

# The Spell of Undoing

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# THE SPELL OF UNDOING

## Paul Collins



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  To Jenny Mounfield –  
for much-needed advice

# 



# A DEAL IS STRUCK

  Tab Vidler was having a bad day and it was about to get worse. She wrung out her mop and rested on its handle. By her reckoning, it was her birthday. But no one at the orphanage knew, and none would care even if they did. She couldn't even afford to buy herself something special to celebrate. The Dung Brigaders weren't aid for their work – it was enough, said Mrs Figgin, the orphanage owner, to have a roof over their heads and two square meals a day. Grub ’n’ keep, it was called.



Bone-weary, Tab sighed. She had just scrubbed the latrines, mopped the floors, washed and dried the morning's dishes, and next she was expected to go to market and collect the dung deposited by an army of horses, oxen, and other creatures used to haul wagons. All she wanted to do was lie down and daydream of being a famous magician like Nisha Fairsight – someone who commanded great respect in the community. A person of restrained power. Someone people left alone. Of course, if she'd had even a smidgen of magical power she would have cast a spell on the orphanage, making it sparkling clean. Then she could have had the day off and gone to the Great River celebrations on the eastern bank, just beyond the cemetery. Everyone was either going or had gone already. Everyone except her, and those Dung Brigaders currently sweeping the streets.

Tab paused by a window. A family, mother and father, boy and girl, strolled past the orphanage. They were laughing. Tab's stomach churned. If only *she* had a family. Despondency fell on her like a shroud.

‘Wake up, you stupid girl,’ snapped Mrs Figgin.

Tab jumped. Her green cats’ eyes narrowed as she returned the landlady's glare.

‘Look alive! I'll have no shilly-shallying on my deck,’ said Mrs Figgin, prim lips pulled into a thin line. ‘Shape up or ship out.’ Mrs Figgin, whose husband had fled to sea soon after their marriage, liked her naval terms. ‘And get that look off your face, if you know what's good for you.’

Tab hung her head. It didn't pay to answer back, especially when the old prune was in one of her ‘moods’. Food was scarce as it was, and being sent to bed without supper was just about the worst punishment a Dung Brigader could get. Or so Tab thought at the time.

Mrs Figgin shook her head. ‘I don't know what I'm going to do with you. There's more water on this floor than what's in the bucket.’

‘It leaks,’ Tab said.



‘What? What did you say?’ Mrs Figgin demanded.

‘It leaks,’ she said stubbornly. ‘The bucket. It leaks.’

Mrs Figgin picked up the bucket and inspected the bottom. ‘It does no such thing, you little liar.’

Just then the rusted handle snapped. The bucket tipped.

‘Oh! Oh!’ Mrs Figgin gasped.

Water grey as pig swill emptied on her head. She staggered back, stepped on a cake of soap, floundered, and fell with her skirt up around her waist.

Tab hadn't seen such a funny sight in all her life. One hand flew to her mouth as she tried to stifle the giggles that welled up inside her, but it was impossible. She doubled over with gurgling laughter.

‘Get out you little wretch! Out!’ Mrs Figgin screeched.

Tab backed away quickly as Mrs Figgin gathered her skirt and clambered to her feet. A tall sharp-faced woman with beetling brows and a hook nose, she was a formidable sight when provoked.

‘I'm – I'm sorry!’ Tab babbled. Try as she might, it was hard to sound sincere.

‘You will be,’ growled Mrs Figgin. ‘Get out of here. Now.’ Tab stared back, not comprehending. The woman's voice became a nasty snarl. ‘You will leave this house at once, do you hear? At once. And if I ever see your useless carcass again, I will summon the City Watch and have you locked up for vicious assault. Now get out!’

Tab stood stunned, but not for long.

A bucket came hurtling towards her and she turned and ran. More missiles followed. Ducking and weaving, Tab fled the house. By the time she'd reached the far side of the square, she was starting to realise the dilemma she was in.

She was homeless.

Worse, she was without a copper round. Unless she could get back into the orphanage and get her few belongings. These included the silver coins she had stashed under a loose floorboard in the cellar. Without them she was in danger of being arrested for vagrancy. If that wasn't enough, it was strictly forbidden to keep money from Mrs Figgin (not that anyone was stupid enough to hand over any valuables found while digging dung) and if caught, she would be flogged to within an inch of her life.

The morning dragged by. Tab shifted locations every hour. That was the best way to avoid the City Watch, who would arrest children who stayed in one place too long. Those arrested, if unclaimed, were put to work, sometimes beneath Quentaris, so it didn't pay to get arrested. Luckily the bulk of the Watchmen were at the Tolrush siege. But even so …

By midday Tab was footsore, anxious and *hungry.* The stiff breeze gusting off the river carried with it the lunchtime smells of fried fish, jellied eels, and – from the harbour inns – the divine odour of roast duckling, fresh-baked mince pies, and the pungent Quentaran coffee. Tab's stomach rumbled loudly, but as there was nothing she could do about it right now, she tightened her belt and waited outside the orphanage.

She knew Mrs Figgin was taking her favourite Dung Brigaders – her ‘shipmates’ as she called them- to the celebrations outside the city; most of the others would be out on their shifts. That would leave the orphanage pretty much deserted. As she was thinking this, Mrs Figgin flounced out the front door, followed by a bunch of smug-faced Dung Brigaders. A wagon pulled up and the woman climbed into the seat beside the driver. The children scampered into the back and the wagon pulled away.

Tab didn't move till the clip-clop of the horse's hooves faded down the cobbled street. Then, nonchalantly, she strolled down the lane that ran beside the orphanage, pausing to check that no one was watching her. Here at the back of the building, a drainpipe that Tab and the others used when they wanted to go on errands after ‘lights out’ offered easy access to one as nimble as she. Though highly dangerous, certain disreputable people liked to employ the Dung Brigaders as runners at night: it was the only way the youngsters could make any real money.

One more check to make sure the coast was clear, and Tab shinnied up the pipe. With a little persuasion, a window lifted from its latch. Tab slipped though the opening, flinching as the frame creaked alarmingly.

Creeping down the stairs, Tab made for the cellar where she had hidden her silver coins. She'd already made up her mind not to risk going for her other belongings, which were pitifully few in any case. She reached the bottom of the stairs and paused, listening.

Where was Masher Mildon, Mrs Figgin's trusted rift world custodian? Masher, who was part-troll, hadn't gone with Mrs Figgin's party. Which meant he was lurking about the orphanage somewhere. The obnoxious creature, who had gotten his name because he liked ‘mashing’ children's faces with his gigantic fists, was always spying and reporting back to Mrs Figgin.

‘Wotcha doing?’



Tab's heart nearly stopped. If she had been thinking clearly she would have acted naturally, as though she had every right to be in the cellar. But no. Masher's voice came so suddenly, and was so suspicious, that Tab took flight.

‘C'mere!’ roared Masher.

Tab leapt forward. Behind her, Masher's rasping breath sounded close but laboured.

‘You little wretch!’ he bellowed.

Tab hit the cellar floor running. She swung around a large boiler. The slab floor was slick. Her feet skidded as though in slow motion and she slid smack bang into a wall.

Dazed, Tab shook her head. Masher slowed, stop ping just short of her. Already he was smacking his fist into the palm of his hairy hand. Tab's insides shrank. She cast about wildly. There was no escape, and the leer on Masher's face merely reflected that. One entrance – the stairway – was also the exit. In desperation, Tab backed away. Masher advanced. His toothless mouth was wide open and ropy threads of drool dribbled from it.

‘Cop your hiding, as is right,’ Masher crooned. ‘You done wrong. Been caught out. Take what's coming to you. Haw!’

Tab stumbled and fell. Something rattled underneath her. A metal grate. Quick as a flash, she fumbled at it with her fingers. Yes! The sluice pit. She yanked with all her strength. The grate didn't budge. Masher laughed. Tab relaxed her grip, pushed and jiggled to loosen the grate in its seat, then pulled again. It came up with a slurping sound.

Masher's grin hardened. He lurched forward.

Tab flung the grate across the floor. It skimmed the flagstones and crunched into Masher's toes.

‘You li'l horror!’ he screamed, hopping on one foot while he clutched the other.

Tab sucked in her breath and went feet first into the drainpipe.

It was a tight squeeze, but grease and oil and slime aided her passage. She dropped like a rock. Down she slid into darkness. Light above cut out abruptly. Around she swirled, panic making her gasp. She would never, ever, be able to climb out of here.

‘Argh!’ she screamed. ‘Noooo!’ Tab spread her feet apart. Nothing seemed to slow her race down into some horrible depths but she had to try.

Bright light flashed overhead. Street grates. *Flash. Flash. Flash.* She whizzed beneath them. Finally she came to a jarring halt. Every bone in her body ached.

Tab looked down. Her feet had wedged her at a T-junction. Water and unimaginable things swept around her and fell into a stinking culvert. If she fell in there she would never get out again. Rift world monsters were said to live in the sewers below Quentaris. True or not, she didn't want to find out.

She was stuck under a street grate. Water fell like a shower, splashing her. She daren't think what else was falling on her. Standing on tiptoes Tab reached up but her fingers fell short by at least two feet.

Exhausted, Tab slumped. ‘Help!’ she called feebly, expecting no reply.

Something blocked out the light. Tab looked up. Someone was looking down. It was a man. Tab couldn't be too sure, but he looked to be Simesian. They fancied mutton-chop whiskers and wore what they called classical clothing: ornate, and rather … colourful, with lots of frills and lace. He was lugging a leather case like an out-of-work actor.

‘Dear me, what do we have here?’ said the man, peering more closely down through the grille. His eyes narrowed. ‘You appear to be in something of a pickle … ’

‘I'm *stuck,’* said Tab. ‘Could you lend me a hand?’

‘I? Surely you're jesting? I am Fontagu Wizroth the Third. Himself. And I make it a rule never to lend anything to anyone,’ said the man, looking pompously indignant. ‘Especially oversized sewer rats stuck in drainpipes. Good day to you.’

And with that he walked off.

Tab was left fuming, and was about to start cursing when the Simesian sidled back into view.

‘Mmm,’ he said.

Tab glared up at him. ‘What do you want now?’ she said.

The Simesian made a humming sound as though deliberating her question. ‘It may be that I was a little … er … hasty.’ He cast a quick, nervous glance up and down the street. ‘You see, I asked myself, what kind of child would be sneaking around in the sewer –’

‘I wasn't *sneaking,’* muttered Tab.

But Fontagu hadn't heard, and he went on: ‘Then the answer hit me,’ he said. ‘A *thief.’* He sounded very pleased with himself.

‘If I was in the Thieves’ Guild you'd be in big trouble right now,’ Tab threatened. ‘The Venerable Lightfingers would … I only went to get what's mine.’

Fontagu continued as if she hadn't spoken. ‘It just so happens that I'm in the market for a … a burglar, so to speak.’

Tab started to say she *wasn't* a burglar and maybe if he cleaned his ears out then he'd – but she stopped herself. She was down here and he was up there.

‘I – I might be able to help,’ she said.

‘Experienced, are you?’

‘Um … yeah.’

‘I don't suppose you have any references?’

Tab gritted her teeth. Luckily, Fontagu couldn't see because of the grille. ‘In my back pocket. I – can't quite reach them at the moment.’

‘Quite, quite,’ said Fontagu. He looked up and down the street again. ‘Of course, it doesn't look terribly good, you know.’

‘What doesn't?’

‘Getting stuck in a drainpipe. Perhaps you're not a very good burglar?’

Tab said hotly, ‘I'm the best burglar in Quentaris!’

The man smiled. ‘In that case, I propose a contract. Limited duration. High remuneration, plus expenses. Negligible danger. How say you?’

Tab frowned. She wasn't quite sure what ‘remuneration’ was, but understood that not only would she escape her present situation, she might get paid as well.

‘How much?’ said Tab.

‘Let us retire to a cosy tavern and discuss terms and conditions over a drink.’ ‘I'm too young to drink.’

‘Lemonade then,’ said Fontagu, showing some exasperation. ‘Agreed? If not, I'll be on my way and –’

‘Fine, fine,’ said Tab hurriedly. She felt she was being forced into something she might regret, but she had little choice.

The man gripped the street grate and pulled. It didn't budge. He gave a little high-pitched laugh and tried again. His face went red with the strain and his eyes bulged. ‘Bit. Out. Of. Shape,’ he gasped. Suddenly, the grate flew upwards. Fontagu staggered back and fell on his backside.

He got to his feet, looking thoroughly disgruntled. ‘Well, what are you waiting for? Climb out of there.’

‘I need a hand.’

‘*I need a hand.’* He mimicked her perfectly, though he made her sound even more pathetic. Grumbling, he knelt down, but even with Tab's outstretched hand he still couldn't quite reach her.

Tab flashed Fontagu a quick smile, the type Dung Brigaders reserved to appease Mrs Figgin and confuse Mildon. ‘You might have to lie down,’ she wheedled.

‘In the *gutter?’* Fontagu sounded horrified. ‘Just who do you think I am?’

‘You're Fontagu Wizroth the Third,’ said Tab, as sweetly as she could. ‘And you've struck a deal with me.’

Fontagu glared at her. ‘I do hope you're worth it,’ he snapped. He took some silk handkerchiefs from his pocket and placed them strategically on the ground, then stretched out, wrinkling his nose as he did so.

This time his hand clenched Tab's and he hauled her up, grunting with the effort. She popped out of the drain, showering him with muck.

He sat up, looked down at his bespattered tunic, and wailed. ‘Oh, look what you've done! How could you?’

Fontagu was making so much noise Tab glanced nervously up and down the street. ‘Shhh!’ she hushed. ‘You'll have the City Watch on us!’

That shut him up.

Fontagu picked himself up out of the gutter, muttering that he'd never get his clothes clean again. Then his nose wrinkled. ‘Do you always … pong like that?’

Irritated, Tab said, ‘Tab Vidler, former Dung Brigader, at your service.’

‘I should have known.’ Fontagu wiggled his nose. ‘Oh, what have you got yourself into this time, Fontagu?’ He eyed Tab with distaste. ‘You may call me Fontagu,’ he said. ‘But don't presume that this makes us anything but casual acquaintances.’

‘Wouldn't think of it.’ Tab held out her hand to shake.

Fontagu looked at the grubby fingers in horror. ‘If I must,’ he muttered. He lightly shook Tab's hand and then carefully wiped his own manicured hand with a clean handkerchief.

‘Well, I'd best be going,’ Tab said. ‘Thanks for the help.’

‘Not so fast,’ said Fontagu. His hand shot out lightning fast, grasping Tab's shoulder. ‘There is the little matter of … our verbal contract.’

Tab was about to dislodge Fontagu's restraining hand – a simple flick of her wrist would do it – when she spied Masher. He didn't look happy. Certainly not if his face was any indication.

‘There you are, you little gutter thief!’ snarled Masher. Red-faced with anger he raised his belt.

Fontagu somehow manoeuvred Tab out of Masher's reach. ‘I say,’ said the Simesian. ‘I've just caught this child pickpocketing.’ He cuffed Tab's ear and taking her cue from this, she yelped and tried – not too desperately – to escape. Fontagu shook her.

‘She's a thief all right,’ said Masher, trying to duck around Fontagu to deliver his own brand of punishment.

Fontagu reached under his cloak and drew a shining sword. He didn't exactly point it at Masher but he kept it between the custodian and the girl. Masher eyed it with grudging respect. ‘Don't trouble yourself, good sir,’ said Fontagu. ‘I shall personally see to it that this one never bothers anyone again!’ With that, Fontagu frog-marched Tab across the square.

‘Please, Mr Mildon!’ Tab called piteously. ‘Help me!’

Masher's face oscillated between mirth and misery.

Tab took one last look at the fuming half-troll as Fontagu marched her around a corner. Masher stood with his hands on his hips, glaring after them.

The moment they turned the corner, Tab burst out laughing. ‘You saved me from a thrashing. I guess I really owe you now.’

Fontagu released her. ‘Where in the world did you learn to act like that? You were marvellous.’

‘I go to Fenn Morrow's Paragon Playhouse. It's the best in Quentaris.’ When Tab saw the disbelieving look on Fontagu's face, she added, ‘I never *pay.* I just sneak in at intermission. I've seen all the classics.’

Fontagu started to sheathe his sword but the sound it made caught Tab's attention. She suddenly reached out and felt the blade, then turned her own disbelieving eyes on Fontagu.



‘It's wooden,’ she exclaimed. ‘You used a sword made of *wood* against Masher?’

Fontagu looked pleased. ‘All that glitters is not gold,’ he said. Appearances *can* be rather deceiving, can't they?’

Fontagu steered Tab into a nearby tavern. They took a booth at the back and Fontagu made sure no one occupied the booths on either side. Tab noted all this, filing it away, but most of her attention was on the tavern itself. She had never been inside one, much less ordered food and drink.

Fontagu hailed the waiter and ordered a mouth-watering array of food but when it arrived he set it down in front of himself and began to eat. Tab's stomach rumbled loudly but Fontagu didn't seem to hear it.

Finally, Tab said in annoyance, ‘What about *me?’*

Fontagu looked up from his plate, frowning. ‘Pardon? What, what about you?’

‘Don't I get to eat too?’

Fontagu's mouth dropped open. ‘Am I correct in thinking that you want *me* to pay *for you?’* He sounded genuinely shocked.

‘Well, we're partners, aren't we?’

Fontagu looked slightly ill. ‘What a vulgar notion. Really, you can't expect me to finance every –’ But the look on Tab's face stopped him. Her stomach rumbled again. He looked annoyed. ‘Oh, very well!’

He snapped his fingers at the waiter and ordered Tab a steaming pork pie, mashed potato, bread, and lemonade. All the while, Fontagu muttered about becoming a charity for street waifs.

Tab's pie arrived and she reached for it with her filthy hands.

Fontagu slammed the table. ‘That won't do,’ he said crossly. ‘That won't do at all. Go and clean yourself up at once, do you hear?’

Tab opened her mouth to say something but changed her mind. She hurried into the washroom and returned a minute later, looking pinker and cleaner.

‘Now for some table manners,’ said Fontagu, and he spent fully five minutes instructing Tab how to hold a knife and fork and what to do with them. Tab bit her tongue several times but figured she should humour him, at least for now.

Finally, Tab got to eat her pie. She dug in with enthusiasm, munching happily, while Fontagu took bird-sized bites of his roast pheasant, chewing each one carefully. After each swallow, he fastidiously dabbed at his lips with a white napkin, as if he were Lord Chalm himself.

Tab didn't care. She was sitting in a real tavern, scoffing real pie, with real lemonade, and on her birthday too! It almost made up for losing her silver coins.

Fontagu was starting to look nervous again. He checked the clock on the wall. ‘Do hurry up,’ he said at one point. ‘We don't have all day you know. There is the little matter of our contract –’

‘Yes?’ Tab asked, mid-bite.

Fontagu puffed out his chest. His knobbly chin and mutton chops quivered. ‘I am on a mission of enormous importance. The Archon himself has commissioned me.’

‘The Archon?’ said Tab. She was becoming a little suspicious of Fontagu. ‘Why you? He's got people to do stuff for him. Like the army and the City Watch.’

‘Most of whom are away at war,’ Fontagu re minded her.

‘Well, if it's some kind of spying –’

‘Shhh!’ Fontagu hissed. He leaned forward con-spiratorially. ‘Sometimes he needs men of special talent,’ – Tab looked sceptical although Fontagu didn't seem to notice – ‘men who can blend in, who laugh at danger, who know when to talk and when to listen –’

‘That's all very well,’ said Tab, but Fontagu was oblivious to the interruption.

‘– and who will lay down their lives without hesitation.’ Fontagu gave her a smug look, as if this description fit him perfectly but he was too modest to say so.

Meanwhile, Tab had begun to frown. ‘You know, you sound just like that actor at the Playhouse, the one who does Scurrilous. In fact, that sounds just like one of his speeches.’

Fontagu choked on a small piece of pheasant. ‘What a coincidence,’ he said. ‘Was the fellow any – er – good?’

‘I thought he was brilliant,’ Tab said truthfully.

Fontagu beamed. ‘Really? Well, what can I say, I was quite –’ he stopped suddenly, swallowed, and went on: ‘— impressed with him.’

‘You saw him too?’

‘Many times,’ said Fontagu. ‘But look here, time's a-wasting. And we have a deed to do.’

‘Well, you'd better spill it then,’ said Tab.

Fontagu's eyes became furtive and he lowered his voice to a whisper. ‘There's a precious gem that belongs to the Archon that was stolen by magical means.’

‘And it's your job to steal it back without anyone knowing it's been returned to the Archon?’

Fontagu smiled. ‘The moment I saw you, Tab, I said to myself, “Self,” I said, “that girl is almost as smart as I was when I was her age!” Now, now, don't let it go to your head. We must stay focused on the mission.’ Tab had that sceptical look again.

This time Fontagu noticed. ‘Oh, dear me, did I mention how much I'm being paid? More than enough to slip you a rather handsome fee, if I do say so myself. On top of my services already rendered, that is.’

‘How handsome is handsome?’ asked Tab, trying to sound as shrewd as possible.

‘What? Well, let's say ten silver moons. That should provide you with lodgings and food for some months.’

Tab sat back. Ten silver moons would last her beyond a year. ‘I'm in,’ she said.

In that moment, the fate of Quentaris was sealed.

# 



# A SPELL BACKFIRES

  As dusk fell, shadows lengthened, grew deeper. Some detached themselves from walls and doorways and even slithered from culverts. No ordinary shadows these, they moved through the city with enormous stealth.

Most of the shadows converged on a grand-looking building a short distance from the Archon's palace. This was the Royal Treasury. It was protected by overgrown goblins and warded by spells, but there were noticeably fewer goblins than usual, and those who stood guard were in a jovial, festive mood, and less vigilant than they might have been.

The shadows came from all directions, joining to form several small clots of darkness arranged at strategic points about the Treasury. In one of these clots a voice, barely a whisper, spoke, and another answered.

‘A fool's money is easy pickings,’ muttered the first voice. This belonged to a man called Borges, an expert thief and a somewhat better fighter. He was a great bear of a man with a shaggy beard and a bulbous nose that turned red when he was angry.

‘And who is the bigger fool? The one who pretends to be a fool, or the one who falls for it?’ asked his colleague.

Borges scowled softly in the dark. ‘You saying they're just faking? Tryin’ to trick us in?’

‘I'm saying,’ said the other man, whose voice held calm and unquestioned authority, ‘that whatever appears to be to our convenience, should be distrusted. I want you to proceed as if a trap has been laid for us. Be on your toes, Borges!’

‘As you wish, m'lord.’ Across the street a curtain was lifted as someone peered out, but just as quickly it fell back and the window was latched for the night. But in that brief radiance the second speaker's face was revealed. It was a handsome, honourable face, though slightly scarred and weathered. Dark, piercing eyes shone with a deep intelligence, and the ready grin and raised eyebrow suggested an ironic humour born of old follies and an appreciation of the foibles of human beings.

‘I will leave you now,’ said Lord Verris, though strictly speaking he was only a lord when on the bridge of his pirate ship, the *Proud Mary.* Many a city watchman considered him no more than a prince of thieves, the emphasis being on the word *thieves.* Even those who sought him most ferociously, respected him. He had never killed a man except in fair fight or self-defence, and only stole from those who – by all who reckoned such things – had too much anyway.

‘You are still determined to go alone?’

