C'mon!'

They scabbled along the ridge until it was impossible to take their horses further. 'We'll have to leave them,' Tulcia said. 'They wouldn't fit into the Scar anyway.'

'According to legend the Scar is impassable to anyone—and the eye discerns this to be true.'

According to legend the Scar is a great many things,' Tulcia observed. 'Legends are normally a lot of horse dung. Anyway, unless you feel like lowering the horses down to the entrance, we have no choice but to leave them here.'

For once Rad agreed with her. He paused to think that the guards down below would get their horses whether or not they returned within three

days. 'There's nothing to tether them to,' he said.

'The horses know their way home.' Tulcia cocked her head and grinned. 'They'll head off as soon as we're out of sight. Those pathetic soldiers won't get them. And if they try ...'

They unstrapped their provisions and Tulcia unwound a length of rope and made a noose to hang over the boulder. 'I hope you know how to do this. You need to hold on to the rope firmly, and let it out just as your legs hit the rock. If you get the rhythm right, it's easy riding.'

Rad inspected the noose. 'It should hold, although I would've used a Thielson knot myself. You go ahead. I'll wait till you whistle that you're safe.'

'Hmm.' Tulcia disappeared over the ledge and Rad scurried over to the lip to watch how she fared. It looked simple enough. One hand over the other, legs pushing off at the same time, bouncing out and then back, hands switching again, and so on.

Suddenly the rope went slack. Rad pricked his ears. Sure enough, Tulcia had just whistled. She'd done it. She'd actually found a ledge down there!

He eased himself over the edge. His feet immediately slipped on the granite and he wound up flat-faced against the cliff. 'Ugh!'

'Rad!' Tulcia's hollow voice echoed up.

Rad held his breath, sure that Tulcia must hear his ragged and desperate breathing above the howling wind. 'Coming,' he called. 'Just wanted to check that knot of yours!'

Tulcia called something back but Rad was too busy trying to get his feet to meet with the cliff. After digging slight grooves into the crumbling granite, Rad finally found purchase. His wrists were already swollen from unaccustomed use. One hand over the other, push off with both feet — or was that kick off first, and then switch hands?

Rad pushed out and let go. 'Ugh!' He tumbled twice, skidded against the rock and somehow tangled himself in the rope. It pulled him up short and the pressure around his chest squeezed the air out of him.

'Is everything all right up there?' Tulcia's voice sounded clearer now. Almost next to him.

Rad opened his eyes. He was hanging upside

down. Somehow he was staring at Tulcia — only she wasn't the right way up.

'When you stop clowning around we can get going,' Tulcia said icily.

Rad looked up. His legs were intertwined with the rope. He looked back to Tulcia. 'Sure thing.' Unfurling his legs proved harder than he imagined. Finally, he untangled them and dropped like a rock onto the narrowest of ledges. If Tulcia hadn't clutched him by his belt buckle, he might have windmilled back and off the ledge.

'I'd suggest you don't look down,' Tulcia advised him. 'It's called vertigo.'

'I know that,' Rad said, brushing aside her hand. 'Oh my Odd Gods, look at the Scar!'

'Careful!' Tulcia snapped. She had Whispering Amber out. Its point seemed to touch rock, but somehow didn't. It went through the cliff face as though it were an illusory facade.

'It's bewitched!' Rad exclaimed.

Tulcia grunted. She kept brushing the illusion with the sword point until she met with solid rock. She picked up a handful of pebbles and marked the spot. Deftly, she smote the air on the

other side of the cave's mouth, and met similar resistance. Having marked out the width, Tulcia waved the sword to find the mouth's height, but the steel simply vanished through the illusion.

'It's as high as we need it,' she said. 'Isn't this the most amazing thing you've ever seen?'. She reached out and tried touching the mirage, but her fingers slipped through it and disappeared beyond. The rock face rippled.

She stepped through hesitantly and soon only her back was visible. Then it wasn't.

Rad waited for something to happen. When Tulcia said, 'Are you coming in or what?' he almost fell backwards.

'What happens if it becomes solid while we're in there? What then?'

'Then we become mountain people,' Tulcia said. 'Look, Rad, it's safe, all right? It's just been magicked to keep people out. And it's done its job well. Now I'm not going to wait all day.'

Tulcia's hand reached out from the seemingly solid rock and pulled Rad in.

7. Hamilian Magic

RAD fell into and through the cliff face. The moaning wind was still buffeting the ridge, still rushing in at them in eddying swirls of dust; other detritus littered the cavern floor as though the barrier wall were nonexistent. Rad peered out through the mouth of the cave and although the horizon was slightly obscured by the rock patterns, it was clearly an illusory granite wall.

Rad brushed Tulcia's hand away as though it

were a bothersome biting insect. 'I was coming!' he snapped. 'I was just looking at the rock image.' Rad stopped dead. 'Have you ever seen the like before?' Despite the fact that his every nerve was tingling with alarm, Rad's face broke into a look of wonder. The cave, with its shifting shadows and otherworldliness, had a nightmarish quality that both thrilled and alarmed him.

'It's real,' Tulcia said, touching her sword against the jagged outcrops of stalactites and stalagmites. She took a deep breath, inhaling the cold, close air. 'It's deeper than it looks. There's certainly ventilation coming from somewhere.'

'Hmm.' Rad tentatively poked a finger through the cave mouth. When it disappeared through the shimmering mirage he quickly pulled it back. 'Weird,' he said. Another wave of alarm turned his skin to gooseflesh. His morbid imagination touched on the fact that he could well be inside a dragon's mouth, and these rock formations — both hanging and jutting up — were indeed its rotting fangs.

'But what's it hiding?' Tulcia pondered. She sheathed her sword. 'It is said in *The Book of*

Quentaris that the Hamil have not visited Quentaris in generations. No-one has reliable proof that they even really existed in the first place! That they were almost godlike even before they created wings and joined their brethren in the night skies is probably a myth. Is this where they lived, looking down on lesser humans as a shepherd might tend his flock? Or is it one great hoax?

'You read and think too much,' Rad snorted. 'If you're saying that this hidden cavern is protected by something other than a master sorcerer, you're a feather short of a stuffed pillow.'

Tulcia looked into the darkened depths of the cave. 'Hamilian protection or conjured magic, it matters not,' she said. 'Ancient Hamilian magic was supposedly banned long ago — most mention of it was expunged from the Lost Library by revolutionaries. If we find proof of it, we will be wealthy beyond our wildest imaginings. We ourselves could become gods!'

Rad winced at the blasphemy. And if the cave's been magicked by a market hack, what then?' he wondered aloud.

'We had better pray to our Odd Gods to

protect us. But if the hidden cave *was* magicked, then the sorcerer's magic has betrayed him. We passed the first test with no harm.'