Verris paused before answering. ‘I will take Vrod, to appease your worries. But the job itself can only be accomplished by one alone. And as you keep pointing out, most of the army and half the City Watch have been seconded to the war with Tolrush.’

‘Where you're going,’ said Borges unhappily, ‘that may not count for much.’

Verris laid a hand on the other man's arm. ‘You know when to strike. We will meet later. Good hunting!’

Aye, and the same to you, m'lord.’ Only after Verris had slipped away into the darkness, did Borges add in a worried whisper, ‘And may all the sorcery in hell, stay there this night … ’



It had grown dark outside the tavern. Tab patted her full stomach and for the first time in her life felt close to contentment. The worry of how she was to steal back her silver coins and where to find lodgings had plagued her from the moment she'd escaped the orphanage. The thought of being alone in Quentaris, a city she only knew from cleaning its streets of dung, made her stomach do flip-flops. But now she had Fontagu and the promise of money.

They left the tavern and headed down Soothsayers’ Lane, trying as much as possible to look like father and daughter out for an evening stroll. They needn't have bothered. The streets of Quentaris were unusually empty, due to the festivities along the river. As Fontagu had explained, that was the precise reason they must carry out the burglary tonight. Tomorrow, the festive crowds would flood back into the city, along with a platoon of City Watch that had been detailed to police the celebrations.

Fontagu suddenly dragged Tab into a dingy lane between two towering tenements. Facing them at the end of the lane was the rear wall of some large ornate building, painted a deep maroon.

Tab's eyes widened. She whirled angrily on Fontagu. ‘The Magicians’ Guild? You want me to break into the *Magicians’* Guild? Are you insane?’

‘Keep your voice down!’ hissed Fontagu. All of a sudden he looked – well, frightened. It wasn't very reassuring.

‘There's no need to keep my voice down,’ said Tab, lowering her voice. ‘Because I am not, repeat *not,* burglarising the Magicians’ Guild.’

‘Now, now, Tab –’

‘You know what they'd do to me if they caught me? Boiling in oil would be a lot more fun!’

‘Tab, my dear girl –’ began Fontagu, whose own voice was a squeaky quaver in the gloom.

Tab stamped her foot. ‘Don't you “dear girl” me,’ she snarled. ‘You lied to me. You said it would be a walk on the pier – and I just remembered something about piers. They're dead ends!’

Fontagu suddenly straightened and it was actually quite eerie what happened next. He seemed to *change.* His voice deepened, even sounded different somehow. It was as if he had just put on one of his acting roles. And of course that's exactly what he had done. It was a role he had played many times before: Bassardo the Brave, from the extremely popular play, *Borrowed Trouble.*

As Bassardo, Fontagu tut-tutted. He now oozed confidence.

‘My dear girl,’ he began again. ‘Ordinarily I would be forced to agree. But there are three reasons why tonight that isn't so.’ And he ticked them off on his fingers. ‘First, between the war and the celebrations, most of the magicians are away … ’

‘Yeah, but some of them can fly pretty fast when they want to,’ muttered Tab.

‘Second, almost all the safeguards are designed to protect against other magicians. One like yourself, and a Dung Brigader to boot, who hasn't a speck of magic, has little to fear – you are as a flea to a dog, almost invisible to them.’

Tab's heart sank. She didn't want to be invisible if that were the case.

‘And third, you will be wearing this.’ Fontagu produced a bronze bracelet which he clipped around Tab's thin wrist. It fit snugly.

Tab eyed it suspiciously. ‘It looks like a market trinket. What is it?’

‘It is a talisman of great power, and will make you almost completely undetectable by their most powerful charms and spells.’

‘Why didn't you say that in the first place?’

‘Please, child, allow me my art. The greatest actors – the *artistes –* know best how to deliver an immortal line.’

Tab eyed him. ‘So you're really just a plain out-of-work actor?’

Fontagu drew himself up. ‘How *dare* you! There is nothing *plain* about my talent. I have played the greatest houses in Quentaris, I've been the talk of towns, admired by kings and queens. *Plain,* indeed. Why, once, I played the balcony scene in *Much Ado About Everything.* Besides, it's a well-known fact that actors make the best spies. Ask anyone.’ He lashed out and grabbed Tab as she headed off to do just that. ‘Some other time. Let us get back to the business at hand. Do you see that storm pipe outlet up there?’

Tab nodded. ‘The one with water trickling out?’ The pipe in question was about eighteen inches in diameter.

‘That's … erm … run-off from the roof,’ said Fontagu quickly. ‘You must climb in there. Take the first right-hand turn in the pipe and you'll come out at the kitchen. Head for the pantry. There's a lever on the inside of the door. It's disguised as a bean grinder.’

‘How do you know all this?’

Fontagu sighed. ‘The Archon's spies know the city's best-kept secrets. The Archon has known where his icefire gem has been stashed for many years. And he's decided that now is the time to reclaim it. With few people in the city there's less chance of anyone getting killed if anything goes wrong.’

*‘Killed?’* Tab asked. ‘You never said anything about getting –’

Fontagu managed a nervous little laugh. His persona was slipping. ‘Did I say killed? Silly me. I meant *billed.* That's an acting term. It means … erm … people finding out, knowing about you. Can't have that now, can we?’

‘Yeah, right.’

‘Well, come along now,’ Fontagu said quickly, shooing her towards the end of the lane and the drainpipe. ‘Oh, I nearly forgot. A fake wall will slide across when you pull the lever. You'll find the icefire gem resting on a pedestal. From the moment you touch it you have five minutes to get out of the building.’

‘What happens after that?’

‘That's when the *billing* begins.’ Fontagu didn't meet her eyes as he said this.

Tab was having serious second thoughts. ‘Maybe we should employ a professional thief,’ she said. Now her voice was sounding squeaky. ‘Crocodile Sal's still around. She's –’

‘Ten silver moons,’ hissed Fontagu. ‘Besides, you *owe* me. Rescue from that gutter. Protection against one seriously ugly troll. And you told me *you* are the best thief around!’

‘Yeah, but … ’

‘No time for buts,’ said Fontagu. ‘And this Sal girl isn't here and most of her thieving friends followed the army. No, we've got to move now. Here, let me hoist you up.’

Tab found herself placing a foot in Fontagu's cupped hands. ‘I still think –’

‘Allow me to do the thinking, Tab. On the count of three, then,’ said Fontagu. ‘One, two, three!’

Tab catapulted up. She clung to the edge of the drainpipe then swung her legs up to gain a better purchase. Straddling the pipe she regained her breath. ‘It doesn't half stink up here,’ she said. ‘You sure it's rain water?’ The colour of it turned her stomach. Although she'd swept muck from the streets, she never wanted to crawl through it.

‘Time is of the essence, remember!’ Fontagu called cheerily.

Tab scowled. Fontagu hadn't mentioned anything about squeezing through narrow pipes that dripped sewage. Still, there were ten silver moons to consider. She slid one foot then the other into the pipe, took a deep breath, and began crawling backwards along its length. It was a tight squeeze. Anyone even slightly bigger would never have managed it.

She'd learnt that breathing through the mouth was much better than through the nose when shovelling muck. This helped her reach the kitchen without losing her pie. She forced open a rusted grille and wriggled from the pipe, sprawling onto a cold flagstone floor. No alarms had sounded, and she blinked back sudden tears.

An angry buzzing sound filled the room. Stepping carefully, she crept past the stoves and stopped at the sight of a pot of rancid dripping. It was crawling with flies, and this was the source of the buzzing.

Used as she was to sickening smells, this one still managed to make her feel queasy. She hurried over to what looked like the door to a pantry and swung it open. Nothing looked remotely like a grinder. She snuck over to another door and easing it open she stifled her elation.

Tab reached for the grinder handle, then suddenly stopped. Did she really know what she was doing? There was something fishy about Fontagu. How did he *really* know where to find the icefire gem? She didn't buy the bit about the Archon's spies. If *they* knew where it was, they would have stolen it back themselves. And was it really a coincidence that he had been passing the drain hole just as she got stuck? Had Mrs Figgin set her up? If so, it had been a rather elaborate way to press-gang her …

Tab was furious with herself. But she was here now, and whatever else might or might not be true, she needed the money. On top of all this, a terrible loss burned deep inside her. There had been no alarms. And that meant that either Fontagu's bronze bracelet really did work, or she had no magic in her, not even the tiniest bit.

‘I don't care,’ she muttered to herself. She wiped away angry tears then yanked savagely on the lever. A wall laden with shelves of jars and bottles slid aside and a startled rat scampered out of view.



Tab froze.

The icefire gem was a crystal the size of an orange. It glowed with a beautiful bluish light, but that wasn't what bedazzled her. Deep inside it, burnt a living flame. And suddenly, it flared.

Tab felt a blinding shaft of pain in her head. ‘Eek!’ she yelped, staggering sideways, groping blindly to steady herself.

She took a deep breath then, and forced the pain away, squinting at the icefire gem. Was this some magical attack? If so, it had failed. She was still on her feet. Tab reached out, but before her trembling fingers could touch the gem, alarms began to wail throughout the building.

The pounding of running feet came from above. Swiftly, she snatched the gem from its pedestal and whirled. But the wall behind her was faster. It slammed shut, imprisoning her inside the fake pantry.

She rammed her shoulder into the door. Her teeth rattled, but still it held. At the same instant something touched her. She let out a frightened cry.

But the touch wasn't on her body. It was inside her, as though someone had dragged a ghostly feather across her mind. With it came a dizzying fragmented glimpse of the pantry door – only it was from the other side, looking up as if from the floor.

Tab began to pant. The strange vision had shaken her. It had seemed utterly real.

But she had no time for wondering. She must get out of here, and fast. Five minutes, Fontagu had said. She had less than five minutes to escape.

She pushed against the sliding door but it did not budge. Panic rose in her. Something faint and whispery touched her mind. She felt rather than saw the word ‘Danger!’ and instinctively flinched back from the door just as it whipped open.

Standing there was a tall man dressed in black. He seemed as shocked to see Tab as she was to see him. Clearly, he was no magician, but his eyes went straight to the icefire gem in Tab's fist.

He held out a hand for it. ‘Please give it to me,’ he said politely. ‘Fear not, I won't harm you.’

Oddly enough, she knew he was speaking the truth. But her survival relied heavily on the gem.

She held out the gem, then dropped it on the floor. As he moved for it, she darted past, shoved him from behind, then reached into the tangle of limbs as the man lost his balance, and snatched away the gem. She jumped backwards and hit the door lever. Instantly, the door slid shut, entombing the stranger inside. She heard an almost merry chuckle and a muffled, ‘Well done.’

Tab barely had time to gather her wits. Doors were slamming elsewhere in the building, and the running feet were coming closer.

Tab scurried across the kitchen and put her ear to the door. No, not this way. She slid a bar across, locking it, then darted to the grille by which she had entered. She thrust her head inside and heard strange barking coughs. White-faced, she withdrew. They were using ferras. The rift world predators loved tunnels. And shredding their prey when they caught it.

That way was closed. Worse, the ferras would soon be in the kitchen. She dragged a heavy cabinet in front of the grille and hoped it would slow them down, then looked about frantically. The creatures could pop up anywhere!

The rat she had seen earlier suddenly darted out from under the kitchen worktable and disappeared beneath a bench. Tab blinked. A second later, she heaved the bench aside revealing a drain used for washing down the floor. But it was too narrow, even for her. She would never fit into it. Not with her clothes on. Unless …

Tab ripped off her tunic and tore down her breeches. Stripped to her underclothes she grabbed the cooking pot of putrid dripping. An ugly swarm of flies rose to defend it. Her gorge rising, she scooped out two handfuls of the rancid muck and smeared it all over her body.

A loud impact jarred the barred door. Tab raised her hands, ready to jump. There was a soft knocking from inside the pantry. Oh, no. She had completely forgotten about the man in black. If the magicians caught him in there they would assume he had stolen the icefire gem and he would be tortured in the most horrible ways.

But there was no time to worry about anyone else's welfare.

Grunting, she snatched the grille from the drain and flung it aside. Then she grabbed a ball of string from a wall peg, the kind used to tie up turkeys and legs of lamb. She knotted one end to the pantry lever and wrapped the other in her fist.

Then she expelled all the air from her lungs and sucked in her stomach.

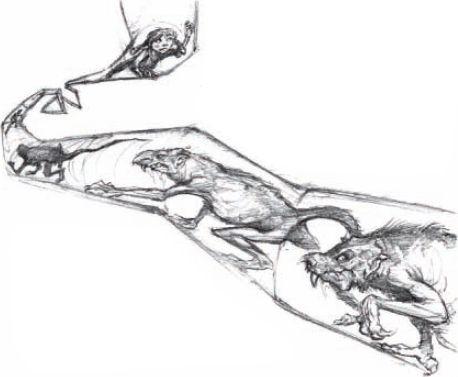
‘This is becoming a habit,’ she said breathlessly, and jumped into the drain. At once the string pulled tight. She heard the pantry door slam open, then she was falling.

Down she swirled, around and around. Narrow walls scraped her, corners slashed and bruised her. Tab turned around so many times, she became dizzy. At one point, she slid to a stop then realised she had breathed in. Maybe that was why she had become dizzy. But there was nothing for it: she expelled her breath again, wriggled frantically, and resumed her downward plunge.

Finally she came to a jarring halt that would have winded her if she had had any air in her lungs. Holding up the icefire gem and using it as a source of light, she saw that she had landed in a slightly larger drain. Far above, she could make out the noises of a battle. Though it was nothing to her, she nonetheless hoped the polite stranger had made it out of the building in one piece.

Gasping for breath, Tab slithered forward but quickly realised the pipe led to a dead end. Then she heard it. The soft barking cough of a ferra.

Shivering, she scrambled back up the way she had come, scrabbling at the slithery sides of the pipe. Fortunately, there were big patches of furry mould growing everywhere and these gave her some purchase. She made her way back to a fork and without hesitating dived into the other branch.



She plummeted, picking up alarming speed. With all her might she dug her knees into the sides of the pipe, but slowed only a little. Then she saw a light at the end of the tunnel. The pipe levelled out and her headlong plunge slowed to a stop.

Luckily she had landed in the main drain.

A petulant voice said, ‘Well, are you going to sit in there all day? You have no idea of the danger I've been in, waiting out here.’

‘The danger *you've* been in?’ Tab exclaimed. Muttering, she crawled towards the exit on hands and knees. As a precaution she stuck the gem into the waistband of her undergarments, then found she was stuck fast.

‘Come *on,’* said Fontagu. He sounded frightened. The alarms were still ringing up in the Magicians’ Guild.

‘I'm stuck!’ Tab tried to free herself but whatever had snared her wasn't letting go.

‘I can't stay here forever,’ said Fontagu. ‘My legs are cramping. I know, throw me the gem and I'll get help.’

Tab had no intention of parting with the gem until she had her money. It wasn't only Fontagu's frozen-on smile, it was just that she had learned in her short life not to trust anybody.

‘Get me out of here first,’ said Tab.

‘Give me the gem and I'll reward you with a gift more precious than anything,’ said Fontagu. Oddly enough, this time Tab thought he was telling the truth – or as much of it as he could bring himself to tell.

‘You've already offered ten silver moons,’ Tab said, struggling to free herself.

‘Nothing compared to what I'm offering you now,’ said Fontagu, reaching into the pipe as far as he could. Then his eyes widened in fright. His feet were slipping. ‘Hurry!’

Their fingertips touched.

Tab heard the now familiar sound of the ferras. She didn't need to see them to know they were coming for her. With tremendous effort she stretched, feeling her joints crack. She managed to hook her fingers into Fontagu's.

‘Suck in your breath!’ he said.

‘I am!’ Tab wheezed. ‘I think I'm stuck on something!’

Something ripped. Tab slid forward. She collided with Fontagu and both toppled to the ground. Tab cracked her head on the cobblestones of the laneway, dropping the gem.

When she sat up, rubbing her temple, Fontagu was holding the icefire. It blazed its sepulchral light. ‘Mine!’ he crowed.

‘Your cloak would be nice,’ said Tab, trying to cover herself and thankful for the darkness.

Fontagu blinked, then looked away, unclasping his cloak. Tab wrapped herself in it. Despite everything that had happened, she wrinkled her nose at the smell of rancid dripping.

‘I'll have my ten silver moons now,’ she said. ‘You've got what you wanted.’

Fontagu sniffed, his lip curled. ‘Normally, I would suggest a bath for someone in your condition, but as promised, I will give you something of far greater value than that paltry sum.’

‘That paltry sum will do fine, thank you,’ Tab said, holding out a greasy hand.

‘You can't pocket what I offer,’ said Fontagu. He shook his head. ‘Oh no. What I have is priceless. *Advice.* Leave the city within the hour. Your life may depend upon it.’

‘Give me what's owing!’ Tab demanded, but Fontagu had turned and bolted from the laneway.

Speechless, Tab stared after him. At the end of the laneway, Fontagu called back over his shoulder. ‘Flee!’ he warned, then hurried from sight.

Tab wanted to scream. She looked down at the useless bracelet he had given her. With a quick tug she yanked it off her wrist and threw it as hard as she could down the alleyway.

In one day she had been kicked out of the orphanage, chased by a troll and promised riches beyond belief. She had robbed the Magicians’ Guild at risk of life and limb and had achieved absolutely nothing for it.

Unbelievable.

‘That's it,’ she said, bridling. ‘I've had enough.’ Tab broke into a run and went after Fontagu.

But when she reached the street, the shyster was nowhere to be seen.

She cursed. How was she to find him in the dark? As though her words had caused it, thick clouds parted and a full moon shone through, bathing the street in silver. That was better, but it still didn't help.

She hurried to the end of the street and looked up and down the cross-junction. Fontagu could have gone either way. It was hopeless.

Hot tears stung her eyes and she sat down on a doorstep. It was still her birthday, but it was the worst birthday she had ever had. She almost managed a smile when she thought back to the morning. There she had been, homeless and destitute … and yet ten times better off than she was now. At least she had had clothes.

Tab sighed. Could things get any worse?

Suddenly she stiffened. She had felt that feathery touch again. Fear flooded her. But before she could react she had another vision, only this one made her feel physically ill: it was as though she was on a storm-tossed ship, but what she saw also made her gasp …

She was high above the Square of Dreams, pitching from side to side in the gusty wind. Even though she was high up, she saw everything on the ground with a startling clarity. And one of the things she saw was Fontagu Wizroth. As she watched, he skirted the night market and slipped into an old abandoned building in one of the alleyways off the Square. A faint hooting, like the noise an owl makes, reached Tab's ears and she saw a horde of magicians sweep across the rooftops of the city, peering down at the streets, their faces stark and angry.

Tab recognised the old slaughter-house Fontagu had entered. It had also had holding pens in years gone by but its owners had fallen on hard times and their business had closed down. A good thing too. Their livestock used to make the streets around there run with dung. She leapt up and ran.



Taking every short cut across the city, she soon stood outside the slaughterhouse. She thought the name very apt, considering what she would like to do to Fontagu when she got her hands on him. She hurried forward but at the next moment stopped in her tracks. What was she doing?

Fontagu couldn't actually be here, could he? She hadn't seen him with her own eyes, she had just – it hit her then: she had seen him *with someone else's eyes!*

The idea made her shiver. Crazy people thought like that. How could you see with someone else's eyes? Maybe … maybe she was hallucinating; maybe the icefire gem had affected her mind. A deep pang of fear struck her then, but she quickly pushed it aside. She took a deep breath. There was one way to find out if she was mad or not – though a small voice in her head whispered that it might be better to be crazy than to be right – just this once …

No one saw her climb through a broken window.

The inside of the shuttered building was large and spooky. Low-ceilinged, gloomy, criss-crossed with enormous beams blackened with age, the place was a museum of shadows, cobwebs and long-forgotten death, still smelling faintly of stale blood and urine.

Tab stepped on something sharp.

‘Ouch!’ she yelped, hopping on one foot. She peered under her foot and saw a sharp angle of glass protruding from her instep. Gritting her teeth, she pulled it out. Blood flowed, and after that she limped, muttering curses under her breath.

Tab prowled around the enormous space. There were dozens of pens and stalls and even some quite large enclosures hidden away from view. She limped from one opening to another, peering into each, and leaving a speckled trail of blood wherever she went. After ten minutes of this she stopped, inclining her head slightly to listen. She had heard something. A soft murmur. She moved closer, careful to make no noise. Chanting. That's what it was.

Tab crept forward. There. Pulsating light stabbed the ceiling like rays of bluish sunlight. Tab came to a doorway. The door was slightly ajar. Through the gap she could see Fontagu squatting beside his open bag. In front of him was some sort of pedestal. The magicians’ gem was clutched within a metal fist on top, the bronze fingers glowing with each pulse of the icefire.

Tab didn't have a plan. She considered dashing in, knocking Fontagu off his feet, grabbing the gem, and running for it. There were, however, a couple of hitches to this. One was that the gem looked firmly embedded within the metal fist. Another was that her running days were temporarily over, thanks to her injured foot. Pity. Fontagu would have had to pay her a lot more than ten silver moons to get it back.

Silently, she pushed the door open and edged into the room. Fontagu was absorbed by his task and did not look up. Whatever he was up to, it was not going well. He was sweating, and repeating certain parts of the chant.

‘No, no, not like that, you fool!’ he muttered to himself. He started again, reading from a torn scrap of paper, chanting the words, but the sweat kept getting in his eyes and he blinked and wiped his face with his shirt sleeve.

Tab realised he was frightened.

‘What are you doing?’ she asked suddenly.

Fontagu jumped and clutched his chest, as if he were having a heart attack. ‘You? What are you doing here?’ he hissed. ‘Go away.’

‘You owe me ten silver moons.’

Fontagu must have seen she was determined to stay. ‘Oh, very well!’ He reached into his bag, quickly counted out some coins, and threw them at her. Tab scurried about, collecting them. The money paid, she now felt inclined to forgive and forget past grievances; besides, curiosity was burning a hole in her head, as they say in Quentaris.

‘What are you doing?’ she asked again.

‘None of your business,’ said Fontagu. ‘Now, if you must stand around and gawk, kindly do so silently.’

Fontagu took a deep breath, held up the scrap of paper where he could see it, and recommenced his chanting. The words were strange. Tab had heard nothing like them in her life. They sounded old, and filled her with a bleak sadness and a kind of wistfulness for something lost long ago. Then the tone changed, and an ugliness crept into the language. These words made her think of death.

Just then, Fontagu happened to look up and catch her eye. He had nearly finished the chant and had only to apply the sealing phrase, and all would be done. But with Tab's quizzical, innocent look upon him, he suddenly grew terribly nervous, and stuttered.

*‘Ab-ab-abathtir – ku-ku-kumeer* … *ilso ibn ye-ye-yethris* … ’

And it was done. But Fontagu didn't appear happy.

‘Something wrong?’ asked Tab, still fascinated by what she knew must be magic.

Fontagu was packing his bag.

‘Wh-what? Don't be ridiculous. Everything went according to plan.’ But he didn't sound convinced and he was now perspiring more than ever.

He gave a sudden yelp as the icefire gem began to glow a deep, ugly, purplish colour and emitted a cascade of golden sparks which burned wherever they landed. Tab dodged a couple.

‘What's happening?’ she asked.

The bronzed fingers unclenched with sharp *clinks* as though they too had just been burnt.

‘Erm … that's quite normal,’ he said. ‘Nothing to worry about.’

‘Then why are you so scared?’

Fontagu gave her a look that could kill, and drew himself up. ‘I, scared? Preposterous!’

‘You're sweating.’