Rad quickly wove a sign of atonement to his special deity, Fellonious, God of Wind and Fire. 'Don't keep saying stuff like that!' he gushed. 'You never know who might be listening!'

'C'mon, hero,' Tulcia laughed. 'Follow me if you dare.'

Rad went unwillingly. Light spilled from crevasses where no light should be; the cavern was warm, as though well-fed fires fought the damp; worst of all was that no superior race such as the Hamil would have lived in such dire surroundings. For despite the warmth and surreal light, this was still a cave. Gravel crunched beneath his feet and the musty smell of animal dung and some other feral presence was in evidence.

As he followed Tulcia's retreating back, Rad kept a wary eye open for the unexpected. Nightmares like this had a habit of containing the most unlikely surprises. It was while he was surveying the darker reaches of the walls that he noticed something inexplicable. Scrawlings in

the Scar? No. He peered closer. The wall was definitely stained, but in the meagre light he could discern neither the colouring nor the design.

Rad put his finger to the stain. Dried to a crisp. It was perhaps his overactive imagination that made him look to the corresponding wall. A similar pattern upon the facing wall made him frown.

'Oi! C'mere quickly, Rad!'

He took a step forward and yelped. His foot had landed on something brittle and he half expected some skeletal creature to come alive and waggle its bones at him. He pushed back against the wall and felt a thready thrumming. Looking down, he could just make out the gaping jaws of a whitened skull leering up at him. The rib cage had been protected by a leather jerkin, now encrusted with white powder and shrunken with age. The rusted pommel of a sword protruded from a curved scabbard, the likes of which Rad had never seen. Lying a knife-thrust away was an uncrested helmet, up-ended like a long-disused bucket.

'Rad? I've found the rift. I've never seen anything so fantastic!'

Shoving away from the wall, Rad skirted the dried bones — some primeval instinct warned him not to linger here a moment longer than necessary. He unsheathed his as yet unnamed sword and waved it about in front of him. The unnatural light had dimmed now, as though a trap had been sprung and the hunt was almost over.

A faint sizzling sound to Rad's right jerked him around. The point of his sword swung into the wall and disappeared. Rad prodded his sword and it sank up to the hilt. He withdrew it to make sure it was still whole. Experimenting, he described a huge arc as he had seen Tulcia do earlier. The mirage covered an opening almost as big as the cave mouth.

'Are you coming or what? Rad!'

Rad stuck his head inside the mirage. Inside the rock was yet another cavern, even larger than the one they had traversed. He pulled out his head then stuck it back in, still completely enthralled by a tingling experience.

One false move and he knew that the unwary could become lost in this rift. Perhaps that was

the reason for so many disappearances in the caves. Maybe each of them was simply a maze — for all he knew, all the caves were linked. He scuffed his feet and made a giant 'x' in the rubble. They would have to explore this new route later.

He followed Tulcia's voice. He had heard rumours of mimics in the rifts, beings that could imitate any word and lure victims to their deaths.' What he found was a shimmering blanket of luminous green. It stretched across the cave like a solid web, wavering and oscillating as though fingers were dipping into it, causing ripples and reflections.

This wasn't another mirage. This was the real thing. A rift. What lay beyond could be the cause for great delight or great concern. It was known that the rifts closed and opened at will, trapping adventurers in lands with no chance of escape, no hope of returning home until they found another open rift.

'RAD!'

Rad jerked. That was no imitation of Tulcia. No-one could mistake her fiery temper, nor imitate it, he hoped. Rad took a deep breath

and plunged through the rift.

The crossing was somewhat of a disappointment. The rift had again turned his skin to goose-flesh, but that was all. He turned and looked at the bubbling, writhing curtain of coloured air. Had he actually stepped into another world? It certainly didn't look like it. This was still the same cave they had been exploring. With a shrug he followed the footsteps left clearly in the ancient dust.

He found Tulcia around a bend. She was staring at what first appeared to be catacombs, but were in fact niches carved into rock. In each nook sat a bejewelled skull. Even in this meagre light the jewels sparkled and spat light so that both walls exchanged beam-like reflections. Tulcia ran her hands through them, cutting the arrow-straight beams in two.

'It tingles,' Tulcia said. 'You should try it.'

'I'd rather not,' Rad said, wearily watching the needle-sharp lights disperse at Tulcia's touch. He crept closer to the nearest skull. Its perfectly preserved teeth gleamed white, while its eye

sockets swam with green from emerald and blue from sapphire.

'Truly these people were gods,' Tulcia said. 'With so much money they lavished gifts on their dead so that they could live like kings and queens in the afterlife!'

Already Tulcia had her dirk out and was about to pry open an eye socket that held a shimmering ruby.

'Don't,' Rad cautioned.

Tulcia stopped in mid-prise. 'Rad, what's got into you? There is more wealth here in two eye sockets than I would need to live without ever having to muck a stable again.'

'I hear something,' Rad said, cupping his ear. 'A warbling sound. Like a bird in distress.'

'I heard it when I first found the skulls,' Tulcia said. 'What do you make of it?'

'Who could fathom such a sound?' Rad said despondently. 'Before, I felt the walls move.' He looked fearfully back along the way they had come. 'There's a dead man back there. You must've stepped right over him.'

Tulcia wedged the point of her dirk into the eye socket and began levering out the ruby. 'Rad. You'll always find skeletons in old caves. I'm surprised there aren't more in here, actually. Ah, now that wasn't too hard.' She pocketed the egg-sized ruby and began work on its matching socket.

'We shouldn't be desecrating the dead,' Rad said. A morbid fear was beginning to rise within him. The trembling he had felt earlier was now permeating the floor beneath him as though the entire cavern was in fact the insides of a giant worm and they were its latest victims for digestion.

Rad said as much to Tulcia.

'Let's hope it doesn't regurgitate us until I've filled my pockets with these gems, then,' she said, working hard on yet another skull. 'Look. There's some writing on the wall. Go read it and make yourself useful.'

Rad went reluctantly. 'Only the humble shall pass,' he read. 'Well obviously that's not you.'

'I'm humble enough,' Tulcia said, jabbing her dirk into another skull.

The vibrations were harsher now. Even Tulcia had cause to stop her excavations and take a quick look about. 'Tell you what, Rad. You keep guard and I'll let you take one quarter of whatever I dig out of these old skulls.' Another gem popped from its socket. Tulcia wasn't even looking at the false eyeballs now — she had become quite deft at simply digging her dirk in at a certain angle, jerking the steel, and popping the gem. Each new treasure disappeared within her leather pouch.

Movement caught Rad's eye. Was it his imagination or were the walls closing the gap between them? He stood there spellbound as the impossible became reality. Walls did not move. Not unless an earthquake made them. He waited expectantly for nonexistent tremors. 'I have a rotten feeling about this,' he mumbled.

Crunching pebbles and a low grating noise broke Rad's trance. 'Tulcia!' he screamed.