‘I'm merely portraying a role, something you would know nothing about. This particular role requires sweating.’

The icefire had begun to vibrate. Somehow, it seemed to make the whole building tremble. Fontagu swallowed hard.

‘I think it might be time to –’

A blinding flash of light burst from the icefire, searing everything around it. This was followed by a roar so terrible that it made both Tab and Fontagu cover their ears and double over in pain.

‘Run,’ cried Fontagu\* when the noise had abated. ‘Run for your life!’ He didn't wait to see if Tab heeded his advice. He took off, showing a surprising turn of speed in one his age.

Tab stood transfixed. But only for a second. Now the building was definitely shaking, and she feared it might come down on her head at any moment. She half-ran, half-limped after Fontagu. Outside, she staggered as the wind, screaming like a banshee, hit her and nearly threw her back inside the slaughterhouse. Glancing back she saw several of the enormous crossbeams crash down onto the floor.

Almost inconceivably, something told Tab she had to go back upstairs. No matter what, her future depended on the next few minutes. She saw Fontagu then, making his way back to the slaughterhouse. On impulse more than desire, cursing her conscience, she fled back upstairs.

She scrambled over debris and peered into the room where the icefire lay. It seemed harmless enough – discounting the white vapour trails that were even now dissipating like ghosts.

Holding her breath Tab clasped the icefire gem. Against all her expectations it felt deathly cold, as though all the life had drained from it. She bundled it up in her cloak and fled.

Five minutes later Tab was still cursing herself. She had hidden the gem as best she could, but for what purpose? All reason eluded her. But she had no time to ponder her actions. The ground bucked and rocked as she stumbled across it. Above, the sky was darkening rapidly. She watched a squad of magicians wheel and whirl as they fought the sudden gusts of air, then descend quickly to the ground, unable to remain airborne.

Tab fled as fast as her wound allowed. She had no idea what was happening, but as usual her curiosity overcame her concern for her own skin – unlike Fontagu whom she had just evaded and could now see hightailing it for the main gate, presumably intending to get out of Quentaris as quickly as he could.

She hurried across the square, making for the city wall to gain a vantage point. Only dimly was she aware that dark clouds had piled up with unbelievable speed. Then, as suddenly as it had come, the wind died as though they had entered the eye of some unseen storm. The next moment, however, every dog in the city began yapping and howling. The hair on the back of Tab's neck stood up.

‘What have you done, Fontagu?’ she murmured to herself. ‘And what did I let you do?’

Tab clutched the cloak tight and kept running. As she ran strange visions jolted her. Dozens of torrential fragments, disjointed glimpses, shards and slivers of things half seen, darted through her mind. She reached the city wall, pounded up to one of the watch-platforms, and had to suddenly clutch her head. She felt dizzy and sick, and would have been scared if the rest of the world hadn't been going just as crazy.

Then the glimpses stopped. She breathed a sigh of relief just as an eerie silence fell upon the city. Tab looked up, and gasped.

The bruised, purplish clouds looked like the coiled intestines of some enormous beast. A vast vortex had formed, circling slowly above Quentaris like a gigantic whirlpool turned upside-down. Thunder pealed. Lightning jagged, setting off ear-splitting detonations.

Everything began to shake. The vibration started deep in the earth beneath Quentaris, spread up through the rock on which the city was built, and made the houses tremble, great and small. The tallest towers shook.

Then, with an indescribable din and a shaking that knocked Tab off her feet, the entire city of Quentaris, hills, harbour and all, wrenched free from the earth that had cradled it for over a thousand years, and rose shudderingly up into the sky, higher and higher, revolving faster and faster.

A party of adventurers led by the famous rift guide, Rad de La'rel, was just leaving a rift cave in the mountain range. They were galloping down the embankment as though Zolka had broken through the rifts. Then those in the vanguard toppled like bowled skittles. The ground shook like a blanket. Laden donkeys and horses whinnied, fear-crazed.



Tab held firmly onto the nearest parapet. The city trembled as it rose into the clouds with a tremendous roar of crushing rock and grinding chaos. There was a terrifying moment of blackness – then a sickening transition before blinding sunlight burst upon Quentaris. The city was still spinning, but slowly now … until it was sucked into the churning mouth of the vortex.

People stumbled about, dazed by what had befallen them. Unbelievably none of the city's buildings had collapsed – magic bonding had held them firm – but anything loose such as market tables and wagons had been smashed to kindling. One by one the survivors of this catastrophe realised that their entire city was now drifting like a sky pirate's ship over unfamiliar terrain.

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\* Go to www.quentaris.com to find out how Fontagu was blackmailed into invoking the Spell of Undoing and by whom.

# 



# ONE YEAR LATER

  It had been a year of enormous change.

Tab stood on the port-side battlements where she had stood exactly a year before, gazing out over the city. Bathed in brilliant sunlight, the waters of the now-enclosed harbour sparkling, Quentaris was a buzz of activity. It was market day down in the town. A forest of gaily coloured stalls and awnings, not to mention some large outlandish umbrellas, had blossomed in the city square, clustering about the base of the mainmast.

Overhead, vast canvas sails crackled and snapped in the wind. The spider web of rigging bounced. Tab craned her neck, staring up at the colossal world of rope and canvas, of bouncing catwalks, towers, turrets, and a complex bridge structure from which Quentaris was steered. Squinting against the sun's bril liance, Tab saw the tiny figures of riggers, canvassers, splicers, knot-men, dousers, lookouts, mizzen-men and the former roofies who made excellent sky sailors – not to mention officers and midshipmen – crawling and bobbing amidst the broad sheets of canvas.

Quentaris looked exactly like an enormous sailing ship, from the rift hills at the stern, to the jutting bowsprit of the prow, and various great masts in between. And, just like such a ship, Quentaris *sailed.*

Only it wasn't the sea that it sailed upon. It was the sky. Tab leaned out over the parapet and stared into … space. A cloud wafted past. She looked down as Quentaris cast its huge shadow over the alien terrain far below. A herd of galumphing, three-horned creatures stampeded. The fear-crazed animals left a trail of billowing reddish dust in their wake. Above, a flock of sharp-beaked birds with pink plumage flitted amidst the immense masts and rigging. The fore-topsail and main-topsail were fully bloated. Everyone had become accustomed to the ever-present raucous flapping of the city's sails. With a fresh breeze, Quentaris was travelling at a swift six knots.

Tab never tired of this sight.

She thought Quentaris, a city she had always loved, had become magnificent. Indeed, in some fashion that she couldn't quite put her finger on, Quentaris had come *alive.* The sails were its lungs, capturing great gasps of air to thrust it on its way; the rigging was its sinews, holding everything together; the masts, its bones; and the great slab of earthen rock upon which the city and harbour and surrounding wall sat, its flesh and organs. The sails crackled, the rigging sang, and the two great engine houses - port and starboard – throbbed rhythmically as they converted the magical energy of icefire into the ire ore that powered the gigantic propellers that were used when the winds died and the city becalmed.

Despite all this, Tab shivered as she remembered the Rupture itself, the wrenching upheaval that had thrown Quentaris into the rift vortex that had formed in the sky. Tab knew that Fontagu and the stolen icefire gem had been responsible. She even knew the name of the spell used, having returned to the slaughterhouse to find both the gemstone and the scrap of paper bearing the words Fontagu had muttered.

Only by then, all the words, except for the sealing phrase, were fading even as she stared at the note. Later she had looked up the remaining words in an ancient book of charms in the library of the Magicians’ Guild. Only one spell used such words.

The Spell of Undoing.

From the entry, she had come to understand that somehow Fontagu had messed up. The Spell of Undoing, used properly, should have ‘undone’ the city: undone its prosperity, its luck, its success in battle, as well as the workings of the rift caves. In the process, many might have died.

But it had somehow gone wrong, perhaps because of Fontagu's nervous mispronunciation of the final words.

Instead, it had ‘undone’ Quentaris in much the way that one popped a cork from a bottle and threw it away. Tab knew this wasn't a very ‘magical’ way of thinking, but it helped her make sense of what had happened.

Of course, no one knew of her involvement in the Rupture, nor of Fontagu's. She dreaded the day the citizens of Quentaris found out. Without a doubt they would hang Fontagu from the nearest spar. Tab, who had merely distracted Fontagu at the critical moment, might simply be thrown overboard or, if the citizens were feeling generous, keelhauled.

Quentaris had a *very* large keel.

On the other hand, there were a few who pointed out that the theft of the icefire had summoned a great many magicians back to Quentaris, in time to be marooned along with everyone else. And without the magicians, there would be no Navigators’ Guild; without the magicians, there would be no hope of finding their way home.

Without the magicians, Tab would also not have become an apprentice guildswoman, clerical division. Being a runner and a clerk was a long way from being a magician, but at least she got to loiter with magicians and, when she was lucky, to see magic at work in its various forms: Earth, Air, Fire and Water.

A sweeper came slowly towards her along the wall. His cap was pulled down over his face and he seemed intent on his work, though Tab saw that he handled his broom sloppily, almost with disdain – as if he thought himself meant for better things.

‘This is *so* demeaning,’ said Fontagu, looking up from his broom. He leaned on it, scowling at Tab's big grin. ‘And look what they make me wear. Grey. I ask you, how can you make a statement with grey?’ He brushed some grime from his tunic and sniffed.

‘Well,’ said Tab, ‘that's your lot for my keeping quiet about your causing this mess. I believe the Dung Brigaders still have vacancies, if you'd like to apply.’

Fontagu paled. ‘No, no, not at all! Look, see, see how much I love my work!’ He started sweeping vigorously but only managed to conjure up a dust cloud that sent them both into great splutters of coughing. Fontagu sighed gloomily. ‘I'm not really very good at this.’

‘I would never have noticed.’

‘Did you know that it takes a whole month to walk around the entire perimeter wall? A *month.* Rain or shine. Around and around, that's what I do, around and around and around … ’

He really did sound depressed. And dizzy.

‘You have only yourself to blame,’ said Tab, trying not to feel sorry for the old scoundrel. Any attempt to find out *why* Fontagu had tried to sabotage Quentaris had been unsuccessful. But Tab would find out one day. She promised herself that much.

Fontagu sighed again. ‘If only I could wear some thing a little more … stylish. And colourful. And, oh dear, do look at my fingernails! I don't suppose I'll ever be able to enter polite society again.’

‘Well –’ Something in the way she said this made Fontagu's head whip around. He looked at her hopefully.

‘What? You've found me a better line of work? Something in keeping with my sublime talents?’

‘On my errands I noticed a scroll outside the Paragon Playhouse. I asked Lorenzo about it. He needs a –’ began Tab.

Fontagu shivered with delight and clapped his hands. ‘No, no, don't tell me. They need a leading man? Someone commanding, handsome, a man of action, and yet with a heart that melts the ladies.’ He saw Tab's look. Apprehension swept across his face. ‘An understudy? A small part, perhaps –?’

‘They need a prompt.’

Fontagu stared. He mouthed the word *prompt* in horror, then stamped his foot petulantly. ‘I won't! I absolutely and most assuredly won't. Who do you think I am? Some bit-part actor desperate to get his nose in the business for the first time? Why, once I was the toast of towns. My name was up in candlelight, on the marquee itself! I – I just couldn't … it wouldn't be me … to squander such talent … to be so close and yet so far … to look but not to touch … Oh. Oh. Oh, all right, I'll do it!’ he snapped. ‘When do I start?’

‘Tomorrow. Tell Lorenzo that I sent you. He owes me a favour or two.’

Fontagu grumbled something.

‘If that was a “thank you”, you're welcome.’

Fontagu gave her a sharp look. ‘Well, excuse me for not falling on my knees and kissing your feet. I do believe my present situation is due, in part at least, to your … what shall we call it?’

‘Blackmail?’

‘Exactly. Seems I recall you promising to tell everyone where to find me if I *didn't* take this job. And for the record, you little vixen, I admit to nothing!’

Tab shrugged, feeling only a tinge of guilt. ‘Admit it, you deserve a lot worse. Anyway, from tomorrow, your situation will be much improved.’

Fontagu looked nervously at Tab. ‘He – he won't change his mind?’

‘The job is yours.’

Fontagu leaned against the outer parapet. He pressed the back of his hand to his forehead. ‘I feel quite faint,’ he said. Suddenly he turned and flung his broom over the low railing. Tab leaned forward and watched it fall, trying not to grin. Five thousand feet below, the huge shadow of Quentaris was sliding over a forest. Clustered on its outskirts were several hamlets surrounded by the ploughed patchwork of fields.

Tab frowned. The broom, now lost to view, would still be falling. She edged back a bit. She didn't have the best head for heights. ‘I hope you don't brain somebody down there.’

‘I will need a disguise of course,’ said Fontagu suddenly. ‘So many know this noble face of mine, it's sure to stand out.’

Tab mentally cringed.

‘I'd better go and prepare,’ said Fontagu. He looked down at himself. ‘And I'll need clothes.’ The excitement in his voice was suddenly cut by a groan. ‘But I haven't the price of an old boot!’

Tab held out several copper rounds.

Fontagu gave her a puzzled look, but quickly pocketed the coins. ‘Happy birthday,’ Tab said.

Fontagu's eyebrows lifted. ‘I don't believe it's my –’

‘No, it's *mine.’*

‘Oh.’ Fontagu blinked. ‘Well, may you have glad tidings this day and lifelong prosperity. But really, I must dash. I have to see my tailor.’

And with that he hurried off.

Alone again, Tab returned her gaze to the miles of rigging and sails – a world unto itself, which had become known as ‘upside’\*\* – and wondered if her best friend, Philmon, was on duty right now. She watched sky sailors clambering along spars, amongst rigging, or swaying on rope bridges that stretched between the enormous masts.

The masts themselves were a sight to behold and had been taken from a forest of gigantic trees – each hundreds of feet in diameter and as much as a thousand feet high. They were so huge that rooms, tunnels, stairways and winch-elevators had been hewn into the trunks themselves. The immensely tough but amazingly light trees had been found growing plentifully in the first rift world the Spell of Undoing had flung them into. It was their luck to have found a fairly peaceful world – unlike the one that followed – and thus some time to adapt to their new situation. Tab remembered it clearly …

Quentaris had started to spin as it climbed towards the gaping mouth of the vortex.

Faster and faster it turned, entering the whirlpool and slowly climbing its sides. Here the light was dim, like the light before a storm or a catastrophe. The city shuddered and rocked, and the spinning vortex threw down great lightning strikes which blasted houses and towers. Fires broke out. At the very apex of the whirlpool, where it was narrowest, a peculiar stillness reigned. Below, great chunks of rock fell from Quentaris, plunging down into the gaping chasm left in the land below.

The noise was tremendous. It was a miracle that Quentaris’ under-city had remained pretty much unscathed.

At the very top of the whirlpool, blackness engulfed them. People screamed and all of the city's animals howled, or bayed or cried out in whatever voice they had. Tab's legs shook and she had to clutch the bat tlements to stay upright.

Others had gathered at the wall, and most had shut their eyes in fear soon after the vortex swallowed them, but Tab had resisted the temptation. She wanted to *see.*

The climactic ending – later called the ‘Rupture’ or ‘Upheaval’ – lasted only seconds. A sickening transition followed, then blinding sunlight burst upon Quentaris.

From all about came the sound of cheering and laughter.

But slowly it subsided. The word spread quickly, and where it spread a hush fell. Everyone rushed to the walls and peered over, to see for themselves.

Quentaris, still spinning, was rapidly slowing. But that wasn't what caused the great silence. Quentaris was now a floating city, drifting amongst clouds. Beneath the level on which the city was built, a great jagged shaft of rock projected downwards for hundreds of feet, much like the roots of a tooth.

No one ever managed to explain why Quentaris floated, why it didn't just crash to the ground, killing everyone. But float it did, and in the end the best theory was the simplest one: that the same magical spell which had torn them from their world and hurled them through the vortex into another, also kept them afloat.

And while fear had come quickly, being airborne also brought hope. A floating Quentaris might one day find its way home … if it survived …

Indeed, that first day a wind picked up and slowly pushed Quentaris towards a range of high mountains. Fortunately, the wind dropped and instead of crashing into jagged peaks, Quentaris came to a gentle rest against them.

Quickly, the city's engineers made Quentaris fast. The nearby countryside was scoured, the forests of huge trees discovered, a plan hatched. Shipwrights and carpenters plied their adzes, augers and caulking hammers. Sail makers got to work and soon great swatches of canvas and rigging were stretching across the city. The dockyards stayed open day and night.

Quentaris would not just be a floating rock at the mercy of the wind.

It would be *controlled.* It would be *navigable.*

And it was the magicians who would do the navigating. Now more than ever, Tab wanted to be one of them …



Tab realised with a start that the morning was passing. She glanced at the scroll in her hand. There was no way she would get far in the Navigators’ Guild if she couldn't even deliver a letter on time.

She headed for the Naval Headquarters, located in and around the mainmast. She made her way hurriedly to the Square of the People, dodging market stalls and managing to buy nothing, which wasn't hard, especially when the vendors saw her apprentice's tunic. Everyone knew how poorly paid apprentices were.

Tab reached the imposing sculpted entrance of the Naval Headquarters, and stopped as she always did to look up. Rising straight and sheer above her, the massive polished trunk of the mainmast – en crusted here and there with barnacle-like dwellings, protuberances and walkways – rose to a dizzying height. The section known as ‘uppermost’ was just a vague shape lost in misty cloud.

Tab gulped, and hurried inside. A moment later …

Uh-oh, she thought as she swept through the doors of the despatches department.

The Archon's nephew, Florian Eftangeny, was on duty. Tab bit her lower lip. She had won her job as Quartermaster Dorissa's personal clerical assistant fair and square, but Florian had been next in line and the Archon's nephew hated her for it. To be beaten by an ex-Dung Brigader!

‘Running little errands, are we?’ sneered Florian, eyeing the scroll in her hand. His slug-like upper lip curled scornfully. ‘Haven't really advanced very far, have we?’

Tab flushed. Florian, a short, plump boy with a moon-shaped face, sour expression and receding hairline, always managed to hit a nerve with Tab. It was as if he could read her mind – or her fears.

Florian snorted. ‘Put it over there,’ he said, pointing languidly to an in-tray.

‘It's to be hand-delivered to First Lieutenant Crankshaft immediately,’ Tab said firmly.

Florian smirked. ‘Is it now? Well I'll deliver it myself then.’ He fingered the jewelled dagger in his belt. All the children wore daggers these days, just as all the adults wore swords. Times were uncertain. ‘Put it in the in-tray and get out of here. I've more important matters on hand than to talk to a witless rift girl.’

Stung, Tab nevertheless dropped the scroll in the in-tray. Such scrolls were usually urgent communiqués between navigators and sailors. If Florian failed to deliver it within a set time, *she* would get into trouble. And that was all she needed.

‘You'll remember it's there?’ Tab pressed.

Florian didn't bother to look up.



Tab slept uneasily that night, tossing and turning. Finally she woke, drenched in sweat. Taking a cool drink of limewater she lay back down, staring at the ceiling. Maybe she should have insisted on delivering the scroll to the first lieutenant. But no, there was no way she could have. Clerical assistants weren't allowed upside. And she couldn't make that idiot Florian do anything. He was almost as useless as his uncle, the Archon.

Tab tried to go back to sleep, but couldn't. Almost at once she was conscious of a feathery sensation in her mind. She had felt it many times this past year. Knowing what was about to happen, she tensed, frightened. And with a sickening lurch, she found herself in a dungeon.

She was low down, close to the floor. In her immediate field of vision were flagstones slick with scum, some large metal poles, and a snout from which whiskers jutted. She was seeing with the eyes of a rat. To some extent, she also felt the rat's awareness. The rat was hungry. It had been searching for food for some time now. The sound of water dripping sporadically came to it. Then a scream.

The view froze. The rat, sitting in shadow, did not dare move. There were more screams, hopeless and high-pitched, as if a child were being hurt. Tab's heart ached for the screams’ owner. The rat started to edge back into deeper shadow. >>>No>> The other way – find out what's happening!

Tab had no idea of what she had done, but suddenly – back in her room, Tab gasped – the rat obeyed. Tab felt a dizzy excitement. Was she actually controlling the rat? Or had it just decided to investigate the noises itself? That seemed unlikely.

The rat scuttled forward, darting between the metal poles which Tab now realised were the bars of a cell. It crossed a passageway and nosed in between more bars, edging along the wall and into the shadows cast by a bunk bed.

A youth and two men, all with cruel faces, occupied the cell. One was torturing a small boy with a pale, freckled face and sandy-coloured hair. The boy, who must have been about eight years old, screamed again. His face was wet with tears and his upper lip and chin were covered with snot.

‘Where is the icefire?’ demanded one of the men. At a nod from the questioner, a brute of a man tightened a knotted rope around the boy's throat. ‘What did you say?’ the interrogator demanded. ‘Speak up!’

Tab was breathing heavily. An uncharacteristic anger was building up. She could tell from their livery that they were Tolrushians, but how could the enemy be on board Quentaris?

Tab now saw the main speaker more clearly. He was a boy of about fourteen, but dressed in rich clothes. He had a crafty look about him. ‘We know your people have icefire,’ he snarled, ‘and we will have it from them!’

The victim whimpered. Tab could see that he was very, very scared.

The torturer tightened the rope. The boy choked, and fainted. The boy-leader scowled. ‘Leave him for now,’ he said, spitting on the straw-strewn floor. ‘There are other matters at hand – prey, for instance.’

One of the men cleared his throat. ‘You still mean to attack, then?’

‘I do.’

‘Is that wise, m'lord, when our own icefire fuel is so depleted?’

The boy-leader stopped at the door, eyeing his advisor. ‘There is more than one source of icefire, Genkis. There is also the matter of revenge.’

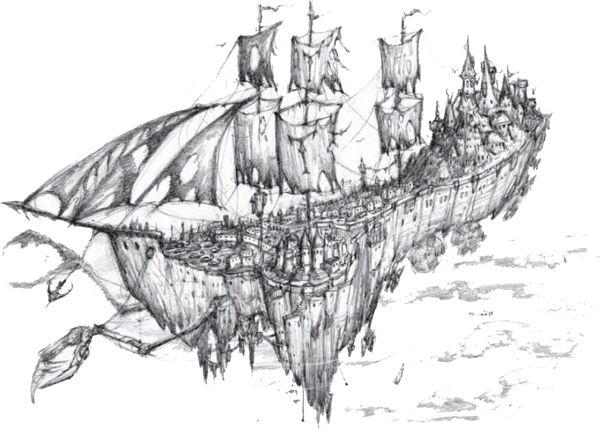
The boy stalked out of the cell. No one noticed the rat watching from the shadows.

Abruptly Tab's vision lurched again. This time she was wheeling through the sky. On either side, great bat-like wings slowly flapped. The view banked hard, and into her line of sight swept something that left her stunned.

Floating in dense cloud was a city.

Above it stretched enormous sails, torn and tattered and filthy. A grim castle bulged from the port side prow, and huge grappling arms like crab claws projected forward on either side of the bowsprit. The whole thing had an evil look. Like a sky pirate's ship. Or a man-o’-war.

Tab had never seen such a place, but she recognised it immediately.



Tolrush.

It couldn't be, but it was. Tolrush had become a flying city, just like Quentaris. And slowly it dawned on Tab that Fontagu had inadvertently pulled Tolrush into the spell so that the two cities had, in that moment of Rupture, been magically joined. What had happened to one, had happened to the other. And who knew what other cities had also been ripped into the vortex?