Tulcia cast a quick look at him. 'One more, Rad. One more. I've almost got it!'

Rad rushed forward and grabbed Tulcia from behind. He dragged her savagely away but it was

too late. The length of the corridor yawned away into the distance. They would never make it.

'Run!' Tulcia cried.

Rad cupped his ears to stop the noise and to concentrate. The walls were at his shoulders now. 'Only the humble — I shall not be greedy, I shall not want what my brother has ... I renounce all ego ... I give up worldly possessions!'

The walls shoved him sideways. Up ahead Tulcia had stumbled and become stuck.

The Order of the Humble! Rad spun around and walked backwards. Faster and faster he went, his shoulders now crunching — until he came upon the fallen Tulcia.

'They've stopped,' Tulcia breathed. 'Oh my Odd Gods! What happened?'

Rad watched the walls recede. 'The Order of the Humble,' he said. 'They really *did* descend from the Hamil, like their scriptures say.' He pulled Tulcia up. 'Don't you see? By walking backwards and renouncing everything, the walls sensed that I was of the Order of the Humble!'

Tulcia eyed the walls warily. 'Whatever. It worked. And that awful noise has stopped.' She

started back toward the skulls but Rad pulled her back.

On sudden inspiration, he said, 'The map, Tulcia. Let's take a look at it.'

Tulcia couldn't take her eyes off the gleaming skulls. 'It got us here. It's done its job, Rad.'

'Give it to me,' Rad said.

Something in the authority of his voice swayed her. 'If I give you the map can I get back to collecting stones?'

Rad unrolled the map. It was as he suspected. The map no longer showed details of the Quentaran ranges. Rather, it focused on the Scar.

Tulcia checked her leather pouch. 'I've lost a couple,' she panted. 'Curse you, Rad. Aiyee! What have we here?'

Rad bent over the now gleaming map. 'It's showing us another cave. I think we should follow it.'

'Leave the thinking to me,' Tulcia said.

'Whatever,' Rad said. 'The skulls are booby trapped somehow. That terrible clanging noise started the moment you prised the first gem — then the walls almost squashed us flat.'

'If that's the booby trap,' Tulcia reasoned, 'then it's already been sprung. So we should be safe. Right?'

'All well and good in theory,' Rad agreed. 'But a house of horror has many instruments of torture.'

'Perhaps you should call your sword Doom Sayer. An apt name for its owner. Aiye! That's two tests that we've passed. There's always three tests, right? That means we only have to pass one more and all the treasure is ours!' Grinning, she prodded the map. 'All right, we'll do it your way. Let's follow the map.'

Rad shook his head and followed her. 'I've already named him, as a matter of fact,' he called. 'From this day on, my sword shall be known as Death Bringer.'

'Outlandish,' said Tulcia. 'Well, bring him along then. With luck some hapless creature might happen upon us and you'll have a chance to display Death Bringer's mettle.'

'I don't suppose you've wondered where all those skulls came from?' Rad said, hurrying after her.

'They're the ancestors of the Hamil, of course.'

Rad thought about that. 'It's just that the skulls don't all look as though they've been there for centuries. In fact, some of them look positively new.'

Tulcia stopped in her tracks. 'Well, that's not right,' she said. 'Maybe someone comes along and cleans them.'

'Now you're being ridiculous,' Rad said. 'I'm thinking that perhaps there's something in the sacrificial human business after all.'

'And why would the Hamil replace the eyes with gems? Out of reverence for their dead, of course. They wouldn't bother placing gems in the skulls of people they've just slain, would they?'

'It all depends on whether the gems are real or not,' Rad reasoned. 'Or whether the gems are worth as much to the Hamil as they are to us.' Rad swore as he bumped into Tulcia's back.

Tulcia shrugged him off. 'I don't remember a fork here,' she said. She withdrew her sword and prodded the craggy walls. Her steel met with solid rock. After a quick inspection of the map she looked up. 'Did you hear something?'

Rad looked behind him. 'No,' he said hesitantly. 'But that's not the way we came!'

The alarm in Rad's words made Tulcia's skin prickle. The single corridor was now forked with two passages. 'No it's not. And I definitely heard something — voices. Something or someone is following us.' She pulled at Rad but he resisted.

An image can't create a tunnel to travel down,' Rad said. 'Therefore the fork must have been hidden by a mirage when we went past it.'

'But why?' Tulcia said. 'It must have been guiding us to a particular spot — obviously the one with the skulls. But why lead us to this treasure, when the map clearly shows a storeroom full of it?'

'Because it was booby trapped,' Rad said again. 'But the trap didn't get us the first time, so it's taking another crack at us.' Rad took another look at the map. And if you're talking about the ruddy glow in the centre of the map — it mightn't be a cavern full of treasure. It might just be a killing ground.' He unsheathed Death Bringer.

A sudden movement ahead galvanised them into action. They barely caught sight of the walls

as they shifted position and ground to a halt. Now they were at an apex of two forks and four passageways.

'There's safety in numbers,' Tulcia said. She studied the map. 'It tells us to take the right tunnel.'

'We could always go back,' Rad said. 'If we can find the entrance.'

Tulcia scowled. 'I didn't come up here to give up and return empty-handed, Rad.' She patted her half-filled pouch. 'If you hadn't been in such a rush to get going, I'd have had enough gems to last a —'

'Quiet!'

From the left tunnel there came a dry crackling sound like wind-blown autumn leaves. It was not a loud sound, yet it filled the worm-like tunnel as though it was a part of the solid rock encasing them. As it neared, it became clear that it was not discordant, instead a rhythmic, organised sound, like that of an army on the march — though a rather light-bellied one, for the sound was not heavy-footed.

'Rodents,' Rad said, his feverish mind already

detecting a clattering noise that was as imaginary as the illusions within the caves. 'There must be thousands of them. On the scent of blood, I bet.'

Rad's unease was infectious. 'Whatever it is, I don't like it,' Tulcia said. She struck her sword against the wall and scraped it along the stone as she quickly moved into the right tunnel. Sparks flew from steel against granite.

Rad brought his own sword against the right wall and together they moved away from the ominous marching sound.

Then Rad found the cross he had made earlier in the dust. He ran into the seemingly solid wall without hesitation. 'Tulcia!'

His companion was at once by his side in the alcove. They had barely disappeared through the image of the wall when an army rounded the corner. This was no mortal army though: the creatures were of bone and sinew, headless skeletal caricatures of what might once have been mortals, curved blades and leather bucklers held at the ready.

The warriors had a spectral blue light about them — an aura that brushed every lump and curve of

the crumbling walls, creating darting shadows.

Rad and Tulcia moved back against solid rock.

'Ugh!' Rad croaked, his face ashen.

Tulcia's hand tightened on his shoulder as though to quieten him, although neither suspected these long-dead creatures could hear.