Tab's heart thudded with sudden realisation. Judging by what the boy-leader had said, the Tolrushians blamed Quentaris for their misfortune.

Which could only mean …

Tab sat bolt upright.

She dressed hurriedly and ran as fast as her legs could carry her to the Navigators’ Guild headquarters. She didn't stop at the gates. A guard yelled a warning and she felt an arrow hiss swiftly past her shoulder. Angry shouts followed. She ran faster.

Breathless, she skidded to a stop outside the operations room. By now alarms were clanging. The doorway opened suddenly, revealing several guards.

‘Gotcha!’ someone snarled from behind. Tab was whisked off her feet.

‘Put her down,’ said a calm voice.

The guard dropped her and Tab went sprawling. When she looked up she saw a navigator staring quizzically down at her. She's scanning me – seeing if there's any danger, Tab realised.

‘What is it, child, that brings you here in the dead of night?’ The woman's face was gentle and her voice soothing. But Tab knew that with one flick of her finger, the magician could kill her.

Tab took a deep breath. ‘I've seen Tolrush,’ she said quickly. ‘It was pulled into the rift worlds at the same time we were. They're after icefire and … they blame us for what's happened to them. We have to do something, they're coming for us!’

One of the guards sniggered but was cut short by a stern glance from the navigator. ‘How is it that you know these things? You're a clerical assistant, are you not?’

Tab looked down at her feet. ‘Yes, ma'am.’

‘You were tested for ability with mage-craft?’

Tab's voice grew smaller. ‘Yes, ma'am.’ It had been one of the worst days of her life. She had actually managed to persuade Dorissa to have her tested, only to discover that she lacked even a speck of magical skill. She had cried for a week.

‘And you say you had a vision?’

Tab paused before answering. So far she had told no one about her odd ability, not even Philmon. At first, it had scared her. She thought she was going mad. And then she had feared what others might think. Mind-melding with animals was almost unheard of. She was scared that people would think she must be evil to have such a talent. Sometimes she thought that too.

And so she lied. ‘I had a vision – yes … ’

The magician did not appear to be angry. She patted Tab's shoulder. ‘Your heart was in the right place, child. You feared for your city and for your friends and family —’



And why should this child fear?’

Tab gaped. Stelka had arrived. Tab had seen the Chief Navigator many times, but never this close. She didn't seem too pleased either.

Her hair was dishevelled and her usually powdered face was pasty, her pouting lips pallid. The middle of the night was not kind to Stelka, and she knew it.

‘Answer my question,’ demanded the head magician.

The kindly navigator, who seemed a little cowed by Stelka's presence herself, quickly related Tab's story.

Stelka eyed Tab for several long moments. Tab found herself blushing.

‘Is this so?’ she finally asked, directing her question at Tab.

Tab nodded, then blurted, ‘And they're really close. We have to *do* something.’

Stelka snorted, and signalled two guards over. ‘Escort this girl back to her lodgings.’ To Tab she said, ‘You had a nightmare, child. Quentaris is the only enchanted city in this rift world. And no one is coming after us.’

‘But it seemed so – real,’ Tab protested.

‘As the best nightmares are,’ said Stelka. ‘Go now, and be thankful I don't have you flogged for charging in here and waking everyone.’



When Tab reported for duty the next morning, Quartermaster Dorissa looked up tiredly from her charts. Tab saw immediately that all was not well.

‘Sit down, Tab,’ Dorissa said, indicating a chair.

Tab felt her insides go cold.

‘I'm really sorry, Tab, but I must relieve you of your duties.’ She held up a hand when Tab opened her mouth to speak. ‘It isn't just about last night. Yes, I've heard. I don't know what you were thinking!’



She sighed. ‘But this other matter … I gave you an important duty yesterday. I was obviously in error to do so. I have been duly chastised.’

‘But I –’ ‘The scrollarrived too late, were observed could forgive your dalliance, as I have on previous occasions. But added to the events of last night … ‘ She shrugged.

‘You caused quite a stir. Wild talk of Tolrush. Our imminent peril. We simply cannot have guild members, no matter how insignificant, opening us to such ridicule.’

‘But it's true,’ cried Tab. ‘Tolrush is out there, and they're coming after us!’

‘Enough,’ said Dorissa. She almost glowered, which Tab had never seen her do before.

‘But what I saw –’

‘Was nothing more than a bad dream. Face it, child.’ Dorissa's voice grew stern, though not unkind. ‘Don't you think I know it broke your heart when you failed the magicians’ test?’

‘But –’

‘I have no choice in this matter,’ said Dorissa sadly. ‘Stelka has spoken. I'm sorry, Tab, but you can no longer serve this guild.’

Tab's vision blurred. She got to her feet unsteadily, blinking back tears. Slowly, in a kind of stupefied trance, she walked to the door. There she stopped, turning.

‘They're coming,’ she said quietly, then ran from the guildhall as fast as she could.

Tab fled through the streets of Quentaris. She didn't stop till she had reached the fifth floor of the lodging house where she lived. She collided with Philmon as he was leaving his room. Philmon was tall and skinny with a mop of brown hair. He was wearing his sky sailor's uniform.

‘Ho, Tab,’ he said. ‘Sorry, can't stop. My shift starts in twenty minutes.’

Tab puffed like a pair of bellows.

‘You all right?’ asked Philmon.

‘Nothing's all right,’ Tab gasped. She quickly told him everything that had happened, including the truth about the visions. He looked hurt when she admitted that she had been getting strange ‘visions’ through the eyes of animals for quite some time.

‘Philmon, I'm sorry I didn't tell you.’

He scowled. ‘I thought we were friends.’

‘You know as well as I do that Tolrushians are reviled for their mind-casting. They control animals with their minds, hideous race that they are. So I was scared … ’

‘Of what I'd think? Of me?’

Tab looked away. ‘No,’ she said. ‘Of me … I thought I was going crazy … I thought you might not … ’ Her voice trailed off.

‘Might not what?’ asked Philmon, hands on his hips. ‘Might not want to be friends with somebody who can see what animals see? Sometimes, Tab, you're as thick as two planks, you know that. *I* know you're not Tolrushian. It's plain to see!’

Tab smiled, and wiped at her eyes.

‘So you'll help me?’

Philmon blinked. ‘What can I possibly do?’

‘You can get me in to see First Lieutenant Crankshaft.’

Philmon's eyes boggled. ‘Are you joking? He'd have me tossed overboard!’

‘It's important, Philmon. The safety of Quentaris rests on us alerting somebody.’

Philmon was shaking his head. ‘You're asking too much. I mean, what you've told me is so fantastical, even I don't know what to think. Is there any proof?’

He looked at her hopefully. She shook her head. ‘I'm not lying,’ she said stubbornly.



‘I'm not saying you are,’ said Philmon. ‘But you could be wrong. Stelka could be right. Maybe it was just a nightmare.’

‘I'd know the difference,’ said Tab. ‘This was real. They're coming, Philmon. And they're going to catch us unprepared, ‘like sitting ducks.’

Philmon gave a small shuddering sigh. He could imagine what would happen to Quentaris if Tolrush attacked right now. Total panic, and defeat. They would all be killed. And those who weren't would end up as slaves.

‘There's no evidence,’ Philmon said, but his resolve was weakening. ‘We've been travelling a whole year and not set eyes on them … ’

‘They might've been sucked into a different rift world to begin with. But it doesn't matter, because they're *here,* in this one.’

‘I'll lose my job,’ Philmon said despondently. ‘I mean, First Lieutenant *Crankshaft* … ’

Thirty minutes later, Philmon was standing to attention on the lower bridge while Tab concluded, once again, her outrageous story.

First Lieutenant Crankshaft nodded when she had finished. ‘Thank you for bringing this to my attention.’ He glanced at Philmon. ‘At ease, ensign.’ He steepled his fingers. ‘Now, although the protection of Quentaris is in our hands, the Admiralty cannot mobilise the city's defences on the basis of a dream.’ As with the magicians, Tab had not explained exactly what kind of vision she had had. ‘And from a non-accredited person at that.’ He shook his head. ‘We have little enough crew to man the rigging, girl. If I take them shipside Quentaris will be compromised. A sudden squall could see us crash. And if that happens … well, it doesn't bear thinking about.’

‘So you won't do anything?’ said Tab. She knew Philmon was glaring at her.

Crankshaft stood. ‘Not *won't,* child. *Can't.* Ensign, take this girl home.’

Philmon snapped to attention. ‘Aye-aye, sir.’

‘When you're done, return here immediately,’ said the first lieutenant. ‘And think long and hard on why I'm not relieving you of your duty.’

As soon as they were outside, Philmon rounded on Tab. ‘See? You almost cost me my job. Oh, why did I listen to you?’

Tab ignored him. She looked scared. This made Philmon shut up. ‘So the navy doesn't have enough crew to defend Quentaris,’ said Tab. The idea staggered her. She had never given any thought to their defences before, had never realised just how vulnerable they were.

‘We've never met an enemy we couldn't handle, so what's the –?’

‘Where would you find an extra crew, if you needed one?’

Philmon looked at her balefully. ‘Huh?’

‘Answer me,’ said Tab, urgently.

Philmon scratched his head. ‘I don't know. You'd need people who've got naval experience, I guess.’

Tab's face lit up. ‘That's right,’ she said. ‘You would.’

‘But there aren't any,’ said Philmon. ‘I mean, the Sky Sailors’ Guild is what used to be the Merchant Navy. We've already got everybody with shipboard time, even the deck scrubbers!’

‘Not everybody,’ said Tab, and she turned and sprinted away. Philmon stared after her, frowning.



‘Absolutely not!’ Fontagu said crossly to Tab. He always got cross when he was frightened. ‘Count me out. There is nothing you can say to change my mind.’

An hour later, Tab was creeping along a wall, keeping to the shadows. She came to a sudden stop. Somebody bumped into her from behind.

‘Fontagu!’

‘You said to stay close,’ came his nervous reply.

‘Not that close!’

Fontagu grumbled, backing off an inch or two. He looked furtively about in all directions. ‘This is a big mistake,’ he hissed, not for the first time. ‘They'll slit our throats and make us beg for mercy!’

‘Probably not in that order,’ said Tab, but she kept her voice too low for Fontagu to hear. She had to admit it was a crazy plan. Even stage one was crazy: that is, enter the Thieves’ Quarter unarmed and at night. It was well known that the city watchmen themselves avoided the quarter after dark, unless they were at least a squadron strong, or on a suicide mission.

Tab gave Fontagu a quick look. Once again, she nearly laughed. He had donned a thief's outfit, as he called it. He wore baggy pantaloons, a gold-braided vest with brass buttons and puffed sleeves, a head scarf, and – as usual – a fake wooden sword painted silver to look real. Tab had had a big job talking him out of wearing an eye patch.

‘You read too many trashy stories,’ she had told him in exasperation.

It wasn't hard finding the tavern called *The Purple Wart,* partly because some enterprising owner had paid to have a gigantic nose bearing a wart, complete with little wart hairs, erected above the main door. By some magic, the wart even changed colour, from red to blue to glorious purple.

‘Charming,’ said Tab, eyeing the monstrosity. ‘You sure that's the place?’

Fontagu nodded. ‘Can I go now?’

‘Sure.’

‘Really?’ Fontagu seemed surprised.

‘Yep,’ said Tab. ‘If you want to walk all the way back through the Thieves’ Quarter by yourself wearing those ridiculous clothes, be my guest.’

Fontagu straightened up and looked down his nose at her. ‘My clothes are not ridiculous,’ he said.

‘I take it that means you're coming with me?’

Fontagu sniffed. ‘As concern for a child of your tender years is always my first priority, I do believe that in this case my presence is required, in spite of the obvious danger to my person.’

‘Could you repeat that?’ asked Tab. ‘No, don't bother. I'll remind you of it later if I need to.’

Fontagu bristled but said nothing.

Tab checked the street. All was clear. ‘Ready?’ she asked Fontagu.

He gulped and nodded. He appeared to have something wrong with his voice.

Tab hurried across the street to the tavern and pushed open the door. The hubbub dwindled gradually. All eyes were fixed on Tab and Fontagu, and not all of them were friendly. In fact, very few of them were.

Tab took a deep breath and headed across the room. According to Fontagu, who seemed to have an uncommonly detailed knowledge of the Quentaran underworld, the man Tab sought kept a booth at the back of *The Purple Wart* once or twice a week.

She was almost across the room when a thickset troll stepped out of an archway in front of her. His broad shoulders blocked out the door. By the smell of him, he was a drainer.

Tab looked up into the troll's mad, blazing eyes. She swallowed. No one in their right mind messed with a troll. Especially one with such disgusting breath and so many teeth.

‘Er, hello … ’ said Tab, sounding as friendly as she could.

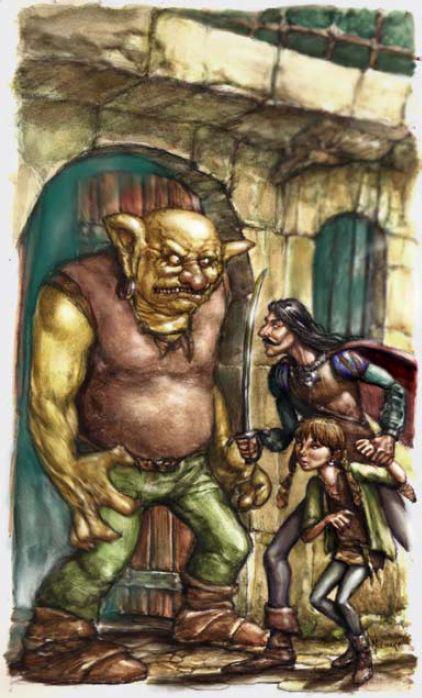
The troll thrust out his hand and growled. His blubbery mouth twitched. Tab got the definite impression he was about to bite off her head, when –

‘Leave her be, Vrod,’ said a voice.

‘Sweet meat, good eating,’ the troll said. His voice sounded like gravel being crushed.

A hand tapped Vrod on the shoulder and the troll stepped grudgingly aside, though he never took his mad eyes off Tab.

Tab shifted her gaze to the man now standing before her. His eyes suddenly flashed in recognition. ‘You?’ he said in amazement. It was the same man who had tried to steal the magicians’ icefire gem more than a year ago, the same man she had locked in the pantry.



Great, Tab thought to herself. Just great.

She started to back away. ‘Uh … I think I made a mistake.’ She turned, intending to dart for the door.

‘Seize her!’ yelled the man. She felt vice-like arms close around her and she was lifted off the floor. ‘Bring the other one too.’

Tab heard Fontagu's whinnying whimper close behind as they were taken to a booth against the far wall. Tab was shoved into a seat and Fontagu squeezed hurriedly in next to her, looking as if he was ready to burst into tears. ‘Don't hurt me, please, please don't hurt me,’ he wailed over and over.

‘Vrod,’ said the tall man. ‘Shut him up. Nicely.’

Fontagu suddenly found a wad of phlegm-smeared cloth had been shoved in his mouth. His eyes widened indignantly but Vrod leaned down close to his face. Fontagu tried an unsuccessful smile.

‘That will do, Vrod.’ The tall man seated himself opposite them. His eyes narrowed as he looked at Tab. ‘I don't take kindly to being locked in a closet and left waiting for the tender attentions of magicians!’

‘Sorry about that. But I did set you free. You know, the string –?’

‘Ah, yes. The string. I suppose I do have you to thank for that. Imprisoned me, then freed me. Well, in that case, drinks all round.’ He shouted orders. When he turned back he saw a look of such confusion on Tab's face that he burst out laughing.

‘Come now, we must have honour among thieves. There is so little any place else!’

‘Does that mean you're not going to kill us?’

‘Kill you? Why, perish the thought. Not only do I owe you my life, twice over – for I would never have made it out of there alive had I had the gem with me! – but I bow before a greater thief than I.’ And he did just that. He stood up and bowed to her in a princely fashion.

Tab squirmed uncomfortably.

Fontagu gurgled something. ‘I think he's trying to say he helped,’ said Tab. Fontagu nodded vigorously. The tall man saluted him.

‘Now tell me why a slip of a girl like yourself, and one such as he’ – he indicated Fontagu – ‘would take such a risk as to come to a place like this at night?’

‘Are you Lord Verris?’

The tall man blinked. ‘I am he indeed. And at your service.’

‘Then I need your help,’ said Tab. ‘Quentaris needs your help … ’

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\*\* Indeed, a whole new vocabulary had sprung up this last year: *uppermost* meant the topmost sections of the masts, including the crow's nests or lookouts; *uppity* meant someone who thought they were too good for plain folk, and should be a sky sailor; *uptime* meant the duration of one's stay amongst the sails and rigging; and *uptowner* had come to mean those sailors and officers who lived permanently aloft like the former roofies, rarely coming down, except in death; even the adjective *uppish* had come to mean something quite fine, or splendid.

# 



# THE CLASH

  Verris left the Sailors’ Guild headquarters with a spring in his step and misgivings in his heart.

Thinking back on his conversation with Captain Bellgard, he hoped that he hadn't been duped by the girl. For sure, she had risked much in coming to see him, and had already lost her job at the guild for trying to convince the magicians. But if he had read her wrong, then he and his crew were about to become a permanent part of the Sailors’ Guild – a *submissive* part, one that had to take orders.

On the other hand, if he were right, he would soon be head of a semi-independent yet-to-be-named new guild. Navies were good at keeping their ships afloat – a full-time job in itself. It was a bit much to expect them to be specialists in *two* areas at the same time.

Hence the need for a corps of marines. And a Marine Commander. Once, long ago, the marines had been the navy's fighting force, going where the navy could not always go: on sea *and* on land.

He found Borges and told him about the deal he had struck with Captain Bellgard.

Borges stared at him, aghast. ‘And what was wrong with our old guild?’

‘And which one would that be?’ asked Verris merrily.

‘The Thieves’ Guild!’

‘Ah, that one. Well, let me ask you, Borges, when was the last time we had good pickings and lots of work?’

Borges stroked his beard, glowering. ‘You know damn well. It was before we stepped foot in this accursed city!’

‘But why? We could ply our trade here, could we not?’

Borges stared at Verris like he was mad. ‘And go where?’ he demanded. ‘We're trapped in this rat cage like everybody else, with no boltholes, and no escape! If we knocked over a big job, the City Watch would track us down in a minute.’

‘Exactly my point,’ said Verris. ‘There's no future in it, unless we want to become petty crooks, and that's not my style. So we're branching out.’

Borges gave him a helpless look. ‘But why this?’

‘Because we're good at it.’

‘The Venerable Lightfingers won't like it. Some people are happy with the old ways.’

Verris shrugged nonchalantly. ‘He can have the Thieves’ Guild all to himself. Him and the other beg gars.’ Verris rested a hand on Borges’ shoulder. ‘The rest of us will do very nicely as marines.’

Borges sighed resignedly. ‘If you say so.’

Verris looked up at the straining sails. Taut ropes hummed and cross-spars creaked, and the wind whistled through the rigging. They were making good speed.

Orders had been issued to tack towards a dense cloud bank on the eastern horizon, but only because Verris had pushed the matter and because Captain Bellgard was enjoying the thought that soon he would have a lord at his beck and call, though he hadn't quite decided whether to make the former Prince of Thieves a petty officer, or something even more subservient.

Bellgard was no fool. He had seized the chance with both hands. He had heard the story of the girl with bad dreams and did not credit it for a second, but Quentaris was undeniably undermanned, especially by experienced fighters. If he won this bet, he would have two hundred extra hands on deck, plus an even larger number of small-time crooks who would probably feel comfortable working under Verris.

And if he lost, well, they would have another guild on Quentaris but a fighting force just the same. Of course, he would have to put up with Verris as some kind of equal, but really he quite liked the man. He would never admit it, but he had a grudging respect for the man who stole from the rich and, just as often, gave half of it to the poor.

Bellgard scowled at himself. He must be getting soft.



Verris and Borges looked out over the portside battle ments. Verris mused that he would be much happier when they drew close to the cloud bank, for in truth he *needed* Tolrush to attack. And with that thought in mind, he had marshalled his forces.

Overhead, within easy reach of his signal, was a clog – a small wooden cabin attached by rope to a crane high above, one of several upside machines used to swing sky sailors quickly from one mast or spar to another, in case of emergency. Verris had managed to commandeer three such cranes. With these, his combined fighting force of roughly three hundred men and women could be swiftly deployed to any point on Quentaris’ perimeter.

Bellgard had found out, of course, and had grumbled and harrumphed a lot, but even he saw the wisdom of it. Fighters need to be where the fighting is thickest, and quick smart too.

‘You think they'll fight, if it comes to it?’ said Borges gloomily. For him, no cloud ever had a silver lining. There was nothing at the end of the rainbow except grief. And if bad things could happen, they would.

Verris laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. ‘Cheer up, man. I'm sure there'll be half a dozen disasters, enough to please even you.’

Verris produced a spyglass and scanned the horizon. Still nothing. He looked ahead towards the cloud bank. They were making good time. If Tolrush was anywhere about they would surely try to stop them before they could vanish into what amounted to thick fog.

An hour later, there was still nothing. In another hour they would be into the clouds. Verris frowned. He wasn't sure how long he could hold together his followers, only some two hundred of which were actually *his.* The others were a motley collection of petty thieves, muggers and highwaymen short on work; he had convinced them to leave the Venerable Lightfingers’ guild and join his well-paid cause.

Only action could turn such a mixed group into a cohesive fighting force.

‘What's that?’ said Borges.

Verris pressed the spyglass hard against his eye. ‘Where –?’

Borges pointed from aft to port. ‘Now will you look at *that,’* he said.

Behind them and a thousand feet above, a dark menacing shape bulged silently from a high cloud. It was long and narrow, and at the front two huge grappling arms opened and closed like pole-cutters. Verris whistled thinly through his teeth as he studied it through the spyglass.

‘It's seen a lot of action, by the look of it,’ he said.

As it slid fully into view, Borges paled. It looked like some demon ship or, as he said afterwards, a ship of the dead.

High overhead, lookouts in one of the several crow's nests began tolling a warning bell. The alarm spread. People rushed from indoors and scanned the sky, shading their eyes. The alarm had only been sounded three times before, twice when the city had been under attack by aerial creatures, and another time when a grim mountain-top castle had opened fire on them with ten-inch cannons. As terrifying as these were, there were few casualties and little damage, though the cannon balls and grapeshot – totally unknown weapons to Quentarans – had ruined the great canvas sails which afterwards had to be carefully patched up.

Despite these earlier false alarms, word quickly spread that this time was different.

‘No doubt about it,’ said Verris. ‘It's Tolrush all right.’ He handed the spyglass to Borges who took it reluctantly but put it to his eye. After a moment, he said, ‘She'll not make much headway with those sails. They're full of holes!’

‘Take a look at the propellers.’ Borges did so. The propellers were a blur of motion. Verris went on: ‘She's making ten knots, or I'm no sailor. So we've less than an hour till she comes alongside and tries to board us.’

‘You guessed right,’ said Borges.

‘The girl guessed right. Or saw rightly, whichever it is. Thanks to her we have a chance.’

Borges lifted his eyes upside and cursed. ‘If our people were up there we'd be travelling a darn sight faster.’

‘We might,’ Verris agreed, ‘but then we'd have no one to repel boarders. Quickly now, spread the word. Leave only a skeletal squad to the starboard. They'll swing to our leeward.’

‘Unless they keep to the heights and rappel down atop us.’

‘They'll not risk losing their propellers and rudders,’ said Verris. ‘Besides, they want us intact. There's no plunder in a crushed city.’