The column of headless skeletons seemed to have no end. Unaware of the fact that he had been holding his breath, Rad pulled Tulcia away from the mirage. 'What manner of things are they?'

'Magicked — whatever, I don't care,' Tulcia whispered back. 'They're obviously either looking for us or their stolen heads!'

'Or their missing eyes,' Rad observed, looking pointedly at Tulcia's pouch.

The tunnel was now full to the brim with the marching creatures. Although they were headless, Rad imagined he saw the nearest creatures turn to stare at them through the mirage. But the column marched inexorably on.

Rad's heart leapt. The ragged line wheeled about to face them. The scrape of bare bone on aeons-old dust made Rad's skin crawl.

He tugged Tulcia back from the facade but she

stood transfixed, her body almost intermingled with the wall mirage. With a quick flourish of her sword she marked out the size of the wall. 'We can hold them here,' she said falteringly. 'Two of us could hold this army.'

'How can you kill something that is already dead?' Rad hissed. He grabbed at Tulcia's pouch. 'Give them back their wretched eyes and maybe they'll let us out!'

Tulcia shoved him away. 'They're afraid of something,' she said. Feet wide apart, she waited for the creatures to charge.

'Now's our chance!' Rad said. 'While they're indecisive!'

'Aiye!' Tulcia spat and charged forward.

'Tulcia!'

Tulcia leapt through the wall mirage with a tremendous war cry. She hacked and slashed but her sword met no resistance. A moment later Rad threw himself forward. Tulcia whirled to face him.

Rad was already swirling his sword around his head in a great scything motion. He brought the sword down slowly. The skeletal figures merely

wavered as his steel ran through them. Their bodies flickered, then faded, leaving an eerie afterglow.

'My blade went straight through them,' Tulcia said stupidly.

'Illusions. Just like the walls,' Rad panted.

Tulcia nervously fingered her pouch. 'But the gems are real enough.' She took a huge breath to calm herself. 'If everything in here is an illusion, then we're safe.' She smiled wanly. 'Nothing can harm us.'

Rad sheathed his sword. 'Nothing to be afraid of save whatever created the images,' he said. 'Something or someone is behind them.'

'Perhaps something long dead, and these are all that remains of its magic,' Tulcia scoffed.

'I wish you wouldn't —'

The ground beneath them rumbled like a waking giant. Tulcia steadied herself, her arms see-sawing for balance.

Rad braced himself by holding on to an outcrop of jagged rock. 'It's basic knowledge,' he said bitterly. 'You simply cannot laugh at the gods without paying a price!'

'Oh, so it's gods we face now,' Tulcia laughed nervously. 'Not satisfied with local or ancient necromancers — the gods themselves are at play here in these miserable catacombs.'

The cave floor bulged, spewing chunks of solid rock. Tulcia was flung aside as the ground opened up beneath her. She had barely landed when the walls squeezed shut like vault doors slamming.

'Tulcia!' Rad rushed forward, half expecting, half hoping, to run straight through a mirage. Luckily he ran into the wall shoulder first. He bounced back and landed with spine-jolting finality. Horrified, he watched the hair-thin line between the opposing walls grind like a prehistoric animal's jaws tearing through meat.

'Tulcia!' Rad's shoulders slumped. His voice had gone flat, as though in a tomb. He scrambled up and tried to pry the walls apart. It was the kind of useless act that his friend Hulk might have attempted. He stood back helplessly, praying the walls would part, but knowing they wouldn't.

Now he remembered the stain he had seen earlier. The reddish-brown stain that seemed

superimposed on the two walls, and nearby, the crippled whitened bones of some long forgotten adventurer. This was no work of a local adept — this was an evil Hamilian magic — an art forbidden since the beginning of time.

He ran his hands over the rocky surface of the wall. If Tulcia had been crushed behind it, she would have had no chance of survival. Her death would be just one more statistic for the chroniclers to add to their ledgers, but Rad knew it would weigh heavily on him till the day he died. He spat and smacked the wall with his palms. Why had he ever climbed that pirate ladder in the first place!

He kicked the wall irritably and stood back to contemplate his next move. This abominable cave had more traps and detours than any Quentaran back alley. He was hopelessly lost and knew without doubt that this rift cave hadn't yet yielded up all its nasty tricks. More for comfort than for practical purposes, he withdrew his sword.

All right, he reasoned. This path has been closed. With his foot he inscribed an 'x' in the dust and drew a circle around it. He hoped

that he wouldn't see it again.

He turned and strode purposefully down the cave. Death Bringer sang sparks as she skidded from rock to rock.

8. The Map Strikes Back

TULCIA dusted herself down with trembling hands. If the heaving ground hadn't toppled her, she would have been crushed like a bug between thumb and finger. She unsheathed her sword and outlined the gap between the two walls. They were solid all right. No point whatsoever in trying to cleave them apart.

She glanced up. Odd how the lighting emanated from the cavern roof. Since the flames were

steady, they couldn't possibly be beeswax candles. What then? All magic knew limitations, and none of it was inexhaustible. Her mind struggled to comprehend that which she had never learnt. Every bit of magic needed someone to feed it. Since every real threat she had encountered was imaginary, therefore not solid, nothing here could be refuelling the candles. Which meant they must be otherwise fed.

With nothing else to work from, Tulcia decided to follow the line of rock-encrusted ceiling lanterns. Could it be that some giant sun fed them? No, if that were so, then surely the worm-like holes of this rift would be exceedingly hot. She grappled with the illogicality of ancient magic. Surely earthenware lamps would suffice!

She backed away from the newly formed blockade, fearful now that it might somehow open up and change direction to snap her up. The walls had reminded her of gnashing jaws, especially in the way that they grated so fiercely.

She wondered too if the walls had eyes, that they were perhaps sentient. How else would they know when to close, or send marching skeletons

to intercept them? She backed further away, pondering the nefarious ways of dark magic.

Although her mind was preoccupied, caution implanted itself in her. She steadied her feet, but it was not the ground that gave rise to caution. What then? That faint grinding sound, as though a thousand slaves were pulling stone slabs across uneven ground?

Perhaps it was the charged atmosphere that caused her to act, or perhaps the slightest irregularity would have given rise to flight. Whatever it was, something propelled Tulcia to roll over her left shoulder and regain her balance in a fighting stance — weight resting on her back leg, her front leg ready to push off and fight or flee, sword at *pointe* position.

The displacement of air pushed her back. A fetid smell reminiscent of dead rats shot from the cavity that now yawned in front of her. A slab of flooring sank into darkness a footstep away. Cautiously she peered down and shrank back, repulsed by the wretched smell rather than the danger of being swept into the pit.