He was right. But Quentaris wasn't going to make it to the thick scudding clouds in which they might have escaped. Being larger and heavier, Quentaris couldn't hope to outmanoeuvre the Tolrushians. Nor offer a decent fight. Because of the siege, Tolrush would have had its entire populace inside the city walls when it was wrenched through the rift vortex – it would thus outnumber Quentaris by quite a margin. Worse, Tolrush had been a military city-state for over a century, its people groomed for war from when they were toddlers.

Quentaris lost its lead within half an hour.

Battle stations sounded, and all hands scrambled on deck or squirmed up the rigging. Citizens grabbed whatever they could: broomsticks, clubs, pots and pans, anything that could be used as a weapon. Magicians assembled on the walls along with Verris’ marines and what sailors could be spared from upside.

And then they waited.

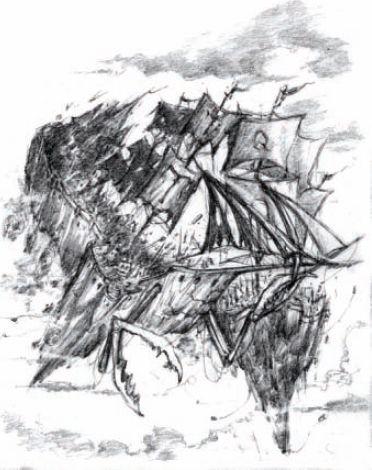
Above them, every inch of canvas strained against the wind. Rigging whipped and jiggled, and the masts, with their cross-spars outstretched like arms, creaked under the load. To port and starboard, thick black smoke belched from the array of funnels atop the great engine-houses; and projecting from the sides, the enormous propellers were spinning as fast as they could. Even so, the marauding city rumbled closer by the second.

Ten minutes later, the predator city came alongside, moving into Quentaris’ wind shadow. Immediately, they dropped sails, and Quentaris shuddered as the two land masses ground into one another, prow to prow. On each side, magicians cushioned the impact with spells that exhausted them almost at once. Despite this, masts shook and rigging twanged. Two sailors dropped to their deaths as the jolt unseated them.

Then came grappling irons, looping through the air, snagging onto battlement and rigging. Within minutes, hundreds of Tolrushians had leapt across to Quentaris.

‘All hands, repel boarders!’ Verris screamed.

The fighting was fierce, mainly concentrated a long the portside perimeter wall and in the rigging above. Verris was not fool enough to pull all the defences from other key spots though. Tolrushians were known for their devious tactics: they might just take it into their heads to send a lifeboat, charmed to float, under Quentaris and up onto the other side. This meant that fully a fifth of his forces were doing nothing, but it couldn't be helped.



Nor did he have much time for regrets. Within moments of the two cities joining battle, he was in the thick of it. A mid-sized mountain troll leapt at him wielding a great battleaxe. Verris ducked beneath the arcing blade and thrust his sword up into the troll. The troll gasped, staggered back, and flipped over the parapet, dropping out of sight.

Then two Tolrushians came at him, trading blow for blow, trying to pierce his defensive swordplay. He parried, thrust, feinted, and parried again. One of the Tolrushians made a misstep, overbalanced, and Verris cut him down then turned all of his attention to the remaining foe.

A moment later the other Tolrushian was down too.

Up and down the battlements, the fighting ebbed and flowed. There were screams, cries and hoarse gurgling shrieks, some fading slowly as Quentarans and Tolrushians fell overboard, plummeting thousands of feet to their deaths.

The air wasn't just full of cries and grunts, it was also full of arrows. Verris saw one man with an arrow in his thigh, another in his shoulder, and a shield with six more sprouting from it. The magicians did their best to take care of aerial missiles, scorching some into flame in mid-flight, or else diverting them so that they fell harmlessly to the ground.



The frenzied fighting went on for another hour.

Verris rallied his men, ordered them to weak spots, and made sure the wounded were pulled from the thick of the battle and taken to the healers at the hospital. More than once he praised good fortune that some of Quentaris’ best fighters like Hulk Duelph and Commander Storm had been in a War Cabinet meeting with the Archon at the time of the Upheaval. Their very presence inspired many a Quentaran that day.

‘Keep at them!’ yelled Verris. ‘We have them on the run!’

This was something of an exaggeration, but Verris had seen what few others had spotted so far: that the two cities were drifting closer and closer to the cloud bank. Just a little further …

At the first clammy embrace of cloud he put his fingers to his lips and blew a shrill whistle.

Immediately, a horn sounded.

Everywhere his men disengaged from the enemy and set about hacking at the grappling lines that bound the two cities together. Sails creaked as they tacked to take full advantage of the wind. Spars cracked and cordage thrummed as the land masses pulled slowly apart. Bodies fell screaming into the chasm between the rumbling monoliths.

The Tolrushians were taken by surprise.

As the last grappling lines were cut, Quentaris yawed two points to starboard. Everyone braced themselves as the city righted then surged forward. There were brief cheers, but the fighting hadn't stopped. There were still a couple of hundred Tolrushians on board, and the clash of cutlasses, battleaxes and pikes, and the screams of the wounded and dying, continued for some time before dwindling completely.

A conch sounded. Every lantern in the city was extinguished; every fire doused.

Except for the creaking of sail and mast, and the wind in the rigging, there was no other sound, unless counting the far-off muffled shouts of enraged Tolrushians as the floating city searched through the pea-soup fog for Quentaris.

Verris turned to find Borges standing beside him. He had a bloodied bandage strapped across his forehead. ‘Accursed cloud,’ said Borges grumpily. ‘Just when I was reaching my stride. Why, I could have sent a dozen more Tolrushians to meet their ancestors!’

‘Sheathe your sword, friend,’ said Verris. ‘For now, we are safe. So let us find out the damage. There will be little enough time to mend things if Tolrush runs us to ground.’

Running blind, Quentaris drifted deeper and deeper into thick cloud. A chill clamminess invaded every corner of the city, and sounds took on an odd quality, as though the whole city was underwater. Captain Bellgard ordered the all-clear sound and a thunderous cheer went up from soldier and citizen alike. Quentaris was safe. For now. Even the Archon stood on his balcony and waved languidly to any citizens interested enough to look up.



‘A narrow escape,’ Verris said to Borges the day after the battle as he sat in the new and hastily appropriated Marine Guildhouse, not far from the Square of the People. ‘For which we're in debt to that young girl for discovering Tolrush.’ He signalled two of his men, Baldrear and Cafferty. ‘Find the youngling, if she's still alive.’

An hour later, someone knocked on the door. Lord Verris looked up from his desk. ‘Come!’ He placed the quill in its inkwell and smiled when the door opened. ‘Young Tab Vidler. Where have you been hiding?’

Tab glared at him. She had a cut on her cheek and her left arm was in a makeshift sling.

‘Ah,’ said Verris. ‘I see that you were in the thick of it. I might have known. Here, please take a seat.’ He offered Tab his own chair, carrying it around the desk and depositing it in front of her.

Verris had food and drink brought and Tab wolfed it down. In all the excitement and danger, she hadn't eaten anything substantial since the battle. When she was finished, Verris asked if she had had any more visions.

Tab was tempted to tell him the truth, as she had to Philmon. She believed that she could trust this man, this pirate and thief, probably more than most of the so-called honest citizens of Quentaris.

Yet still something held her back. As they said in Quentaris, you can't unscramble an egg.

Just then Captain Bellgard was shown in. Tab leapt to her feet, but the captain smiled kindly and waved her to sit down again. He seated himself nearby. Verris gave Tab a nod to speak.

Tab frowned, trying to remember everything. ‘I saw a big youth, a Tolrushian. He wasn't much more than a boy, but everybody took orders from him. He was very cruel, with fox-like eyes.’ Tab thought for a moment. ‘He had an advisor, someone called Genkis. Oh, and last night I couldn't sleep because my arm hurts. I had another vision.’

Verris nodded for Tab to continue.

‘There's a horrible, black creature – like a kind of big wolfhound. It kept hissing and spitting.’ Tab shivered at the memory of watching it. ‘Anyway, the boy-leader was yelling at some people, telling them they were imbeciles for letting Quentaris get away. He had two of them killed on the spot by a magician who vaporised them into a dark mist. He's … I think he's in desperate need of icefire.’

‘That's Kull Vladis you're describing,’ said Verris. ‘He's the blood-thirsty boy-king of Tolrush. His pet's name is Sherma. The Tolrushians use animals as slaves and fighters. What else did you see?’

‘Kull blames Quentaris for their plight. He says our army was having no luck with the siege and so we bewitched them.’



Verris’ lips moved with the merest hint of a smile. ‘Obviously, he doesn't realise we're in the same boat, so to speak. Perhaps that will prove useful.’

Tab shrugged. ‘Kull is telling his people that we know how to get back home to Amlas. And that we have a stockpile of icefire with which to fuel the propellers.’

‘If only that were true,’ said Captain Bellgard wistfully. ‘Our stock is pitifully low. We lose people every time we send a landing party out to find the gemstones.’ He sighed.

Verris gazed at Tab thoughtfully. ‘I'm going to ask you for a favour, Tab. You are free to refuse, if you choose. It is this – that you keep future visions just for our ears.’

‘Why?’ asked Tab. She didn't mind keeping silent, but she was curious.

‘Well, you're our secret weapon,’ said Verris. ‘With your help, we have a way to eavesdrop on Kull and his plans. I have no doubt that that could prove enormously helpful.’

‘Aye,’ said Captain Bellgard. ‘And that's putting it mildly!’

Tab shrugged again. ‘I don't mind. I've already told my friend Philmon, but you can trust him.’

‘Ah, yes,’ Captain Bellgard said, ‘the young ensign who tried to alert Crankshaft. I shall have to see about giving that young man a promotion, I think.’

Tab couldn't help herself. She clapped.

‘And now, before we let you go, is there anything we can do for you, Tab?’ Verris asked.

Tab stared back, blinking. No one, in her whole life, had ever asked her that question. She was dumbfounded. She opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out.

Verris smiled.

Finally, Tab said, ‘Could you help find my … friend, Fontagu? He disappeared during the fighting. I'm worried about him.’ She quickly described him.

Verris said, ‘If he still lives, he will be found and brought to your door.’ Tab felt a huge sense of relief. It wasn't like Fontagu to just vanish, especially when there were so many opportunities to brag about his heroic fighting exploits.

‘Is there anything else we can do for you, child?’ This was from Captain Bellgard. He was leaning forward slightly. For a moment Tab wondered how different things would have been if she'd had someone like him for a father, someone gruff but kind. But she swiftly pushed the thought away. There was something else she wanted, more than anything in the world. It was an ache within her, but she knew it could never now be fulfilled – because she'd been told she had no magical skill …

She shook her head, not trusting herself to speak.

‘Well, you'd best be off then. You have a big day tomorrow and will need your sleep.’

Tab gave him a puzzled look. ‘What for?’

‘Well, naturally,’ said Verris, ‘you can't begin your training as an apprentice magician if you can't even keep your eyes open, now can you?’

Tab's eyes grew as big as plums, and there was a roaring in her ears. ‘A *what?’*

# 



# THE RAIDING PARTY

  Hardly daring to believe her luck, an extremely nervous Tab reported for training at the Magicians’ Guild the very next morning.

She didn't know what to expect as she arrived at the Hall of the Initiates. Here a duty clerk peered owl-like over her thick glasses and mumbled, ‘Another initiate, eh? Name? Sponsor? Former address? Come along, girl, don't just stand there witless. I'm busy, as well you might be if you'd gather your thoughts. Dear me, I don't know where they find you all.’

Tab stumbled over her answers. After a harrowing time, Amelia, Philmon's cousin, was called to collect her.

‘Don't mind Mrs Haggerty,’ Amelia said as they walked between thick pillars. ‘I'd be rather short too if I had to sit in that hall day in and day out poking questions at every visitor. She calls us all good-for-nothings, you know.’

‘But the Navigators’ Guild is the most important guild in Quentaris,’ said Tab.

Amelia laughed. ‘That's just her way. Mind you, she doesn't talk to the magicians like that. Oh no, they'd turn her into a frog or something. But *we're* not magicians, not yet anyway. I mean, we don't have real powers.’ She suddenly gave Tab an odd look. ‘Maybe you do, though.’

‘Me?’ Tab shrugged. ‘I just have – visions … ’

‘Mmm,’ said Amelia. She led Tab along twisting corridors. Groups of students could be seen taking lessons in classrooms and in the leafy grounds. Magicians would look up annoyed as they passed, and Tab realised they were late for her first class. Amelia stopped outside a classroom door and knocked.

‘Come in,’ said a magician.

Amelia wished Tab good luck and hurried away to her own classes. Tab took a deep breath and entered. Several students looked at her with interest, even awe, though they were too busy copying something written on the blackboard to do more.

Tab stood just inside the door, not sure what to do. ‘You're late,’ the magician snapped. ‘Take a seat.’

Tab spied a seat at the back of the class and hurried to it. The students might think she was something of a hero for saving Quentaris, but it was clear the magicians did not or if they did, refused to give any sign. Perhaps they thought it would go to her head. Or maybe they were just peeved that she had seen something that they hadn't.

Tab sat beside a smiling girl called Seretha. In a hurried whisper she told Tab what they were doing. Tab got out a notebook she had been given – along with several textbooks – and started copying from the board. The class was on levitation, which didn't just mean making objects float in the air; it was also the method by which the magicians themselves flew.

Happy beyond belief, Tab settled down and started to work.

That day and those which followed hurtled along in a haze of lessons, homework, practice, breaks, friendships, and more homework. At the end of each hour, the initiates were shunted from one class to the next. As the days wore on, Tab learnt about magic lore, herbs, poisons and the rudiments of rift navigation. It seemed to her that being an initiate wasn't as much fun as she had imagined. Instead it was hard work, and yet she found a deep pleasure in that too, though she would have liked something more challenging. The fun stuff, like sending exploding bubbles of soap suds diving at your enemies, usually went on after school hours.

Tab soon began to believe she actually did have powers. At least that's what most of the other apprentices seemed to think. Wherever she went whispers followed, as well as pointing fingers. ‘That's the girl who saved Quentaris from Tolrush.’ Again and again she heard the words. Girls jostled each other to get a good look at her, and several times teachers had to scold students for trying to pass notes to Tab in class.

Tab thought back to her introduction to the Hub, that part of Quentaris that housed an icefire gem that powered the ire ore.

‘And there,’ said Quartermaster Dorissa, pointing, ‘is the fabled bloodfire beetle. See how the Seeker hums and strokes the creature?’

The initiates stared open-mouthed.

‘Note that its carapace is like a ruby version of icefire, hence its name. It feeds on icefire and so incorporates particles of the gem into itself. Look, it sparkles and glows like a ruby reflecting the flames of a fire,’ Dorissa went on. ‘When it's spinning in perfect harmony with our city and that of another plane, it sets up a harmonic humming that is integral to the process of sensing out the pathways to an alternative rift plane – looking for and predicting weaknesses, flaws, sensing where the next vortex will form, and when. It feels the raw fabric of space-time.’

‘It's disappearing!’ an initiate cried.

‘No, child,’ Dorissa said. ‘Bloodfire beetles exist mostly in and marginally outside this plane, hence their flickering. It's a form of concealment and escape for them. They shift into alternate rift planes for short periods of time.’

Without thinking Tab tried to mind-meld with the bloodfire beetle. An unimaginable harmony came over her and, sensing the risk of being consumed, she immediately withdrew. ‘Until a predator has passed or given up searching for it?’ Tab said, slightly disoriented.

‘Well done,’ the quartermaster said. ‘The morphing is a camouflage.’ The magician frowned. ‘Are you all right, child?’

Tab felt her face drain of colour. ‘I'm fine,’ she said. ‘A momentary turn, that's all.’

Dorissa continued with the lesson.

Without realising it at the time, that first, albeit brief, mind-meld with the bloodfire beetle had been Tab's first real inkling of the part she might one day play in the Navigators’ Guild.

Tab held up her head. Although she was currently a minor cog in the Navigators’ Guild, she was still part of an essential organisation. Being able to move Quentaris from place to place was one thing. Knowing where to move her to was quite another. And hence the need for navigators. It fell to the Navigators’ Guild to find the way back to where Quentaris belonged. And for this they needed to navigate the rift planes and pathways. Once again, the icefire gem, coupled with ire ore, was the key – the catalyst. It could enhance the natural abilities of the magicians to ‘sense’ and ‘see’ these pathways. It even enabled some very powerful magicians to open vortices, rather than just to locate them by how they made the rift planes tremble.

Under the leadership of Chief Navigator Stelka a black-eyed, raven-haired magician and clever court politician – all the key positions in the Navigators’ Guild belonged to magicians.

Dwelling on the magnificence of the Hub, Tab fell asleep in her new room which she shared with Amelia. Later that night she suddenly sat bolt upright. She knew what had been needling her.

She felt – *important.* Bleary-eyed, she glanced down at the seed-gem that all initiates were given. Its lambent glow made her smile. How protective the magicians were of their little brood.



That first week flew past in a blur. Tab was dazed much of the time and had to keep pinching herself, half afraid she would wake back in Mrs Figgin's orphanage. Oddly enough, there were some similarities to her first home. The rooms, for instance, were very small and had to be kept sparkling clean. And there were rules. Lots of them.

Tab didn't mind really. She was living her dream.

They had classes in just about everything, though it would be months before the apprentices even began to think of specialising. Tab's favourite lessons were in levitation, foretelling, spells and charms, wind-working and storm-bringing, magical defence and attack, and most of all in rifting – that rarest of all gifts, the ability to hear the deep whispering of the rift currents, to locate the vortexes … and find the way home for Quentaris …

Most of her fellow students were ahead of Tab, having started their apprenticeships nearly two months earlier. Amelia was actually two years in front. The guild believed in pairing younger and older students, and the arrangement seemed to work out well for both.

Tab didn't see much of Philmon at first. Shortly after her arrival he had accused her of acting first and thinking later, which had stung her, for he had gained a promotion due to her. And Fontagu failed to turn up. Verris visited her a few times but he had no news of the ex-actor, and Tab slowly came to the belief that Fontagu had perished in the battle with Tolrush.

She went one day to the Hall of the Fallen, had Fontagu's name added to the Quentaran casualty list and paid to have a candle lit on the anniversary of the battle.

Here, in the echoing silences of the Hall, she whispered goodbye to Fontagu and wished him well.

And after that, life continued.

Tab's only real complaint in this whole period was that they never got to do serious magic. She mentioned it late one evening to Amelia, who was sitting on her bed, yawning, trying to read a thick volume called *Levitating in Emergencies,* which was one of Amelia's specialities.

Amelia groaned and closed the book with a snap.

‘I am so tired,’ she said. ‘I think my eyes are about to fall out of my head.’

Tab had to ask her question a second time. Amelia just shook her head.

‘You need to walk before you can fly. I know it all seems a bit of a mish-mash at first, but trust me, all those little bits build up into bigger bits. And suddenly they all come together. Like, a brick is nothing, yes? But thousands of them built this school. Millions of them built Quentaris. Once you can make a brick, you can make anything.’

‘I know all that,’ said Tab, ‘it's just that I'd like to –’

‘Be a natural, like Nisha or Stanas,’ Amelia interrupted. ‘Wouldn't we all, Tab? But they had to learn how to control their raw power. Nothing's ever easy, even though we'd like it to be.’

‘But I *feel* as though I have something in me, Amelia. I –’

But Amelia was already snoring softly.

Tab scowled with frustration. Here she was, the girl who had saved Quentaris almost single-handedly, and she was learning how to levitate pins, or remove warts. She wanted to do something big, really big. Something that would make people sit up and take notice of her, that would make the *magicians* take notice of her.

Tab slumped back on to her bed.

She was tired, too, but her growing frustration stopped her from sleeping. Even her visions – her mind-melding with animals – seemed to have faded away, though that might be in part because the magicians’ school was warded by strong magic, which perhaps suppressed her abilities.

Desperate to sleep, Tab wove a relaxation diagram in the air. She had learnt the rudimentary spell during an enlightening lesson that day. Being the first layer of a set of ten, it was a minor spell.

Apart from a tingling sensation, Tab felt nothing. Perhaps she hadn't drawn the diagram particularly well. She tried again, this time adding a few curlicues. A fluorescent sheen morphed in the air then dissipated. ‘Oh!’ Tab gasped, sitting back. She watched the miniscule specks of twinkling magic fall like a shower.

Tab was tempted to try the spell one more time. But Dorissa had warned her students that magic didn't like being messed with. If it wasn't working, then leave well enough alone. There might be a reason why it wasn't forming.

However, Tab eventually drifted off to sleep.

Around midnight she woke suddenly. She was ‘in’ a dingy room lit by a single shaft of daylight. Three Tolrushians slept on the bare ground. Another stood watch by a broken window. A cloth was draped across the gaping hole. A burly Tolrushian grunted, climbed to his feet, and peered out the window. Tab started. Before the Tolrushian dropped the cloth back into place she had glimpsed the mainmast off in the distance.

The Tolrushians were right here in Quentaris!

Tab studied the room. A wolfhound stirred, got to its feet, and came towards her, nuzzling her. So she must be seeing through the eyes of a second wolfhound.

The other wolfhound stepped back and growled at her, as though it could sense her presence.

‘Settle,’ the Tolrushian at the window whispered. The wolfhound padded across to a bundle on the ground. ‘Leave it,’ said the man gruffly. He knelt and stroked the wolfhound's wiry coat. ‘You'll have more food than you can eat soon, Slezzer.’

The mound of rags stirred. Tab made the animal move closer. Someone or something was tied up there, but the hessian wrapped about the body made it impossible for Tab to tell who or what it might be.

‘All right you lazy lot, get up. It's time.’ The two Tolrushians still stretched out on the floor groaned, blinking. ‘Bruta, Carris, you mind that bag of slag. Once we get what we've come for we're off this pile of rock.’

The meld faded.

Tab sat up. Across the room, Amelia slept peacefully, still clasping the thick tome on levitation. Tab felt a chill. What did the Tolrushians want? And how had they managed to sneak on board Quentaris? She had sensed their tension, had smelt their nervous sweat.

Something bad was about to happen, Tab knew.

‘Amelia,’ Tab hissed. She reached over and shook the girl, but Amelia didn't stir. Tab was about to shake her again but stopped.

Maybe this was her chance to do something that even the magicians would have to acknowledge. If she foiled the spies’ plans they would see she had true power after all, not just beginner's luck. Maybe she'd even get put up a class or two.

There was another reason too. Florian Eftangeny. She had run into him a week after the battle and was stunned to see him wearing the scarlet robes of the Magicians’ Guild. Somehow – probably by bribery, she thought – he had become a personal apprentice to a magician. She herself was wearing the black and silver tunic and cloak of an apprentice in the Guild itself.

Florian sneered. ‘Well, if it isn't the little rift girl, made good.’

‘You can talk,’ she retorted.

‘Oh, I earned this – saved a magician, I did, just as a Tolrushian was about to cut off his head.’

‘They don't give you an apprenticeship for that!’

‘Quite right,’ said Florian, ‘they don't. So it must be the magic spell I used to stop the brute. I must say, it surprised me nearly as much as the Tolrushian. Blasted him over the battlement, it did. The magician was *so* appreciative. Said I had real talent, unlike the kind of dumb luck certain others seem to have … ’

Tab said hotly, ‘It wasn't dumb luck. I can *see* things!’

‘Yes, but it's not really *magic,* is it? I mean, it doesn't *do* anything.’

‘It does!’

‘Is that a challenge, then?’

‘Yes!’

They stood near the edge of the harbour on Spray Lane. All around them stood stalls selling fish. ‘Let's see what you've got then,’ said Florian. He removed a magic wand from under his robes and brandished it. Accomplished magicians didn't use wands; they preferred words, and hands, to weave spells.

But Tab didn't know many spells yet, not real ones. And levitating pins wasn't going to impress Florian. He was already conjuring something. A basket of fish guts and scales trembled. Tab realised that he was trying to fling it at her, but was having some trouble.

Angry, Tab grabbed the basket. Before Florian knew what was happening, she had dumped it over his head, plastering him with stinking fish innards.

‘I'll get you!’ Florian screamed.

Tab didn't wait around to find out what he would do in retaliation. She fled. Two streets away, she could still hear his howls of rage, and couldn't stop grinning. A little later she wondered if she had gone too far. It served him right, though. He had only got what he had meant for her.

But the incident left her feeling moody.

Florian could do genuine magic, and she couldn't. It wasn't fair. What use was mind-melding with animals? It hardly seemed like magic at all.

She wanted to make things *happen.* She wanted to control water like old Stanas once did, she wanted to cast fire, like Nisha Fairsight. She wanted …

More than anything right now, she wanted to beat Florian.

She made up her mind. She would capture the Tolrushians by herself. Even Florian couldn't do that.

She got up, dressed quickly, and tip-toed down the long corridor outside her room. Moments later she was outside in the street. High above, two moons peeked through the upside rigging. In the distance a city watchman strode across a square and disappeared into a shadowy street.

She would have to be careful. First, she must find the spies. Only then could she rouse the City Watch: if the spies hid or escaped without being seen, nobody would believe her and then she would truly be in trouble. The magicians might even kick her out of school.

For a second she hesitated. Maybe she should wake somebody …

She had just convinced herself that this was the right thing to do when Florian's words came back to haunt her. She flushed again. No. She would do this herself. She could handle it. After all, she was the girl who had already saved Quentaris once. She would do it again.

The streets were reasonably quiet. With fewer people since the Rupture, Quentaris had changed: life had become more peaceful – or it *had* been till Tolrush attacked. Tab passed a few night watchmen. They glanced at her as she hurried past but her initiate's clothing saved her from closer inspection. No one really wanted to get on the wrong side of the magician-dominated Navigators’ Guild.

Tab skirted Idler's Gardens. Like the Thieves’ Quarter, it was one of those places where shady characters plied their trade. Tab stopped in the shadows beneath a monument to some long dead magician, and opened her mind. She was a little nervous. She had never deliberately tried to re-establish contact with an animal she had already been linked to. Tab sat at the foot of the monument and concentrated. She wasn't entirely sure she could make it happen; usually, the mind-melds just sprang upon her, often when she slept or dozed.

She tried to remember what it felt like to be the wolfhound: the sense of sinew and strength in its long-limbed body; the panting need for breath; its beating heart … and the excitement, the anticipation, that soon there would be action, fighting, *blood* … She felt a sudden swooping urge to howl at the sky and with an audible *click* she was back inside the hound …

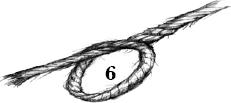
She frowned. ‘Where are you?’ she whispered, then all at once she recognised the Square of Dreams. Two Tolrushians moved with stealthy purpose through the shadows, pausing and listening. The other two, plus one wolfhound, were missing.

As a wolfhound began to growl, she broke contact and ran out of the park to find the raiding party.

Tab arrived at the square out of breath. With her heart hammering against her ribs, she slid into the nearest shadow. She tried to meld again, reaching out with her mind …

… then something hit her from behind and she crashed forward into darkness.

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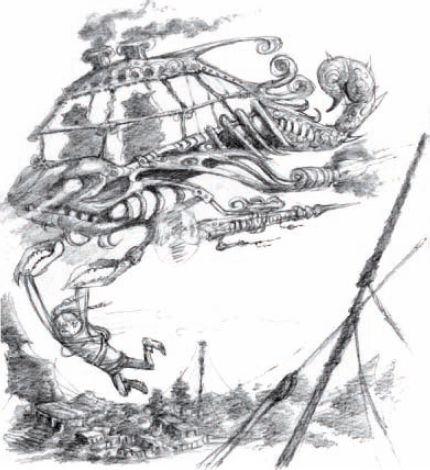


# KIDNAPPED!

  Tab woke several times. A buzzing sounded close by, and wind buffeted her. When she tried to move her hands she discovered she was gripped by claw-like pincers. A herb-soaked cloth was strapped around her mouth – that accounted for her drowsiness. Her head nodded and she lost consciousness again. In that brief moment of wakefulness Tab had seen she was hanging from a flying machine. And though she couldn't see the land below, she knew it was a very long way down.



The next time she woke, she wished she hadn't. The hard bunk beneath her, the harsh lighting, and the metal bars told her all she needed to know. She tried to sit up again, but her head felt as if it had been split with an axe. Her vision swam, and she slumped back on her bunk. She must have fallen asleep because she woke several more times in the night, but each time she heard horrible noises and screams from somewhere nearby. She stuffed her fingers in her ears and curled up tightly, more frightened than she had ever been in her whole life.



Finally, Tab woke and she knew it was morning.

She caught brief ‘glimpses’ of the world outside as a series of rapid mind-melds flashed through her brain without any effort on her part: she was a rat poking its whiskery nose cautiously from a jutting drainpipe; a cat prowling a battlement, questing for food; and a hawk-like bird of prey gliding past a filthy, tattered sail that flapped in a light breeze; then she was back inside her dismal cell. With a sinking heart she knew she was on Tolrush.

Unsteady on her feet, Tab carefully crossed her cell and clutched the bars. She craned her neck to peer up and down the corridor but could only see more cells. The cell opposite hers was occupied, though she couldn't tell by whom.

‘Hey, you in there,’ she hissed. ‘Can you hear me?’

Somebody stirred, sat up briefly, giving her a look of pure terror; it was the boy from her vision. His eyes held such desolation that Tab gasped. Then he buried his face under his thin blanket.

Keys jangled and she heard footsteps coming along the corridor. Tab moved away from the bars and sat down.

A guard unlocked her cell. ‘Stand up in the presence of the King,’ he growled. He went to kick her but years of experience in Mrs Figgin's orphanage had given her swift reflexes. She dodged easily.

The boy-king she had seen in her mind-melding with the rat swept into view. Kull Vladis didn't seem as imposing in the flesh as he had in her vision. He was not more than five years older than her. But there the similarity ended. He was already massively muscled and a monster in the making. His brutal face and small darting eyes revealed treachery and cunning.

Kull eyed her up and down. ‘Answer my questions and you will live,’ he said. ‘Where is the magicians’ icefire gem?’

Tab blinked at the boy-king in surprise. Before she could open her mouth, the guard slapped her, hard. Tab grunted in pain, and her ears rang.

‘You will answer immediately and truthfully,’ said Kull, bored. ‘I'm told you're the thief who stole the gem from the Magicians’ Guild. You then pursued a fellow by the name of Fontagu Wizroth and were present when the Spell of Undoing was itself undone.’ He paused, and seemed to be mocking her. ‘I have it on good authority that the icefire was not recovered by your magicians. Indeed, no one has seen that particular gem since it was stolen, though the ruins of the slaughterhouse were thoroughly sifted. So let me repeat my question –’

‘I don't have the gem,’ said Tab. ‘I –’

Another blow knocked her to the ground.

The guard snarled, ‘Answer when spoken to, not before.’

Kull smiled. ‘I believe you returned to the slaughterhouse, found the icefire, and hid it. My advisers suspect that you then used it to hurl Tolrush into this,’ – he spat fiercely – ‘this demon-riddled hell! So I ask you once more. Where is it?’

‘I don't have it.’

‘Brand her. We shall see if she knows more than she's telling.’



Tab woke screaming.

She clutched her left hand to her chest, but no matter how hard she pressed, the pain wouldn't go away. Gritting her teeth, she forced herself to unclench her fingers. Pain seared through her arm, and made her gasp. When she could see again, she stared at her hand. The palm was ruptured and blackened like charcoaled meat. Crying, she dipped it in a pail of water …

… and fainted from the excruciating pain.

Dreams came to her. The branding was just one part of the torture. They had flogged her, hung her upside down from a high beam by her feet and tried to drown her by shoving her head repeatedly into a barrel of ice-cold water. The torture had gone on for hours. As she slept she jerked and cried out, cringing away from unseen horrors.

Tab woke hours later. She was no longer in her own cell. She raised her head. She now shared the cell with the boy she'd seen when she had first woken to find herself in this hellhole. Two swarthy-looking men sat slumped in the cell she had previously occupied.

Her mind, still groggy from pain, became more alert then. She forced herself to sit up. The boy's bunk was hard against the other wall, barely an arm's reach away.

Tab knelt by the other bunk. Very gently, she shook the boy's shoulder, aware of how stick-thin his arm was. The boy suddenly recoiled in horror, kicking and screaming. His foot caught Tab on the jaw and knocked her backwards. The boy scrabbled as far away as he could, whimpering.

Tab rubbed her jaw and got back on her knees. She could see the terrified boy watching her from a gap in the blanket.

Ruefully she said, ‘You've got a kick like a mule, did you know that? Owww!’ She tried moving her jaw from side to side. It hurt, but nothing seemed broken. ‘How many guards have you brained by now?’

The boy said nothing, but his tiny whimpers had stopped. He continued to gaze at her with enormous brown eyes.

‘My name's Tab. I'm from Quentaris.’

Nothing.

‘They kidnapped me and brought me here – last night, I think.’ Nothing.

‘I'm an orphan. Grew up in Mrs Figgin's orphanage. She was horrible. An old bat. Actually, bats are all right. She was more like an old she-dragon … Well, some of the time. She could be really gentle on her better days.’

The boy did not answer, nor did he look away.

‘You know, I'm a prisoner here too,’ said Tab, trying not to sound exasperated. She realised one of the boy's legs was poking from the blanket. His shin was painfully skinny and a large seeping sore was crawling with flies.

Tab wrinkled her nose. ‘Oh, what have they done to you?’ She blinked back tears and stretched out a trembling hand to move the blanket so she could see the wound better, but fretting, the boy jerked his leg away. He was crying now, silently.



Tab reached for his hand. The boy cried out like a frightened animal and covered his head with his arms, cringing away from her.

Tab froze, her arm in mid-air. Slowly, she drew it back.

Softly then, she continued talking about her life growing up as a Dung Brigader, not ever having known her parents; she talked about Quentaris and what it was like and how much she loved it, even though she herself had not been born there, but had stumbled from a rift cave one day, an articulate four-year-old who knew her own name but little else; she talked about meeting Fontagu and the Spell and the great Rupture, and how her life had changed for the better; and in an even lower whisper she told the boy how she had discovered her ability to mind-meld. ‘Somehow the magic in me was awakened by the icefire itself,’ she said, thinking back. ‘And that eventually helped me become an apprentice magician. I've had that dream from as far back as I can remember.’

All the while she kept her tone low and gentle, though the things the boy seemed to respond to most were her sudden smiles and the silly laughter which she tried to hold in but couldn't.

Tab realised later that it had probably been a long time since the boy had seen a smile that wasn't cruel, or heard laughter that wasn't at his expense.

She ended her story by bringing him up to date. ‘And they tortured me for hours, but I didn't tell them anything. They did this.’ She held up her burnt hand. She had actually managed not to think about it while she related her story to the boy, but seeing it again brought the horrible memories back, and the pain seemed worse than before.

She tried very hard not to, but suddenly she burst into tears, cradling her wounded hand. Wave after wave of pain throbbed along her arm.

Through the blur of tears she could see that the boy had crept forward to the edge of the bed. Tab didn't dare move, in case she frightened him again. Despite her tears she smiled at him, wanly.

As she watched, he reached out towards her wounded hand. Instinctively, she started to pull it away, and the boy froze. His eyes seemed to appeal to her. She swallowed, and tried not to move as he touched her hand.

Even that gentle touch sent a shockwave of pain racing along her limb, but she bit her lip and forced herself to remain utterly still.

Then, with a quickness which surprised her, the boy wrapped his hand around hers. She gasped in pain, went to jerk it away, but then a sliver of light shot out from between their two hands, and the pain ebbed, then disappeared.

Just like that, the burning sensation was gone.

Tab's free hand flew to her mouth. The boy released her hand and crawled back to the wall, not taking his eyes off her.

Tab looked down at her hand. It was still blackened and ruined, but the wound was now … old. As if it had happened weeks ago. She looked up at the boy. ‘What did you do?’

There was the tiniest of shrugs.

‘Do you … do you have a name?’ she asked, barely above a whisper.

Nothing. Then the boy's lips moved. Tab bent closer, and this time she heard it.

‘Torby.’\*\*\*

Tab sat back and smiled. ‘Thank you for fixing my hand.’ She wished fervently that she could heal Torby's wounds, knowing that healers couldn't cure their own injuries.



Tab woke later that night to find a small warm body pressed against her. Very slowly she rolled over. Torby whimpered but did not wake or leap away in alarm. She made sure he was covered with a blanket then slid her arm around his shoulders, and held him tightly as her eyes filled slowly with tears.

What's going to happen now? she wondered bleakly. Because one thing was very clear to her: she had to escape from this place, and she had to take Torby with her.



Shockingly cold water hit Tab's face. She sat up, gasping and spluttering. Immediately she was aware that Torby was gone. She looked about frantically. He was nowhere to be seen.

In a fury that took even the boy-king by surprise, she leapt off the bed and attacked him. Momentarily stunned, he took a step backwards, then regained his composure and laughed, holding her off with ease.

The next second a guard grabbed her from behind and threw her back on the bunk where she crouched, snarling. Kull clicked his fingers and another guard stepped into the cell doorway, holding Torby. Tab held out her arms and Kull nodded. The guard released the boy and he hurtled across the cell and into Tab's arms, burying his face against her shoulder, his body trembling.

‘What did you do to him?’ shouted Tab.

Kull seemed amused. ‘Nothing,’ he said. ‘Not today at least, and it can stay that way – if you cooperate.’

Tab's sharp intake of breath was the only sound in the cell. So that was why they had moved her. They hadn't gotten what they wanted by torturing her so they had tried something different.

‘Well?’ said Kull. ‘I'll ask only once. Where is the magicians’ icefire?’

Tab slumped. This was all her fault. If she hadn't been stupid enough or arrogant enough to think she could handle the Tolrushian spies, she wouldn't be here now. But then she wouldn't have found Torby either …

She sighed, and told them exactly where she had hidden the gem that she'd stolen from the magicians.

Kull smiled broadly. ‘See, how hard was that?’ He suddenly frowned and pursed his lips. ‘Tell me, riftling. Why didn't you hand over the icefire to your Navigators’ Guild?’

Tab slumped with her betrayal. ‘I was going to but as time went by I knew no one would believe my story. And even if they did, they would have blamed me for everything. I had … had intended to leave it in the Chief Navigator's office … but –’

Kull slapped his thighs with merriment. ‘Enough, you fool of a child. For a moment I thought perhaps the icefire was faulty. Instead you worried about your own safety and have caused a two-fold calamity for your city!’ He turned to go.

‘What about us?’ said Tab. ‘You've got what you wanted … ’

‘We'll see,’ said Kull. ‘Perhaps the gem is where you say it is, and perhaps it isn't.’

He turned and strode out of the cell and the guards followed him. The cell door clanged shut with an ominous sound. Tab held Torby as tightly as she could. She suspected there was almost no chance that Kull would release them, even when he had the gem. Much easier just to slit their throats and throw them overboard.

Torby raised his face and looked at her. ‘You knew.’

She smiled down at him. ‘Yes. I went back to the slaughterhouse and grabbed the icefire. Only just in time, too, because Fontagu turned up about two minutes later. I don't think he saw me. I snuck out and hid the gem where nobody could find it.’

‘Why?’

It hit her then that Torby was actually talking. She felt like laughing, as if he were her own child, or a little brother, and these were the first words he had ever spoken. The feeling caused an odd ache in her chest.

‘Because I thought that it was the most dangerous thing in the whole world. And I was right. It ripped my home, Quentaris, from out of the very ground and threw it through a rift vortex, into another universe. Later, I realised what the icefire really was: a source of fuel. But by then I'd waited too long to hand it back to the magicians. And the longer I waited, the more impossible it was. But I really was going to leave it in Stelka's office.’

Torby was silent for a while, then he said, ‘What now?’

‘I don't know, Torby. I really don't know.’

She kept hoping that Kull, once he had the icefire, would release them. But that hope was dashed that evening. Kull himself, alone, came to gloat. He even bowed low to her.

‘Truly,’ he said, ‘I am in your debt. Never have I seen such an icefire gem! My magicians tell me it will power the ire ore for at least a year, maybe more. With it we will capture and crush Quentaris, and we will extract the secret of how to get home again. So once more, apprentice, I thank you.’

He bowed a second time, smirking.

‘If you are in my debt then I ask that we be released.’

Kull stared at her for a moment then burst out laughing.

‘You can't keep us here!’ she cried. ‘And anyway – Quentaris will send somebody to rescue us.’

Kull stopped laughing and his eyes glittered with malice. ‘Are you threatening me, brat?’

Tab's eyes went wide. She looked away from his gaze. ‘No,’ she said. But then she looked up again, defiant. ‘But they will come for me.’

‘Why, because you saved them?’ asked Kull. He emitted a scornful bark of laughter. ‘A creature like you lives to serve its city, not the other way around. Do you really believe Quentaris feels any *loyalty* towards you? Know this, even now they are making speed away from us. Besides, your name there is mud, thanks to the vigorous efforts of my … agent.’

‘You're a liar,’ said Tab.

Kull's face flushed and he gripped the cell bars. Tab knew that if it had not been for those bars he would have killed her on the spot. Finally, after a long panting moment, he took a step back, smirking.

‘Tomorrow morning, you will be given a breakfast fit for royalty,’ he said. ‘Then you will provide the day's entertainment. My nobles and I, you see, are in disagreement over exactly how high above the ground we are. And my master magician has come up with a delightful way to measure our altitude.’

Tab scowled and said nothing. She pressed her hands over Torby's ears so he couldn't hear.

‘Apparently, sound travels at a fixed rate of speed. So my master magician has determined that by throwing a child overboard and timing its screams as it falls, we will be able to arrive at an exact measurement. Rather brilliant, I thought.’

And with that, Kull turned on his heels and strode out of the cell block, whistling merrily.

The night deepened. Tab dozed fitfully and woke to the sound of a distant bell tolling midnight. And with the final peal, the first threads of a plan began to knit in her mind. She woke Torby …

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\*\*\*Read how Torby became a prisoner of the Tolrushians at www.quentaris.com

# 



# DESPERATE ESCAPE

  Tab cleared her mind, and tried to recall what it felt like to be a rat, to be so small and scared, and always so hungry. She pictured the twitching whiskers on the snout, the feel of a tail stretching out behind, and she let her mind float outwards … and almost at once she was there, inside the rat, peering out from its eyes. It was reaching up a wall as though curious. Smells and sounds leapt at her. She forced the rat to look around and suddenly she gasped. She could see herself – only that wasn't what she looked like. To the rat, she was a tall, thin blob with a pale face and sharp horrible eyes. She was also black and white; the rat, like all rats, could not see in true colours.

She sent the rat hurrying back the way it had come, stopping directly above the key rail. Tab had to give the rat an extra push to do her will. It was hesitant and for good reason. The jump was risky and the rail narrow.

The rat half leapt and half slithered down the wall. Tab held her breath, but the rat was good at its job. It landed awkwardly, started to slip back, then dug in its claws and pulled itself to safety.

Inside the rat's mind, Tab directed it to grab the keys and slide them off the peg. This was the dangerous part. She didn't know how far away the guardroom was and the sound of the keys hitting the stone floor might bring someone. But as she overheard Verris say once, nothing ventured, nothing gained.



She urged the rat to push the keys off the peg with its snout. They hit the floor with a loud rattle. Tab waited, and she could feel both her own heart, and the rat's, beating hard. After what seemed an eternity, she relaxed. No one had come.

Tab had the rat leap to the floor and, very slowly, and as quietly as possible, drag the keys to her cell. >>>There>> You're free to go

The rat scurried away. Tab reached through the bars and grabbed the keys. There were only three. The sodden clunk of tumblers told her when she had found the right one. Her heart leapt. With Torby held tight against her, they crept silently from the cell.

‘Torby,’ whispered Tab, ‘I need you to be as quiet as a mouse. Can you do that for me?’

Torby nodded, wide-eyed. She could tell he was scared but he was also excited. Good for him, she thought. They stole past the guardroom, hearing heavy, reassuring snores. Then they came to some steps. They climbed them, halting at a locked door. Tab fumbled for the key ring and mentally crossed her fingers.

But as she inserted the key, the door started to open. Someone was coming in.

In utter despair, she grabbed Torby and whirled to flee back down the stairs, but before she had even taken one step she heard a remarkable thing. Her name.

‘Tab!’

She looked back, and gaped. Philmon and Amelia stood in the doorway. It was almost too much. She felt herself sagging but hands were grabbing her, keeping her steady. She heard Torby whimper and instinctively put an arm around him.

Her head cleared. Philmon's grin was in her face. She threw her other arm around him and hugged him hard.

‘What in the name of all the odd gods are you two *doing* here?’

‘Oh, we were just in the neighbourhood and thought –’

Amelia elbowed Philmon in the ribs. ‘Shut up.’ She rolled her eyes. ‘Honestly, if he cracks one more joke, I swear I'll throttle him.’

‘Hey, that's not fair,’ said Philmon. ‘At least I'm not all doom and gloom.’

Tab looked from one to the other. ‘But –?’

Amelia quickly filled her in. Exhausted, she had gone to bed early, then wakened to find a small blinking seed-gem on Tab's bedside table. She had known at once what it was: an alarm, the kind that was only triggered if something hidden was stolen, or a locked door was opened. The city had been searched at Verris’ request. But no sign or clue of Tab had been found.

Then Florian had started spreading rumours. About how Tab had sold out Quentaris, how she had been working with Tolrush all along and that the first attack had been designed to make her look good so that she would win favour.

‘The seed-gem is designed to take you to the place or object being protected, and that's just what it did,’ said Amelia. ‘I should have thought of it before.’

‘Bit of a shock, though,’ said Philmon wryly, ‘to stumble on a bunch of Tolrushians, I can tell you!’

‘But how did you get here?’ asked Tab.

‘Flew,’ said Philmon.

‘I enchanted an old rowboat – levitated it, to be precise,’ said Amelia proudly. She looked at Torby. ‘I think we should get moving. But who's this?’

‘His name's Torby. They – tortured him. We have to get him to safety,’ said Tab.

Philmon and Amelia heard the appeal in her voice, and both nodded. They couldn't imagine even for themselves what it would be like to be trapped in a Tolrushian dungeon, let alone for a young child. Amelia put her palm to Torby's cheek. It was a measure of his newfound security with Tab that he didn't quite flinch. ‘We're going to get you both out of here, Torby, don't you worry,’ she said. ‘The rowboat's on a tower not far from here. Let's go.’

As they ran, darting from one shadow to another, Amelia filled Tab in on the rest of the story. They had followed the Tolrushians, who already had the gem – Amelia and Philmon had seen them later admiring it – to their flying ship. From what they could overhear, the group had been led by a Quentaran spy or traitor, someone who knew his way around, and who kept mentioning his ‘prodigious reward’.