Clearly other adventurers had happened upon

the Scar and paid the ultimate penalty for their carelessness. Was this what all the rifts had in store for swordsmen and adventurers? she wondered. Dark and lonely deaths, orchestrated by long-dead Hamilian demons? Yet some returned from the rifts, burdened with gems and treasure, while others wandered aimlessly out, insane, or fleeing otherworld creatures.

Tulcia straightened, unconsciously tightening her grip on the pommel of her sword. She saw no point in pitting her strength against the newly closed tunnel wall. It would open of its own accord, or to the wish of its demon owner.

Her mind decided, Tulcia placed the tip of her sword against the jagged wall and strode off purposefully. Somewhere in this monstrous place there dwelt a guardian, either human or inhuman, who controlled her destiny. And that of Rad's, if he was still alive.

To slay the guardian, she would need to locate it.

It was easy to lose track in the tunnel, even though he had the map. After a while, Rad paused to wonder whether he was ascending or

descending. It didn't matter, really, although if he were unable to find the cave mouth, he might be trapped in here until his meagre food and water supply ran out.

Then, as though by magic, he heard the rumbling of water. Rounding a bend, he saw a magnificent sight. The sheen from the cavern roof was cast by thousands of fireflies. The rippling water beneath reflected their eerie light. Rad looked down at the map. Indeed there was a swirling pattern lit by a blue glow. In the centre of the swirl was an icon that looked like an oblong piece of parchment, but Rad struggled to decipher its meaning. Clearly it was something he needed. The incessant flashing of the icon gave no doubt to that! He rolled the map and returned it to his tunic.

He stood as though in a trance, watching the spectacle before him. The raging torrent of white water tossed and turned like a whirlpool. Surely no-one could enter that fury and survive!

Rad looked further out to the middle of the river. A silver pedestal stood like a lone sentinel. Upon it was a spherical object — made of glass? — which encased ... something. He snorted.

Judging by the speeding water, he would never make it to the island in the first place, much less be able to swim back with the pedestal's treasure. Maybe he could make a raft? He smacked his head in mock anger. Out of what?

Again Rad heard sounds behind him, above the roar of the river. The moment he returned his attention to the gushing water, Vindon Nibhelline sneaked up behind him and wrestled him to the ground.

'Not so cocky now your friends aren't here!' Vindon snarled.

'Friends?' Rad wheezed. Vindon's forearm was tight around his throat.

'Don't play the dolt with me, ratface!' Vindon cuffed him across his scalp. 'Where's the map?' he demanded.

Rad gurgled a reply.

Vindon shoved his hand down Rad's tunic and snatched the map from its hidden pocket. He pushed Rad away and pointed at him to stay down. Vindon squinted at the map and looked up. 'The treasure's on that island,' he said, staring at the raging torrent. 'And there's only one way to get to it.'

'If you're a good swimmer,' Rad muttered. His ears were still ringing from Vindon's cuffing. Had Vindon found Tulcia? The thought made him feel sick.

'Good swimmer?' Vindon was saying. 'Better than you, Raddy — unless you're a cave diver, which I very much doubt.' He shrugged off his clothes and unlaced his buskins.

'I have an idea,' Rad said.

'Keep it to yourself,' Vindon replied. He dived in and ploughed through the water. Rad watched apprehensively. He had no love for Vindon Nibhelline—even less now that it seemed that he might have harmed Tulcia, and that he would claim the treasure of the rift cave. Even so, he would have advised the idiot that he could have swum with the current, which would have taken him in a huge circle and back past the tiny island. According to the map, that was.

Rad's thoughts seemed prophetic. Vindon was only halfway across the turbulent water when he began to struggle and the current slowly drew him under.

Rad began to undress. He knew he'd be powerless

to rescue Vindon, but with luck he might be able to drag him ashore if the current washed them over a shallow shoal. Rad waded in, but the ledge dropped alarmingly and very quickly he found himself in water above his shoulders.

Vindon went under for the third time. Rad judged where the current might take him and struck forward. He swam with long strokes, fighting against the strong tug of the current.

Rad stopped to tread water. Vindon had disappeared. Rad took a deep breath and dived. It was almost impossible to see through the churning bubbles and white water, but he caught a glimpse of something dark tumbling over and over. He kicked out toward it. Then the object slammed into him, almost knocking the breath from his lungs.

Panic-stricken, he almost left Vindon, but before he struck for the surface, he clutched his foe by the hair and dragged him up. He broke the surface, drew in a huge breath and ducked again. Securing a firm grip on the now struggling Vindon, he swam for shore.

'Don't fight!' Rad screamed. He ducked a

frenzied fist. Then Vindon took in another mouthful of water and went limp.

The current wouldn't let go. Rad thrashed his free hand more savagely, drove his legs harder. He knew he wasn't going to make it, not with Vindon in tow. Sink or swim? He could easily have let go of the dead weight, but some inner reasoning wouldn't allow it. He took in more water. On the verge of collapse, he remembered the advice he was going to offer Vindon.

He allowed the current to take them around a craggy outcrop, where they gathered speed. At one point an undertow tugged at their legs.

'Kick!' Rad screamed.

Vindon shook his head, his eyes like glazed marbles. But Rad could feel his feet paddling. Slowly they drew back from the undercurrent. Tributaries opened up in fissures and much of the water seemed to disappear into their mouths.

Travelling fast, Rad realised he would only have seconds to align himself with the island. If they swept past it, he knew he would be unable to make the distance again. The next moment the

island swung into view. Rad struck toward it. Despite the current's pull, he managed to reach out and grab a rock. Almost lifeless, Vindon was drawn back into the torrent but Rad's grip was firm. Sodden, he clung to the rock until he had the strength to pull Vindon to shore.

Vindon's face was deathly pale but he was still alive. He flopped on to his back and lay there like a beached whale. It wasn't until he gagged water that Rad dragged himself up and went to the pedestal.

He approached it almost reverently but warily — there was no telling what magicked evil would spring from such an unusual piece of rock!

He stared at it before attempting to open the glass casing. Was this a test — or had he just passed the test? It was hard to tell. Cautiously he placed his palms on the glass ball. When it moved he jumped back. Hamilian magic! He had never seen a glass ball disappear into grooves before.

A key lay exposed on a once-plush bed of red velvet. Time had ravaged the fabric but the key seemed untarnished. It was unlike any key Rad had ever seen. Thin and oddly shaped, it looked

too fragile to open any door that he knew of. But a key it was — of that he was sure.

He swung around a moment too late. Vindon had snatched the key from its resting place.

'You can't have it!' Rad said, swiping at it.

Vindon struck him in the chest. Rad flailed backwards and fell.

'Says who?' panted Vindon.

Rad struggled to his feet. He barely had the energy to stand, much less fight someone twice his size. 'Don't make me wish I hadn't saved you.'

'Huh! That's a good one, Rad de La'rel. I've a good mind to toss you back in and hold you down like the water rat you are.' Vindon tucked the key into his tunic, then nodded toward the far bank. 'It'll be easier going back—just go with the flow.'

Rad seethed as Vindon dived in and began to swim toward the far cave mouth with powerful strokes. The map was over there, and their clothes. Rad cursed mentally. Vindon had been feigning exhaustion! If he'd been thinking half straight, he would have beaten Vindon back there and at least taken the map. Despondently

he dived in and let the current take him back.

Vindon had already dried himself with Rad's undergarments by the time Rad pulled himself up to the ledge. He had also thrown Rad's sword belt over his shoulder. While he dressed, Vindon studied the map. 'My mind is set,' Vindon said. 'The map's quite specific. You first — that way.'

I'll need my sword,' Rad said.

'Nice try, dolt. I'll protect you.' He pulled Rad's sword from its scabbard and struck the walls as he had seen Rad do earlier. 'Now move!'

Rad narrowly avoided Vindon's savage kick and followed his directions.

It was when the sword's scraping sound on the rock face changed to a screech that they stopped. 'It's here,' Vindon said, squinting to decipher some writing on a small section of steel frame. Gingerly he touched the metal surface. Never before had either of them seen such workmanship. The metal plate was the size of a door — larger in fact, almost twice as wide but the same height.

Vindon began chipping away at the rock around the door. It suddenly occurred to him

that two work faster than one, and he grudgingly gave Rad his sword back. 'One wrong move, street rat, and I'll cleave your ugly head from your shoulders!'

Rad had no doubt that he would keep his word.

The sandstone crumbled as they dug at it with their swords. Soon entire slabs of rock had peeled away from their bedding. They worked with speed, hoping that the door would magically open at their insistence. Eventually, when they had cleared a sizeable portion of rock, Rad rubbed the dust from the pitted metal.

The writing was in an old script — most likely a language studied by some disreputable scholars and necromancers — but not one of the more popular languages.

The words **AUTHORISED PERSONNEL ONLY** emblazoned in red were barely legible. They both stood back, still marvelling at the smoothness of the door. When Vindon spied the glass gems lined up to the right of the doorway, his heart leapt. He sheathed his sword and began digging at the row of coloured gems with his dirk.

Rad stood back. He had seen the folly of stealing Scar gems.

'There's a slot here,' Vindon said. He delved in his pocket and withdrew the thin key. Beneath Rad's stare, he gingerly placed the key in the slot and stood dumbfounded as a gem sparked green.

A sibilant sound spat the air and Vindon jumped back. The wall itself began rumbling and at once they readied themselves for flight. Instead, the doors parted in such a way that they slid into the hidden wall cavity.

'By all that is holy,' Vindon whispered. Inside the wall was a dimly lit room — a room as unfamiliar to them as a smithy is to a child. Lights shone where no flames lit them; boxes with unblinking eyes viewing other worlds were fixed to walls; intermittent humming and hissing filled the air like swarms of alarmed insects.

Rad kept a wary eye on the doorway in case it decided to lock them in as they took another step into the room. Vindon leapt forward and touched benchtops and dusty chairs with his sword, testing whether they were real.

Most of all, Rad was mesmerised by the eyes.

Through them he could see the tunnels that he and Tulcia had been traversing, although they mostly looked indistinguishable from one another. Some, he noted wide-eyed, looked down upon Quentaris. He reached out a tentative hand and touched an eye, thinking, perhaps, that he could reach through and touch the city. He pushed his splayed hand around the magic window. Then he rushed from window to window, hoping to reach through at least one of them.

Finally he stopped. Movement on one window distracted him. Tulcia! He quickly looked at Vindon, who was preoccupied with digging gems from the steel-like panels.

Again Rad pushed at the window, but to no avail. What was the use of a window if it wouldn't open? He thumped the black and silvery panelling in a futile attempt to attract Tulcia's attention. Was it possible that some demon had trapped her inside a glass cage? Without doubt she was trying to escape. Tulcia turned and stared at the cavern roof and Rad felt like screaming her name. Could she see him?

It was while Rad was pondering his next move

that he saw three shadowy figures sneaking up behind her. He turned urgently to Vindon. No help there. And he didn't want Vindon to see Tulcia trapped within the glass.

Frustrated, Rad brought his sword down hard on the eye. It bounced back, jarring his arms. Again and again he slashed at the eye, but time and again his sword met with resistance. Finally, Rad gripped his sword by the pommel and drove it hard into the glass.

Vindon laughed maniacally. 'Go ahead — destroy the demon's lair,' he cried.

Amid a shower of sparks the glass shattered. Then some incredible invisible force ran through Rad and hurled him across the room. He tried to get up but his vision swam and blurred. Slowly he sank to the tiles and closed his eyes. Vindon's laughter followed him into sleep.

9. The Great Escape

TULCIA looked up at the gems almost hidden in the ceiling. Some lit up and she swore they followed her progress as she walked the length of the passageway. It was perhaps because of her preoccupation with them that three members of the Thieves' Guild managed to sneak up behind her.

She froze when a dagger pricked her skin.

'Look who it ain't,' growled a voice. Tulcia almost gagged at the man's breath. 'It's the ostler's stablehand. Your friend scarred me badly, wench!'

'Don't kill her yet!' said another voice. 'We'll slice her up slow until she hands over the map!'

'Where's that conniving partner of yours?' said the first voice. At the same time Tulcia felt feather-fine fingers relieve her of the amulet of Rys. The body pat, as it was known, left her in no doubt that she had just been robbed of everything valuable.

Tulcia waggled her fingers. No way could she utter a sound with the knife edge cutting so finely into her throat.

Her assailant released pressure slightly. 'We're not murderers,' the man said almost apologetically. 'But mistakes happen, if you get my meaning.'

Tulcia nodded slightly. 'I lost him,' she ventured. The man's forearm tensed and she squeaked. 'I did! One moment he was there, the next he wasn't.'

There was a murmur of assent. 'We lost

Wilmore like that,' one of them said. 'The walls are cursed. They *live*, Le'ard!'

Scepticism passed over Le'ard's pock-marked face. He hesitated before drawing his dirk from Tulcia's throat. 'There might be truth in that, all right,' he agreed. 'But if you are lost, then you are of no help to us—making you expendable. Yes?'

Tulcia rubbed her neck. She thought her palm came away sweaty. It was in fact smeared with blood. 'Rad knows his way around the rift. He will come looking for me.'

The one known as Le'ard touched his forehead as though concentrating. His hand was bandaged with a bloody rag. 'It may be, or it may be not. Move. That way.'

Tulcia moved forward. They had apparently been unaware of the hidden passageways, and although Le'ard gave Tulcia back her sword, this new knowledge drew them, together in a tight, knot, each casting fearful looks at every inch of jutting rock.