Tab started at the words. They reminded her of someone, but just then she couldn't think who.

Amelia continued. ‘We didn't know exactly what was going on, but it was pretty clear that if you were still alive, then you had to be on Tolrush, and this bunch knew where. So I enchanted the boat and we tracked them. The rest you pretty much know.’

‘You came here on your *own?’* Tab gasped.

Philmon shrugged. ‘We couldn't alert the City Watch. If they knew Tolrush was so close they'd have alerted the Navigators’ Guild and they'd have fled faster than you could say “drop dead”.’

Tab was amazed, and humbled. It must have taken a lot of nerve for both of them to come and rescue her. This was probably the first time in her life that she knew that other people actually cared about her. She felt an odd stinging in the back of her eyes.

‘Nearly there,’ said Philmon as they reached an arched doorway. They had been following an enclosed passageway between high walls. Tolrush was a grim rat's warren of alleyways, tunnels and interconnected streets that had long ago been built over, forming even more tunnels.

‘Hold!’ growled a voice.

The children skidded to a stop in front of four armed guards. ‘What we got here? A scurrying rat pack, no less!’ one of them said. ‘And fell right into our trap, they did.’

‘Behind me,’ Amelia said.

‘The skinny girl and the boy alive,’ said the leader. ‘Kill the others.’

Amelia blew into her hands and something not quite invisible sparkled like a gust of vapour, smothering the nearest guard. He coughed and buckled over.

Philmon snatched up the fallen man's sword and waved it uncertainly. ‘Stay back,’ he threatened, his voice almost breaking.

‘Take them!’ snarled the leader.

A guard smashed down on Philmon's sword, jarring his arm. The sword clattered to the floor but Tab leapt forward and snatched it up, raising its point just as the guard advanced, almost skewering him. He leapt back just in time, bellowing a curse as he tripped over his fallen comrade and slammed backwards into the wall. There was a nasty *crunch* as his head connected, and he dropped.

Meanwhile Amelia's shaking hands wove a quick spell and the third guard's face went suddenly blank, as though he didn't know where he was.

But now the first guard who had fallen was getting up. The leader shouldered past him, cried ‘Enough!’ and swung his sword. It sliced through the air an inch above Philmon's ducking head. Amelia, drained from her use of magic, slumped against the wall. Tab tried to block the leader's way, brandishing Philmon's sword, but she knew she was useless at fencing.

Someone blocked the light from the doorway. Tab's heart sank. Reinforcements had arrived.

‘Drop your weapons else I'll slay the lot of you,’ warned the leader, who had also seen the shadow.

Then a chair came crashing down on his head and he fell like a sack of wheat. The first guard, his head clearing, took to his feet, and bolted.

The man in the doorway stepped forward.

‘Fontagu?’ exclaimed Tab. She couldn't believe her eyes. ‘Wha – how –?’

‘Never mind all that,’ said Fontagu in a quavering voice. ‘Let us flee this horrible place!’ The Tolrushian sergeant groaned. Fontagu started. ‘He's not dead, is he?’

Amelia said, ‘Usually they don't groan when they're dead.’

‘Right,’ Fontagu mumbled.

‘Is this *the* Fontagu?’ Philmon asked, wonderingly. ‘The one you told us about?’

‘Yeah,’ said Tab, still amazed to see her friend.

‘I thought you said he was dead.’

‘I thought he was,’ Tab replied, dropping the sword and replacing it with a sturdy dagger.

Amelia looked at Fontagu through narrowed eyes. ‘He's about the same size as the one who guided the Tolrushians.’

‘I've just saved your wretched lives,’ said Fontagu petulantly. ‘And I've been a prisoner here too, you know.’ He glared at them.

‘You don't look as though you've been tortured to me,’ accused Amelia. This wasn't quite true. Fontagu did look thin and pale and his eyes were red-rimmed, but whether from poor treatment or crying, it was hard to tell. He was, however, wearing clean and rather expensive clothes.

‘Tortured!’ Fontagu cried theatrically. ‘Bound and gagged, half drowned, beaten to within an inch of my life, starved and driven mad with thirst –’

‘I think I saw that play,’ said Tab. Then she was struck by a sudden, rather unpleasant idea. She looked at Fontagu. ‘They captured you during the battle, didn't they? And you've been a prisoner ever since … ’

‘Oh, I could tell you tales of woe … ’ he began, but Tab cut him off.

‘That attack on Quentaris was a ruse to land a boarding party. They were really searching for you. You told them that I knew where the icefire was hidden. That's what happened, isn't it?’

Fontagu began to bluster. ‘Me? Well, really! Shame on you! You think I would hand over my only friend in Quentaris? What sort of man do you think I am?’

Tab said nothing. She continued to stare at him.

He broke down in a rush, falling to his knees and wailing, ‘Don't blame me, Tab. I couldn't help myself. They were going to poke out my eyes with a red-hot poker … I would never have acted again!’

Amelia and Philmon glared at him. Amelia snatched up a sword and looked as if she was going to run him through. ‘Because of you,’ she said, ‘Tolrush now has the magicians’ icefire gem and you nearly got Tab killed!’

Fontagu was weeping. Tab stepped between him and Amelia. There had been one brief flash of resentment when she had found out that Fontagu had betrayed her, but then she remembered her own torture, and Torby's, and how she had quickly caved in and told them where to find the icefire.

People like Kull Vladis always knew how to reveal the thing each person feared most, how to find their breaking point.

She stuck out her hand. Fontagu looked at it, not understanding at first, then he took it, still weeping, but with a kind of wonder.

‘I don't blame you, Fontagu,’ said Tab. She helped him to his feet. ‘But it's a pity about the icefire.’

Fontagu stared at her, then smote his forehead. ‘Oh, but it's not,’ he said.

Amelia muttered something darkly. Fontagu stepped around Tab, making sure she was between him and the more hot-tempered Amelia. He reached into his pocket and drew out the icefire in question.

Amelia and Philmon's mouths gaped. Tab stared. Torby eyed the gem with wonder.

‘How –?’ Tab began.

‘Well, I do have some skills you know … and the master magician does like to keep things in his pockets … ’

Amelia gaped. ‘You *stole* it again?’

Fontagu tried to look bashful, and failed.

‘Now we'd *really* better get out of here,’ said Amelia, ‘’cause they're going to come after us with everything they've got!’

Leading the way, Amelia hurried through several passageways, covered courtyards, and a long narrow lane. They came out into a square open to the sky. At the same time, a platoon of guards entered from the opposite side. Sighting their quarry, the guards charged, bellowing.

‘This way!’ shouted Philmon.

They fled up a stairwell to a tower that bordered the square. At the top, Tab slammed shut the stairwell door and drew the bolt. The door wouldn't hold for long, but it gave them breathing space.

‘Now what? We're trapped!’ said Tab. Fontagu wailed softly. Torby said nothing.

Amelia had rushed onto a large balcony. It was some eight storeys from the ground. ‘I'll have to try summoning the boat. We'll never get there with that lot on our heels.’

She closed her eyes and concentrated.

Tab could see sweat breaking out on her forehead. Summoning an object as large as a rowboat was no joke. Even some fully-fledged magicians couldn't manage something like that.

Just then, an impact nearly tore the door half off its hinges.

‘Hurry!’ hissed Philmon, darting looks back and forth between Amelia and the door. More pounding came. Bits of plaster fell from the wall around the door frame.

Tab hurried out to stand by Amelia's side, as if her presence might somehow help. Then she gasped. ‘What are they doing? Why are they just sitting there?’

Barely a mile away, cruising slowly under full sail, was Quentaris. ‘They don't know Tolrush is here,’ said Philmon. ‘Tolrush is cloaked. When we followed the raiding party, we couldn't figure where they were going. I mean, there was nothing there. Then suddenly we were here.’

‘You mean, this whole city's invisible?’ asked Tab.

‘And sort of soundproof, too,’ said Philmon. ‘It's like there's a bubble or something around it. So Quentaris doesn't even know we're here. They can't see us.’

Behind them, the pounding had intensified. Any second now and the door would crash in, and it would all be over. ‘I'm sorry I got you two into this,’ said Tab to Amelia and Philmon.

Philmon pushed his way in front of the girls. ‘Nonsense,’ he said.

‘We're trapped like rats,’ wailed Fontagu.

‘Look!’ cried Philmon.

Rising into view beyond the balcony's rail was an old rowing boat. Unseaworthy, with ragged tears in its planking, it nonetheless floated in mid-air. Tab looked at it doubtfully. It didn't appear sturdy enough to carry the five of them.

Amelia wove her hands in the air and the boat drew closer, and bumped into the balcony's rail. One of its planks popped out from the impact and fell into the street far below.

Fontagu pushed past the others and climbed unsteadily into the boat. It tipped and yawed with his weight. ‘Hurry, you fools!’ he screamed.

The children needed no urging, for just then, the stairway door crashed in. Yells and curses followed, and bodies falling over one another, then pounding feet coming straight for the balcony.

Philmon dragged Tab into the boat and Amelia vaulted the railing and joined them. The rowboat shuddered and started to pull away from the balcony, but with agonising slowness. They weren't going to make it.

At the same moment, Tab realised Torby wasn't with her. She spun wildly. He wasn't in the boat. ‘Amelia, stop!’ she shouted frantically. ‘Where's Torby?’

‘There he is!’ yelled Philmon. Tab gasped. Torby was standing in the middle of the balcony. When Tab cried out his name he turned and looked at her with his owl-like eyes. Then the Tolrushians rushed them.

There was a blinding flash of light. Then nothing. The balcony was empty.

‘Wh-what? What happened?’

The boat rocked as though a large wave had hit it.

‘We have to go back!’ yelled Tab.

‘We can't,’ said Amelia. ‘Tab, I'm sorry. It's all I can do to get us home – and I may not be able to do that … ’

Tab stood up, went to leap back to the balcony, but suddenly Fontagu's arms were around her, dragging her back into the boat. ‘He's gone, Tab,’ he screamed. ‘He's gone. We must think of ourselves!’

In another moment the crisis had passed. The rowboat was now too far from the balcony for anyone to think of jumping to it.

Tab slumped against Fontagu. She had promised Torby that she would protect him, no matter what. And he had trusted her …

Tears spilled down her cheeks. She felt awful. Was it always this easy to betray someone?

Fontagu produced a monogrammed silk handkerchief, the kind that equalled a week's wages for a poor Quentaran, and dabbed the perspiration from his brow. Noticing Amelia and Philmon glaring at him, he offered the handkerchief to Tab. She snatched it from his hand and wiped her eyes and blew her nose. Then she offered it back to Fontagu.

He eyed the dampened handkerchief with disdain. ‘Consider it a gift,’ he said through gritted teeth.

The boat picked up speed as it sailed out over the rooftops of Tolrush, avoiding Kull's castle which protruded from the portside like a dark tumour.

‘I'm glad that's over,’ said Philmon, breathing a sigh.

But he had spoken too soon. A flurry of arrows suddenly whizzed past them. Several twanged into the bottom of the boat and one came whistling through the gap where the plank had fallen off.

‘They're firing from that rooftop,’ said Tab, pointing.

Amelia muttered something, wove her hands in the air. The boat tossed and twisted, nearly flipping over at one point. Philmon and Fontagu looked ill.

‘You idiot!’ Fontagu screamed as the boat spiralled downwards instead of up. ‘We're doomed! Oh! Oh!’

The boat righted itself and began to fly straight, though it sagged alarmingly at the stern. Everyone had to hold on tight to stay aboard.

‘I'm falling!’ Fontagu screamed piteously. Tab grabbed him and tugged. The boat suddenly veered into a clear area, away from the higher towers, but several planks popped their rivets and were snapped away, as if torn by a buffeting wind.

‘We're breaking up. Do something!’ cried Fontagu.

‘Yeah,’ growled Amelia, ‘somebody do something. Gag him, so I can concentrate.’

Philmon awkwardly clamped a hand across Fontagu's mouth. Over the top of Philmon's hand, Tab could see Fontagu's eyes bulge.

Amelia was struggling to keep the boat moving and under control. They began to lose height, though they were still high above Quentaris.

Faster and faster they fell. The ground appeared to rush up at them. Then, just as a crash-landing seemed inevitable, they veered off towards Quentaris. Amelia groaned and her eyes rolled back.

# 



# SHIPWRECKED

  By now Amelia was white-faced and shaking from trying to keep them in the air. The boat continued to lose height in an alarming fashion.

Tab didn't think Amelia could hold out for much longer. Fontagu's extra weight didn't help either. A sudden thought smote her. Had Torby known that *his* added weight would have doomed them?

She looked over the side. Quentaris was appreciably closer, but still a long way down. Then, clutching the gunwale, she peered back at Tolrush, hoping beyond hope to see Torby. She gasped loudly. Tolrush had vanished!

Philmon looked over her shoulder and nodded. ‘It's cloaked, like we said. That's why Quentaris isn't piling on the canvas and getting out of here.’

Tab's chest hurt. If Tolrush was still there, then hopefully Torby was too, but it felt as if a piece of her heart had disappeared.

Behind her, Philmon said, ‘Hey, look at that!’

Though there were few clouds about, lightning struck suddenly across the broiling grey sky. Thunder rumbled. As they watched, a fog appeared from nowhere and began to envelop Quentaris.

They were now almost over the city and as they drifted in amongst the swathes of canvas, masts and rigging, the fog thickened. Suddenly, Amelia cried out. At the same moment she lost control of the boat, which began to spin, dropping faster and faster. Everyone grabbed the gunwale and held on for dear life.

‘We're going to die!’ wailed Fontagu, squeezing his eyes tightly shut. The boat lurched, nearly spilling them into the air.

Everyone screamed.

‘Hold on!’ shouted Tab.

The boat bucked frenziedly, as if it were trying to shake them out of it. It whizzed amongst the rigging and whirled around the First Mast six times until everyone on board was dizzy.

The boat banked sharply, dropped still lower, and accelerated towards the mainmast. ‘We're going to crash!’ yelled Philmon. ‘Hard over, Amelia!’

‘The rigging!’ cried Tab. ‘We've got to jump!’

The boat zoomed towards a tangled spider's web of rope work. ‘Not yet!’ yelled Tab. She forced Fontagu unsteadily to his feet. The others were already poised to leap. As the boat soared past the rigging, Tab half leapt and half fell out of the boat. From the corner of her eye she saw Philmon and Amelia make it safely but Fontagu had waited too long. By the time he jumped the boat was nearly past the last cord and he had barely managed to grab hold of it.



‘Help me!’ he shrieked, hanging by one hand as he dangled six hundred feet above the deck, as the ground level was called. Tab scrambled across the rigging, mindful she didn't plunge through one of the large gaps. She managed to reach him just as his grip started to slip.

She grabbed his wrist and hung on, her injured hand burning. Behind her, the boat crashed into the mainmast in a shower of splinters.

Then Amelia and Philmon were beside her and between them they yanked Fontagu onto the rigging where he sat, pale and gasping, not daring to look down.

‘Now what?’ Amelia gasped. She didn't look any happier than Fontagu.

‘Just follow me,’ said Philmon. ‘This is my territory.’

He led them, slowly and carefully, up the rigging that was like a big sloping ladder made of rope, to a cross-spar. The spar, which held the great billowing sail in place, was almost as wide as a lane and led straight to the mainmast. From there they could make their way down to the deck.

Tab was pondering on what had happened to Torby, and how it might have felt to have had a little brother in her life, when the next mishap happened.

Reaching the more or less solid ground again seemed to have gone to Fontagu's head. And if the truth were known, he very much wanted everyone to forget just how scared he had been moments before. ‘Now wasn't that fun?’ he said, in a loud and jovial voice. ‘We should do it again some time.’

Philmon grunted. Amelia, however, jumped forward and yelled, ‘Boo!’

Fontagu screamed and leapt backwards – towards the edge of the spar.

‘Fontagu!’ yelled Tab. But it was too late. He had stepped too far and was teetering on the very edge, his arms windmilling as he tried to save himself. ‘Nooo … ’ he cried.

Tab lunged forward just as he started to tilt backwards, grabbed his outflung arm and tugged with all her might. It was just enough to tip the balance. Fontagu staggered forward, groaning with relief. For better purchase, he gripped Tab's tunic and pulled hard, but in doing so, Tab suddenly found herself stumbling towards the edge.

‘No!’ she cried out, plunging headfirst off the cross-spar.

As Tab fell, she heard the others scream, then the air was whistling past her ears and she was dropping … Below her was a great sail, straining against the wind. She was falling towards it.

Moments before she hit, she yanked the dagger from her belt, then *ooomph!* – she struck the canvas, which collapsed a little beneath her. Then, winded, she began to slide over the bulge of the sail. She twisted round and plunged her knife into the thick sheeting.

Her sliding fall slowed, but not for long. As soon as she hit the outermost bulge of the sail she would be flung out into empty space toward the mizzenmast … unless the dagger helped her cling to the canvas!

Which was exactly what happened.

She continued to slide. Her dagger slicing into the canvas, she followed the curve of the sail. But this was only a brief reprieve.

Below her, the sail came to a sudden lethal end. And then she saw something, and her heart leapt. It was a knotted double rope with foot and arm loops, the kind used by canvassers. It was the job of these men and women to deploy the canvas and also repair it, a task which often had to be done while Quentaris was under sail.

The sling-rope dangled the length of the sail some twenty feet to Tab's right. If she could somehow angle the dagger so that she veered that way as she fell, she might just be able to reach it before running out of sail.

Clutching the dagger with both hands Tab turned the blade to the right. Immediately the new direction of the ‘cut’ caused her to move towards the sling-rope. Looking down, she moaned in fear.

If only she had spotted the sling-rope when she had been higher up, she might have made it … Arms and legs burning from the friction with the canvas, she turned the knife blade further. She skewed too far to the right. The knife buckled and caught. Clutching it tightly she angled it downward again.

She had twenty feet of canvas left, then a fall of some two hundred feet. She looked across at the sling-rope – so near and yet too far …

Except … somehow … she *was* moving towards the sling-rope.

No, she wasn't. It was moving towards her!

Amelia! She must be levitating it.

Tab reached out and just as the sail ran out and she dropped, her good hand closed tightly on the knotted rope.

Three distant voices cheered from the rigging.



Tab's legs were shaking when she climbed down to the deck to join the others.

‘That was amazing,’ said Philmon.

Fontagu bit his lip, looking thoroughly abashed. ‘I thought you were going to … That you would … That you couldn't possibly –’ He grinned lamely.

‘I'm so sorry!’ Amelia gushed. ‘If I hadn't been so childish –’

Tab said, ‘I would have died just then if you hadn't levitated that rope, Amelia.’

Amelia stared at her. ‘What rope?’

‘The sling-rope – you made it slide towards me so I could grab it.’

Amelia shook her head. ‘It wasn't me. I couldn't even see you.’

Tab appeared stunned. ‘Then who?’

Suddenly Philmon's eyes widened. He was gazing over Tab's shoulder at something behind her. The hairs on the back of Tab's neck stood up.

She whirled, visions of Tolrushian assassins in her mind. But what she saw made her gasp. ‘Torby!’

The beaten and battered boy was standing not twenty feet from her. She hurled herself at him and threw her arms about his shoulders, hugging him tightly. He grinned guardedly.

‘However did you –?’ Tab began. She had a million questions and they all came bursting out of her. The others crowded round.

Finally Amelia called for quiet. ‘Torby,’ she said. ‘How did you get here?’

Torby glanced fearfully back to where Tolrush might be lurking.

‘Not exactly the talkative type, is he?’ said Philmon. Amelia hushed him.

‘Did you fly somehow?’ asked Tab.

Torby looked pensive, as though pondering the question. Then in a very small voice, he said, ‘I sewed.’

Tab frowned and looked to the others. ‘Sowed? Sewed? What does he mean?’ ‘There!’ said Torby.

They all glanced up. Fontagu wailed. Overhead, Tolrush – now visible – looked as if it was dropping down on top of them. Bells tolled, and people ran from their houses and swarmed the decks. The rigging came alive with sailors.

Chunks of rock, which were always falling from the sides of the floating cities, crashed down onto Quentaris. Some landed in the harbour, sending up great spouts of water.

‘We're done for!’ cried Fontagu. He hurriedly reached into his pocket and thrust the icefire gem into Tab's hands. ‘For safekeeping,’ he explained. ‘In case anything happens to me.’

Tab hesitantly pocketed the gem, wondering at Fontagu's sudden thoughtfulness.

‘This is very bad,’ said Amelia. ‘It will take time to get up to speed … ’

‘Can I help?’ said Torby. Everyone turned and looked at him. Fontagu snorted and even Philmon shook his head.

But Tab had an odd feeling. ‘Yes … yes, help us, Torby.’

Amelia and Philmon exchanged looks.

‘I know what you're thinking,’ Torby said quietly. ‘I was drained beneath the ground, but now I'm free. It will take time for me to build … ’ He stopped, as though guilty of something. With some exertion he then raised his arms and wiggled his fingers. A light wind picked up about him.

Philmon said, ‘I'd better report to my battle station. They're going to need all hands before –’ He stopped suddenly.

‘Now will you look at that?’ he said, frowning in wonderment. High above them, Tolrush was in difficulty. A fierce nor’-nor’-easterly wind had sprung up from nowhere and was pushing her rapidly away from Quentaris. At the same time a sou’-westerly wind was filling Quentaris’ sails and the fog was thickening. Within moments, Tolrush had veered off and was dwindling astern. Then the fog closed in and obscured most of the enemy city.

Everyone turned and stared at the wind-swept Torby who slowly lowered his arms. He looked for a moment as though he had borne the brunt of the inclement weather.

‘I don't believe it,’ said Amelia.

‘He's some kind of magical genius,’ said Philmon.

Tab said, ‘You're not wrong.’ Suddenly Torby went cross-eyed and reeled. She caught him just as he was collapsing. ‘Help me!’ she cried.

Amelia and Philmon rushed to her aid. Standing well back Fontagu looked up at the beleaguered Tolrush, then at the full blown Quentaran sails. Then he looked down at Torby, a calculating look on his face.



Tab let the curtain drop and sighed. Torby was sleeping soundly, after a night of sudden fever and chills. The two of them were back in Tab's old lodging house.

She joined Philmon and Amelia in the sitting room. All three had long, gloomy faces.

And they weren't the only ones. Everyone had gone crazy lately. It wasn't surprising. A week of fog and rain, no sun, no fresh air, and the constant threat of attack from Tolrush were enough to drive anyone to desperation. To make matters worse, Tab had been hauled before the Grand Council and chastised. Even the return of the icefire – and enough energy to power Quentaris for a year – did not make up for her theft of the gem in the first place or her subsequent hiding of it. It had taken all of Verris’ authority to keep her from being thrown in the brig, and even so she was under a kind of house arrest. She had also had to fudge the truth to keep Fontagu's name out of the proceedings. She hated to think what would happen if the magicians verified what they had suspected from the beginning: that their gem had been used to ignite the Spell of Undoing.

And if all that wasn't bad enough, she was blamed – along with Amelia and Philmon – for bringing the wrath of Tolrush down upon them. Luckily, it was quietly bandied about that Tab had somehow concocted the fog and the strange wind that were keeping them out of Tolrush's claws.

‘I still can't believe that we brought the icefire back home yet we're still the villains in all of this,’ said Philmon gloomily one evening. He had suffered the least of the three. Captain Bellgard did not share the magicians’ feeling that the youths had behaved badly. Amelia, however, had been severely reprimanded, while Tab had been expelled from the Magicians’ Guild altogether.