A strange ululating sound woke Rad—that and

the smell of something burning. Sparks were spitting from the panel where he had smashed the glass. Vindon was cursing, something about the red and green gems being fake — either glass or some barbaric replica. Each had lost its lustrous colour when he had removed it from the polished metal casing.

'Maybe they were living but you killed them with your dagger,' Rad mumbled.

Vindon glared at him. 'The place has been magicked by a sour magician,' he said. He kicked savagely at some dangling wires that hissed and spat.

Rad dragged himself to the panel where he had seen Tulcia. It was blank now, as though it faced a void. This was potent magic — make no mistake. The map confirmed his thoughts. The map! It lay on the smooth surface of the panelling. Rad flattened it out on the metal table.

All of the map's mysterious icons were shining now, as though the artifact was gaining power. Rad looked down and saw that his bracelet seemed to be emitting a high-pitched whine.

Then from within the map's pattern there appeared hair-fine lines of dazzling red, blue and

green. A fairy picture of a solid map began expanding from the parchment. It grew in size and both Rad and Vindon floundered back from it.

It grew larger and larger, until the two Quentarans were almost forced through the door to escape its ever-expanding boundaries.

'Surely this is evil magic!' Vindon swore.

'Faith and courage.'

The words came from nowhere, yet everywhere. Vindon and Rad drew their swords simultaneously.

To Vindon the words were spoken by the very devil himself. To Rad, they were words of advice.

'It's a map,' Rad whispered. 'A map of every cave.' He stepped forward to be embraced.

'Then it's mine!' Vindon hissed and rushed past Rad.

There was a blinding flash and Vindon screamed. His body became enmeshed in a grid-work of darting, red-lit lines. His body convulsed as blue and red tendrils slithered snake-like around him, probing, enveloping.

'Help me!' Vindon screeched. 'It's burning me up!'

Rad took a hesitant step forward but slivers of

sizzling light struck out at him. He narrowly avoided a vicious slash as a barb of light shot past his face.

Rad shielded his eyes, but even as he did so the lines of pulsating light circled Vindon's body and, starting at his feet, engulfed him like a whirlpool, until he vanished without a trace.

The map glowed brightly where Vindon had entered it, then his outline dispersed and the luminous lines became clear and defined once again.

Rad swallowed. *Faith and courage.* Faith that he would not meet Vindon's fate? And courage to do what someone else had failed at? Rad shook his head. 'I don't think so,' he said, but inexplicably he strode forward and became bathed in the unnatural light.

Tulcia hastened when she heard screaming. Le'ard urged his men forward while he took up the rear.

They were running when Rad appeared in the middle of a brightly lit corridor.

'Rad!' Tulcia said, startled.

The thieves ran into her back and stared wide-

eyed at what they thought was an apparition.

'We need to get out of here,' Rad said calmly. 'The rift has served its purpose and is now obsolete.'

Tulcia's face clouded. 'Rad?' she said dubiously. This was not Rad as she knew him. His voice had changed, and the words he spoke were not his. 'I'll skewer you like a stuck pig if you can't prove you're Rad de La'rel!'

Rad smiled wanly. 'You'll have better use of Whispering Amber before this quest is over.'

Tulcia let her sword dip.

Le'ard stepped forward. 'If there be gems in that cave, we'll not leave without them.'

Rad stepped to one side. 'Be my guest.'

While Le'ard and his brothers-in-arms hesitated, Tulcia rushed to Rad's side.

Le'ard uttered a curse. 'You first.'

Rad shook his head. 'I don't think so. We're leaving. Join us if you will, but we must leave now.' After saying this, he and Tulcia stepped past the thieves, but Le'ard barred their way.

'Where is Vindon?' Le'ard's face darkened. 'There's a price on his head and I want it!'

Rad whipped Death Bringer from its scabbard.

'It needn't be like this,' he said cautiously. Already Le'ard's brethren had fanned out. They were veteran alley fighters — not expert swordsmen, but nonetheless lethal adversaries. Three to two, Rad mused. Not good odds in anyone's books. Cunning and streetwise tactics won over conventional skill any time — despite what sagas told of heroes defeating insurmountable odds.

Le'ard took the initiative and lunged first. He kept his sword well in front of him, ensuring he had sufficient room to retreat.

Rad met his lunge with an expert parry, while Tulcia met the advance of Le'ard's men. The latter attacked as one, with swift feints and lightning fast stabs.

Steel met steel, and it was Rad and Tulcia who were driven back as the more experienced thieves hacked and slashed their way forward.

A back-handed blow from one of Tulcia's opponents surprised her, and a blossom of blood appeared on her forehead like magic. She cried out. The cutpurse closed in. By pure chance she countered his vicious attack: a quick parry, a feint

to her attacker's chest, then a quick stab to the thief's shoulder.

The man gasped in pain and fell backwards.

Rad wheeled to cover Tulcia while she blinked away the blood coursing down her face.

'Pah!' Le'ard spat as his remaining colleague hesitated. 'They are but children!' he snarled and swept forward, feinting, stabbing, deflecting. Sweat bathed his face, but he fought relentlessly.

Perhaps too much so, for in the end it was Rad who had the winning play. He ducked as Le'ard's steel thrummed overhead. He retreated before Le'ard's onslaught — blocking mostly, but economically, wasting no energy but deflecting the sweeps and strikes with minimal effort. Twice Le'ard's blade sliced his tunic, but Rad seemed not to notice. He danced back sure-footedly, back and back.

Le'ard, mistaking Rad's retreat for cowardice, extended himself, right foot forward, sword-arm outstretched. Rad easily parried the lunge and leg-swept Le'ard's leading foot.

The thief lost his balance and landed hard.

Rad's sword point quickly found his exposed throat. 'Call off your man or I'll skewer you,' Rad panted.

Le'ard's gasp of alarm drew a quick conclusion to the other duel. Tulcia slashed down savagely on her astonished opponent's sword and it clanged against the metal doors. He shrank back quickly and joined his wounded comrade.

Le'ard's whiskered lips curled savagely. Rad's sword point trembled against his gullet. A dozen rasping heartbeats passed. 'Do it, street urchin, as I would you!' he whispered hoarsely.

Rad kicked away the man's fallen sword. A distant rumble unsettled him. 'We intend to leave now, thief. What is in that room will be of no interest to you.' He smiled to himself. 'Leave now or make peace with your chosen god.'

Le'ard gingerly pulled away from Rad's sword. Quickly he scabbled up and retreated two arm-lengths. 'You've not heard the last of this — mark my words!' He signed for his two fellows to follow him. He edged around Rad and entered the control room. His two ill-at-ease companions

doubted their leader's decision but nonetheless joined him.

Rad grabbed the ashen-faced Tulcia. 'Are you all right? You're a bloody mess!' he joked and urged her forward when she nodded blankly.