‘I went to the market today,’ said Tab, ‘and a merchant spat at me.’

Amelia nodded. ‘This is all Florian's doing. He's been spreading evil rumours ever since you disappeared. What's he got against you, anyway?’

Tab sat on her bed and rested her chin on her hands. ‘He hates me.’ She didn't mention how she had dumped a basket of fish guts on his head, and in public. ‘And he's too powerful to expose for the traitor he is without real evidence. Even with proof the Archon would hush it all up and Florian's accusers would “disappear”. I'm so sorry I got you into all this,’ she added, miserably.

‘We got ourselves into it,’ said Philmon. ‘And anyway, I don't see how Quentaris’ plight is our fault.’

‘Hey, something's happening,’ said Amelia.

Tab joined her at the window. Outside, pale towers and buildings loomed out of the fog.

‘I don't see anything,’ said Tab.

‘But you can see *something,* right?’

‘Oh.’ Amelia was right. For the past week Tab hadn't been able to see the house across the street. Now, however, she could even see the Pandro's Tower which was a good three blocks away. ‘The fog's breaking up,’ she said.

All eyes went to the curtained alcove where the bandaged Torby tossed and turned in the grip of fever. The children exchanged dark looks. By mutual agreement, Torby's abilities – if that was what they were – had been kept from the Council. Tab had had to convince Fontagu, but under threat of being named as the man who had caused the Rupture, he had agreed to keep quiet.

At that moment, a jolt rippled through Quentaris.

‘They've furled the main sail, and we're coming hard about,’ Philmon said. ‘You know what, I think they've found a vortex.’

‘We're leaving this world?’ Tab exclaimed.

Philmon nodded. ‘We've been tracking the vortex for days, but it keeps shifting.’

Outside, there was a sudden flood of sunlight. Tab's spirits lifted instantly.

But the next moment Amelia cried out, ‘I don't believe it!’

Tab turned and followed the direction of Amelia's gaze. Propellers humming, sails straining at their ropes, the dark fortress of Tolrush thundered toward them.

# 



# THE VORTEX

  Horns blared. Bells tolled.

‘Tab!’ Amelia called as her friend ran to the door and flung it open. ‘You're confined to quarters! And what about Torby?’

Tab stopped in her tracks. Amelia was right. She couldn't leave Torby when he was sick.

‘Do you mind if I come in?’ said a nervous voice right behind her. It was Fontagu. Tab's eyes lit up.

‘Just the person I wanted to see,’ she said. ‘Torby's in there. He's got a fever. If he wakes, give him this herbal tonic and tell him I'll be back soon. Come on, you two!’

And she was out the door.

As the trio ran through the streets, Tab pointed up at the dark mass of Tolrush. ‘Look! They're attacking us with everything they have.’

Amelia and Philmon had already seen the flying lizards and demon-like dragons bombarding the city. The animals were normally used for scouting and hunting.

Tab's mouth gaped. ‘They must really be desperate to be using their squadrons. They'll get snared in the rigging. Come on, you two, this one's all or nothing!’

Pandemonium reigned. Everyone but the very young or ancient was rushing to their battle stations. Streams of people were charging up onto the perimeter wall; boats were being launched to defend the port area; specially trained and equipped soldiers were trudging across the Barrenlands to meet infiltrators who had landed to starboard.

‘Look out!’ someone screamed.

A giant flying lizard, its black shape blotting out the sun, screeched as it tumbled from the sky. Stuck full of arrows, it wheeled, pitched, and plummeted amidships. More creatures thudded into the Square of the People. Tab could see squads of Verris’ archers sending volleys of arrows skyward.

Tab pounded to the nearest section of the perimeter wall and raced up the stairs. The fighting was thick on all sides. Tolrush had landed a dozen boarding parties all across Quentaris, having clearly learnt their lesson from last time. The nearest such melee was only yards away.

Ignoring this hubbub, Tab pressed her hands to either side of her forehead. Fixing her eyes on a marauding lizard she sent out her mind, questing. She mind-melded instantly with the predator. Fighting through the creature's jumbled thoughts she tried to take control of it. The creature wavered, its handler countermanding Tab's order. The lizard, disoriented, narrowly missed the bronzed minarets of the Cathedral of the Holy Benefactor Mushin. It tried to navigate the narrow canyon between two tenements but clipped a roof, lost control, and cartwheeled into the ground.

‘Yes!’ Tab cried at her small victory. By now, though, the sky was thick with flying monstrosities. Many had landed, depositing their passengers before flapping back to Tolrush for reinforcements. Screams and angry shouts rose on all sides. Quentarans fought fiercely and died bravely but the outcome of this battle wasn't much in doubt. Vastly outnumbered and low on morale, it was only a matter of time before Tolrush overwhelmed them.

Somewhere overhead, rigging snapped and twanged. Tab stared as a canvasser fell like a stone, his scream stopping abruptly when he hit the deck. Some were plucked from spars and walkways while others scurried like rodents into rat-holes as the flying lizards passed overhead. There are too few of us, Tab thought. We're … sunk …

As though to confirm her worst fears, an entire cross-spar, sail and all, came crashing down. Sailors scrambled for their lives. The vast billowing canvas settled languidly over several city blocks. Ironically, this saved many from the attacks of the lizards. Conversely, and no doubt part of the saboteurs’

plans, the fallen rigging and sails gave better access to the enemy's airborne troops.

Amelia, who was using levitation spells to toss Tolrushians overboard or deflect killing strokes of sword or pike, joined Tab on the battlement.

‘Where's Philmon?’ gasped Tab. She was winded, having sent yet another lizard crashing into the ground.

‘He went to his battle station. Watch out!’

Amelia magically deflected a thrown axe that would have split Tab's head in two.

‘This is madness!’ Tab screamed.

‘Look at that!’ Amelia said, shaking Tab.

Tab followed her pointing finger. A vast mushroom-shaped vortex turned ponderously in the distance. Livercoloured clouds broiled in its mouth, lightning crackled. It was more frightening than any vortex Tab had ever seen.

‘We're going into *that?’* she whispered.

‘Well, if we stay here, we die,’ cried Amelia, pulling Tab to safety as two Tolrushians ran past.

Tab shivered. No one liked flying through a vortex. It felt too much like entering banned rift caves. She shook her head as she tried to focus on the task at hand: namely, stemming the airborne attack.

A three-lizard squad darted in low under the forward sail. As Tab watched, they flew between tall buildings and towers, down where the ranks of Verris’ archers could not assail them. As they swept past her, Tab recognised one of the riders on the middle beast: Kull Vladis.

The lizards landed in a small square and the Tolrushians quickly dismounted.

‘I can't see them!’ Tab cried, craning her neck. ‘Stay here,’ she told Amelia, then raced down the stairs.

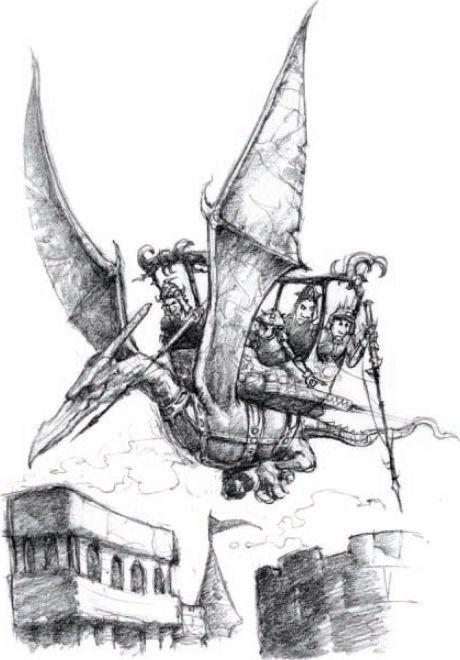
Tab reached the square just in time to see the last of the Tolrushians disappear into a culvert at the base of a tower. Running lightly and quietly to the entrance, she peeked inside. She saw torches flaring in the distance, and bit her lip. Should she follow?

Quentaris was undermined by catacombs, but this tunnel had a carved look which meant that it was probably somebody's escape route. Only thieves and royalty had need of such tunnels. And Tab had an idea she knew just where this tunnel would lead.

Cursing herself for an idiot, Tab ducked inside and followed the distant lights, being careful to stay back as far as she could without losing sight of her quarry.

The tunnel twisted and turned, dropped steeply at one point into that maze-like underworld that existed beneath Quentaris, then thankfully started up again. And all the time Tab's heart hammered. If she lost sight of the torches, she would be marooned in the pitch dark: she would have no hope of finding her way out of here again.

With these chilling thoughts to keep her company, Tab hurried along in the Tolrushians’ rear, stumbling over unseen objects, barking her shins, and once bashing her head on a projecting beam. She nearly lost sight of the rear-most torch then and only the fact that the Tolrushian bearing it stopped to retie his sandal allowed her to catch up again.



Finally, Tab climbed stairs that led to a slightly open door. Pressing an ear to it, she could only see a tiny part of the room but what she saw made her catch her breath. Tolrushians … and Quentarans! Ruffians by the look of them. Thugs for hire.

Although those inside spoke in low tones, Tab could hear them clearly. And there was one voice that she recognised, aside from Kull's, that chilled her with instant fury.

‘Yes, yes, we've agreed to all this in principle,’ said an irritable Kull Vladis. ‘You shall be installed as Monarch of Quentaris.’

‘And you shall be Overlord,’ came Florian's fawning voice. ‘We will rule the rift planes like demi-gods!’

‘And your uncle?’ queried Kull.

‘Pah! He shall do as he's told else I'll have him whipped bare and thrown to the blood wasps.’

Kull laughed mirthlessly. ‘Family loyalty is so overrated.’

Tab rammed her hand in her mouth to gag it. The little monster!

Kull said, ‘And your engines? You've disabled them, as a greed?’

‘I have a magician in my pay. He will steal the icefire when he gets my signal. Without it, the engines will run for only a few minutes. And with this breeze … ’

Tab finished the sentence in her own mind: with this breeze, Quentaris would become a sitting duck.

‘A toast, then. To our combined good fortune,’ Kull rumbled.

Tab heard chinking goblets. The next moment something sniffed her leg. The same something uttered a loud and horrible growl.

Slowly Tab looked down. Kull's wolfhound, Sherma, met her gaze, revealing yellowed, saliva-dripping teeth.

‘Oh!’ Tab squealed, promptly lost her balance and tumbled down the stone steps.

Before she could pick herself up, the door above flew open. Someone shouted ‘Sherma!’ and the next moment she was lifted bodily and hauled up the steps. The guard rammed his foot in her backside and shoved her into the room.

Florian's sharp intake of breath was the most gratifying sound Tab had heard. This was followed by Kull's burst of laughter as Tab fell flat on her face.

‘Get up!’ someone growled.

Tab got to her feet slowly. As she did so, she saw a dumb waiter in the wall in front of her. It was used to send trays of food up and down a shaft to the other floors. The tray itself must be on a lower floor – all she could see were ropes drawn taut.



Without hesitating she threw herself into the cavity.

‘Get her!’ yelled a guard. His fingertips grabbed for Tab's pigtails but missed. A knife thudded into the wall, just missing her ear as she scrambled into the chute.

Up or down? she thought frantically.

Then she was straining to haul herself up the ropes. She was tempted to slide down but if they cut the ropes, she might have fallen to her death. And at this depth, there might only be a cellar – an instant death trap. So up it was.

‘Stop her!’ Kull roared.

The guards tried to obey their king but none could fit into the chute. One poked his sword at her but it fell short. Through all the yells and oaths, Tab heard Florian's squeaking exclamation: ‘I can fit! The rest of you – up those stairs. She can't get far!’

Sure enough, Florian squeezed into the shaft. Tab could hear the little toad's wheezing as he strained to follow her.

Tab climbed faster. She kicked at a panel on the next floor, but could hear the guards charging into the room on the other side. Up she went to the next floor, then the next. At that point she could go no further.

She booted open the dumb waiter's panel and found herself in a meeting hall. An arched window and balcony took up most of the north wall. Her arms aching, she swung out of the shaft and pulled a dagger from her boot.

Clasping the dumb waiter ropes with one hand, she started slicing.

‘No!’ Florian screamed. His whining voice echoed up the shaft.

Tab hesitated. Could she really kill someone in cold blood? The rope trembled in her hand. Florian had almost reached her.

‘Don't cut the rope!’ he wailed. ‘I'll give you anything. You can rule by my side!’

But Tab had hesitated too long. The chamber door shattered like kindling. A guard rolled across the lush carpet.

Kull Vladis strode into the room, looking slightly out of breath. ‘Back,’ he told his men. ‘I'll handle the riftling. Sit,’ he told his wolfhound as he drew his sword.

Tab tried mind-melding with the wolfhound, but it was too agitated and she flinched from its dark angry mind. Automatically she cast about for anything that might aid her. But there was nothing in the room. Outside, yes, a strange mind, long enslaved, welcomed the touch of her mind … and she sensed a kind of release …

‘Time to teach the meddler not to meddle,’ said Kull. He lunged for Tab.

Tab ducked, parrying. The blades clanged, but she had been lucky. A dagger was no match for a sword. Already her arm was numb and that was just the first blow. Unable to tightly grip the dagger with her injured hand, she flipped it to her other hand and threw it at Kull.

The boy-king, taken completely by surprise, instinctively brought his right hand up and howled as the dagger sliced through his forearm. He dropped his sword. ‘Kill her!’ he screamed. ‘Sherma!’

Florian had meanwhile clambered from the dumb waiter. He picked up Kull's sword. ‘I'll get her!’ he crowed.

But Tab was already dashing across the room. With not a second to spare, she curled into a ball and hurled herself through the leadlight window.

The next moment she was plummeting to the ground.

Then came a loud ‘Oomph!’ as she landed on something. She looked down. She was sitting astride a dragon. Tab clutched wildly at its neck spines, frightened she would fall off.

>>> I won't let you fall, Tab Vidler

Awestruck, Tab's eyes widened. She'd never encountered a talking beast before. She didn't know what to say, or how to say it.

>>> My name is Melprin. Speak to me with your mind and I will hear. I thank you for freeing me

‘I fre … freed you?’ stuttered Tab. ‘How?’

>>>I do not know. The moment your mind touched mine, the enslavement was broken. Thus, I am in your debt. What would you have me do, Tab Vidler?

Tab's mind raced. Florian was going to have the icefire stolen. That would spell Quentaris’ doom. The only thing to do, Tab realised, was to even the odds.

>>>I understand

Melprin banked hard, giving Tab a sudden fright. She squealed and clutched the mane even tighter. She sensed rather than heard a deep throaty chuckle from her mount.

‘Not funny,’ she muttered, hoping the dragon couldn't hear everything she was thinking.

The dragon soared across Quentaris. Several lizards came near and Melprin's gushing breath vaporised them all. After that, the lizards kept a wary distance.

Then Melprin veered out from Quentaris and flapped swiftly towards Tolrush. Since the air was full of so many lizards and dragons, none paid Tab and her mount any heed, and they made it unscathed to the outskirts of the enemy city.

‘I must find their icefire gem,’ Tab shouted into the wind.

>>>The icefire is kept in the Tower of Storms. I will take you there

Melprin flew like an arrow towards one of a cluster of towers in the castle complex that Kull called his palace. The entire building jutted from the forward portside of the city and was ringed by a low wall. Steps led down to a platform that bordered the void and was tinged a deep red.

Melprin overshot the tower, banked hard, and came back in a swirl of wings and fire to settle on the slippery rooftop.

>>>I can blast this place to smithereens if you wish it

Tab would like nothing better but there was always the possibility that there were innocent people inside. She must warn them first. As before, the dragon knew her thoughts immediately.

>>>You must hurry. They come

Tab looked back towards Quentaris and saw a battery of lizards clawing the air in their effort to gain height as swiftly as possible. On one rode a figure that she guessed was Kull.

>>>Climb down my tail

Tab paled. Despite all her recent adventures – or maybe because of them – she still wasn't very fond of heights, and here was a dragon's tail drooping over the edge of a building some two hundred feet above the ground. Uh-oh.

But time was of the essence.

Tab crawled along the dragon's spiny back, reached the tail and, holding on tight, slid slowly over the edge. She risked one glance down. The good news was, yes, there was a balcony. The bad news was, if she missed it then she had a long drop ahead of her.

Dropping lightly onto the balcony, Tab ducked into the room. In the centre was a complicated machine, a pulsating icefire clutched in a metal fist. Tending the machine was a white-haired magician, possibly Kull's master magician himself. With him in attendance was a young woman.

Tab didn't waste any time. ‘There's a dragon on the roof,’ she said. ‘And in about ten seconds she's going to blast this tower to vapour, so my advice is that you run, fast!’

The young woman turned and fled at once, but the white-haired magician just laughed. ‘A ridiculous bit of foolery,’ he said. ‘As if any dragon could escape from the mind-lock which only I control! Get you gone, child, before I blast *you* into vapour!’

‘Very well,’ said Tab. ‘Have it your way.’

Tab rushed back out. As she did so Kull's lizard rose into view and swiped at her with one bat-winged claw. She ducked, then felt something pluck her from the balcony. It was Melprin. The dragon lifted Tab onto her back, leapt into the air, performed an amazing half-twist, and vomited a fiery torrent at the tower. In seconds, it was an inferno.

Kull, nearby on his lizard, roared, ‘NOOO!’

But it was far too late, and a moment later the tower exploded, raining molten chunks of rock down on the palace grounds.



Kull sent his lizard in a sharp dive towards Tab's dragon, clearly oblivious to the danger, his eyes wild with fury.

As Melprin sideslipped away from the palace and into clearer air, her right wing-tip caught Kull in the chest and lifted him out of his seat. He howled, then plummeted.

Tab watched him fall with mixed feelings. Meanwhile, his lizard dived after him. Whether it reached him in time or not, Tab did not see. A pall of smoke from the fires on Quentaris cut off her view.

Like a trail left by a ship at sea, Tab followed the smoke, and gasped. ‘Quentaris!’ she cried. ‘It's heading for the vortex!’

>>>It's too far, child. We will never make it

‘But I must – it's my home!’

>>>The great mouth is angry

‘It's a vortex,’ Tab explained. ‘It takes things … elsewhere. To other worlds.’

>>>It swallows all. I have lost loved ones thus

‘No! How do you think we got here? It's like a door – a door to other places, other … planes.’

>>>None return

‘Your loved ones still live, but not in this world,’ said Tab. ‘Please, please … I *must* get back.’

Melprin said nothing. Then, very slowly, she folded back her wings, and dived …



# 



# THE NEW WORLD

  Tab tried not to scream.

The dragon was soaring at tremendous speed. Below, Quentaris was revolving faster and faster as it moved deeper into the mouth of the vortex. Her mainsail was double-reefed; sails from the flying jib right through to the spanker were torn asunder. Her skysails were tattered ribbons. And most of the city's rigging was tangled and snarled like a bird's nest.

Down and down into the voracious mouth fell the city, riding the whirlpool walls round and round. High above, falling like an arrow, came the dragon with the tiny speck on her back.

The smoke trail from the fires on Quentaris corkscrewed down after the city. Melprin shot through the centre of the trails. Tab watched, fearful. If Quentaris reached the bottom of the vortex and went through into another world, there was no guarantee that the vortex wouldn't close immediately behind it. Some did, some didn't.

‘Faster!’ yelled Tab frantically.

At the last second, just as the city hit the bottom of the vortex, Melprin and Tab plunged amongst the masts and rigging of upside. Tab whooped and hollered.

>>>Hold tight>>I cannot pull up in time

As the city shivered, preparatory to transition, Tab's eyes widened. The harbour was rushing up at them awfully fast. Fortunately – or not – at that precise moment, the city and its surrounds blacked out …



Tab woke. For a moment she had absolutely no idea where or who she was.

Then a face swam in and out of focus. She blinked and squinted. It was Torby. He dabbed her forehead with a damp cloth, and grinned when he saw that she was awake.

‘Where am I?’ Tab croaked.

‘In the infirmary. A private room, as befitting a hero.’ This was Verris, who came up behind Torby. Then Amelia and Philmon, and even Fontagu, crowded forward.

‘Hero?’ said Tab, her mind still fuzzy. ‘I think I drowned, didn't I?’

‘A nasty brush with the House of Death,’ Verris agreed. ‘Heroes often die young, but you have a few years ahead of you yet, I suspect.’

‘Hero,’ said Torby, shyly.

Tab reached out, took his hand and squeezed. ‘What happened? I'm a bit hazy on the details.’

Philmon laughed into his hand. ‘Like we're going to stand here and recount all your heroic adventures, just so you get to wallow in them all over again. What I want to know is, how come you left us out of it?’

‘Out of what? Hey, there was a dragon, wasn't there?’

‘Yes, there was a dragon, a dragon that seems oddly fond of you. Nearly burnt the whole place down when we tried to explain that you were indisposed. Had to carry you outside on a stretcher so she could see for herself. Stubborn creatures, dragons, if you ask me – Tolrush is welcome to them. But as for what you did, you single-handedly defeated Tolrush. More or less. Destroying its icefire gave us time to escape. Had Tolrush followed us through the vortex we would have fallen to her by now.’



‘Where are we?’

‘Take a look.’ Verris strode to the window and pulled back the curtains.

Tab's eyes widened. The sky was vermilion. ‘I've never seen anything so beautiful!’ she gasped.

‘A world of bounty. Already the Scouts’ Guild has discovered the sweetest water you've ever tasted; abundant fishing, herds of game as far as you can see. And even the natives are friendly.’

‘How long have I been here?’

‘Several days,’ Verris said. ‘You were in a strange kind of coma. None of the healers could wake you. Funny thing though, as soon as your young friend here arrived, you came out of it at once and began to recover.’ He ruffled Torby's head and gave the boy an odd, quizzical look.

Tab squeezed Torby's hand even harder. He looked down at his feet and squirmed.

Tab sat up, and several hands rushed to plump pillows and make her comfortable. Then hot soup and fresh bread were brought, and she realised she was starving. As she wolfed down the food she suddenly remembered the Grand Council, and her face fell.

She was no longer a magicians’ apprentice.

Just then, the door opened and in strode Stelka. With her was Quartermaster Dorissa. The latter gave Tab a bright smile. Stelka's face, however, was grim.

‘Ah, Stelka, excellent timing,’ said Verris.

Ignoring Verris, Stelka crossed the room and gazed down at Tab. She pressed the back of her hand to Tab's forehead. ‘You still have a touch of fever, child,’ she said sternly. ‘You must eat up and get well. I will expect you at the guild school come Monday morning. Please remember that I do not like tardiness.’

Tab blinked, sure she had misheard the woman. Stelka stalked back to the door. Verris cleared his throat loudly.

Stelka stopped, wincing theatrically.

Tab stared at her wide-eyed.

‘Oh, very well,’ said Stelka, giving Verris an exasperated look. ‘The Magicians’ Guild wishes to express its thanks for your – for your courage and loyalty.’ It was as if the words were being pulled out by tongs. ‘Accordingly, you have been awarded the Medal of Merit, and have been promoted a year. You will restart your studies in year two.’ As a parting shot, she added, ‘And don't forget your new uniform.’

With that she was gone. Dorissa gave Tab another fleeting smile then hurried after the Chief Navigator.

Tab couldn't believe her good fortune. ‘I'm a magician again!’ she shouted, deliriously happy.

‘You always were,’ said Verris.

Riding the thermals to starboard, Melprin honked her agreement.