'Rad! What's come over you? We'll never find our way out of these catacombs if we just rush around! The floors drop and —'

Rad shook his head urgently. 'I have it up here,' he said, pointing to his head. 'It's fantastic. I know a lot of these caves like the back of my hands. Tulcia, it's as though I've absorbed more knowledge than anyone has ever had of them!'

Tulcia flinched. 'Don't talk like that, Rad. You might've been possessed.'

'Possessed with the knowledge of the rift caves, Tulcia! These caves — they're not connected. Each has its own life! They open and close like living things.'

Sudden movement in the ground wiped the grin from Rad's face. I'll tell you all about it later. This place is like a giant holding bay of

knowledge. But Vindon set off a self-destruct mechanism—everything's going to collapse. C'mon!

'You are using outlandish words,' Tulcia said, her bloodied hand clenching the pommel of her sword. Are you possessed now? By the Hamil?'

Rad shook his head violently and stayed her hand. 'We have to act now, Tulcia! Or else we'll be swallowed whole.' He leapt forward and dragged her with him.

Tulcia had trouble keeping up with him. She hadn't lost much blood, but a forehead cut sluiced a steady stream. When Rad realised this, he tucked his arm under hers and half-carried her.

Luckily for the pair, what had taken them hours to enter took only minutes to escape. They ran helter-skelter through the rumbling, bucking caves and plunged straight through the rift. As they did so, it buckled and belched as though it might at any moment disintegrate.

'Watch your step here,' Rad wheezed. He skidded to a halt and stepped over the skeleton they had passed earlier. The two corresponding smudges on the opposing walls he now knew

were made from blood. These walls were booby trapped.

'Ugh!' Tulcia grunted. Fresh smears had appeared on the walls. A hapless carcass lay at her feet, its glistening blood soaking into the caked dirt. One of Le'ard's men.

Nimbly, Rad led Tulcia to the entrance. They swam through the image not a moment too soon. Already the walls were shutting behind them—the facade shimmering and billowing like a curtain. Somewhere not far behind a tremendous explosion ripped through the air.

'The rift!' Rad said.

From within the mountain they heard anguished screams. Or perhaps it was the wind gushing from the fissures of the Scar. Whatever it was, they had no time to lose, nor to dwell on the foolishness of thieves.

The first stars were out beyond the gathering dusk, and Rad paused to consider the length of time they had been inside the Scar. Amazing, he thought in wonder. Tulcia had been right. There was beauty ...

'Look out!' Tulcia said.

Boulders rumbled past their heads. Moments later the lintel of the cave collapsed. The ledge tossed and heaved like a living thing. Their rope, still secure, hung like a jiggling meat hook in the ensuing maelstrom.

Together they clasped the anchor line and began scrabbling up the now shifting cliff face, as an avalanche began its rumbling descent. The mountainside shook like a waking monster; stunted bushes were swept aside as the landslide gathered momentum and the rubble rolled towards them like an unfurling carpet.

Rad frantically clawed his way up. Behind him Tulcia screamed for him to move faster. A monstrous dust cloud enveloped them even as Rad gained solid ground, then reached down and pulled Tulcia over the lip. Without a backward glance they raced along the narrow ledge.

Barely had they scampered across the escarpment when the mountain itself seemed to belch and growl. The very ground itself seemed to ripple like a shaken carpet. The avalanche roared past, pebbles and dust stinging them in its wake.

From the Scar, orange flame and smoke spat like an angry dragon's breath.

They strove to keep their balance until the land settled, a beast twitching in its death throes. Then it was silent. The Scar was no more, the only evidence of its passing a pall of eddying smoke.

The descent took longer than the ascent. Rad attended Tulcia's wound while she demanded that he explain everything. It was not until they reached the anxious soldiers that Tulcia began to fully understand everything Rad had told her.

The soldiers were massing by the darkened perimeter fence, their lit torches flaring in the wind. The soldiers had felt the ground trembling and knew what to expect. These two young adventurers, like many inexperienced youths before them, had somehow unleashed a horde of otherworldly creatures.

The sentry guards who had signed them in claimed that the pair had promised two horses as an entry fee, but these had rampaged through the gates and escaped.

'You two!' growled a surly sergeant. 'You'll pay for this!' He glared at the rock face that had once been etched by the Scar.

Rad laughed carelessly, reached into Tulcia's pouch, and threw a gem to them. The guards broke ranks with oaths and curses, and an all-in brawl followed.

Now Tulcia knew this: Rad de La'rel had never been more sure-footed in his life and an energy seemed to blaze from his every pore. She was suddenly sure that no-one would ever treat him as a street urchin again.

It was the more internal matters that completely stumped her. 'So that ridiculous bracelet you always wear was some kind of ... beacon, that worked with the map to offer you ... knowledge? And you entered this ... this map's image, even though you saw it kill Vindon?'

'I didn't say it killed Vindon,' Rad cut in. 'I don't understand how, but I suspect he's back in Quentaris somewhere. Probably out of his mind with fear, but somewhere safe at least.'

'Right ...' said Tulcia doubtfully. 'But at the time you thought it had killed Vindon — and yet

you still walked into the image?'

'Faith and courage,' Rad said. 'I needed faith that the map could absorb me — or me *it* — and that I could handle the map's power. I needed courage to step into the map, after seeing Vindon disappear within it. I might never have stepped forward if it hadn't been for Vindon.' He fondly stroked Nathine's weathered bracelet. 'It was written that a descendant of Nathine would become a great guide. *Yes!*' Rad punched the air.

Tulcia shook her head. 'But you're still the Rad de La'rel I went up there with?'

'I am,' Rad said. 'But now I have Nathine's knowledge of the rift caves — which was mine by birthright. It makes everything I have ever learnt seem like ... like I've been a babe all my life, Tulcia!' He tapped his head which still rang from all the information it had absorbed. It's suddenly all up here—just like when I'm running along the rooftops or alleyways. And with this new knowledge I intend to continue my ancestor's work.'

'So you're going to become a guide after all,' Tulcia said. Her shoulders slumped. 'I'll never

see you, will I? We're all babes now, to your mind.'

Rad beamed a mischievous grin. 'You're an idiot... oh Tulcia!' He flung his arms around her shoulders and hugged her fiercely. 'I'll need a booking agent — someone to line up all my adventuring customers who will flock to Quentaris and seek my services.'

Tulcia's spirits rose. She disentangled herself, though she still clutched Rad's shoulders for support. 'Yes, you will, won't you?'

Rad nodded vigorously and they hugged one more time.

They walked the rest of the way to Quentaris in silence, Rad with the knowledge that the famous Nathine had been initiated into the Hamils' scheme of things in much the same way as he had been; Tulcia wondering how they were going to explain the disappearance of the three thieves.

Whatever lay ahead, neither of their lives would ever be the same again.

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