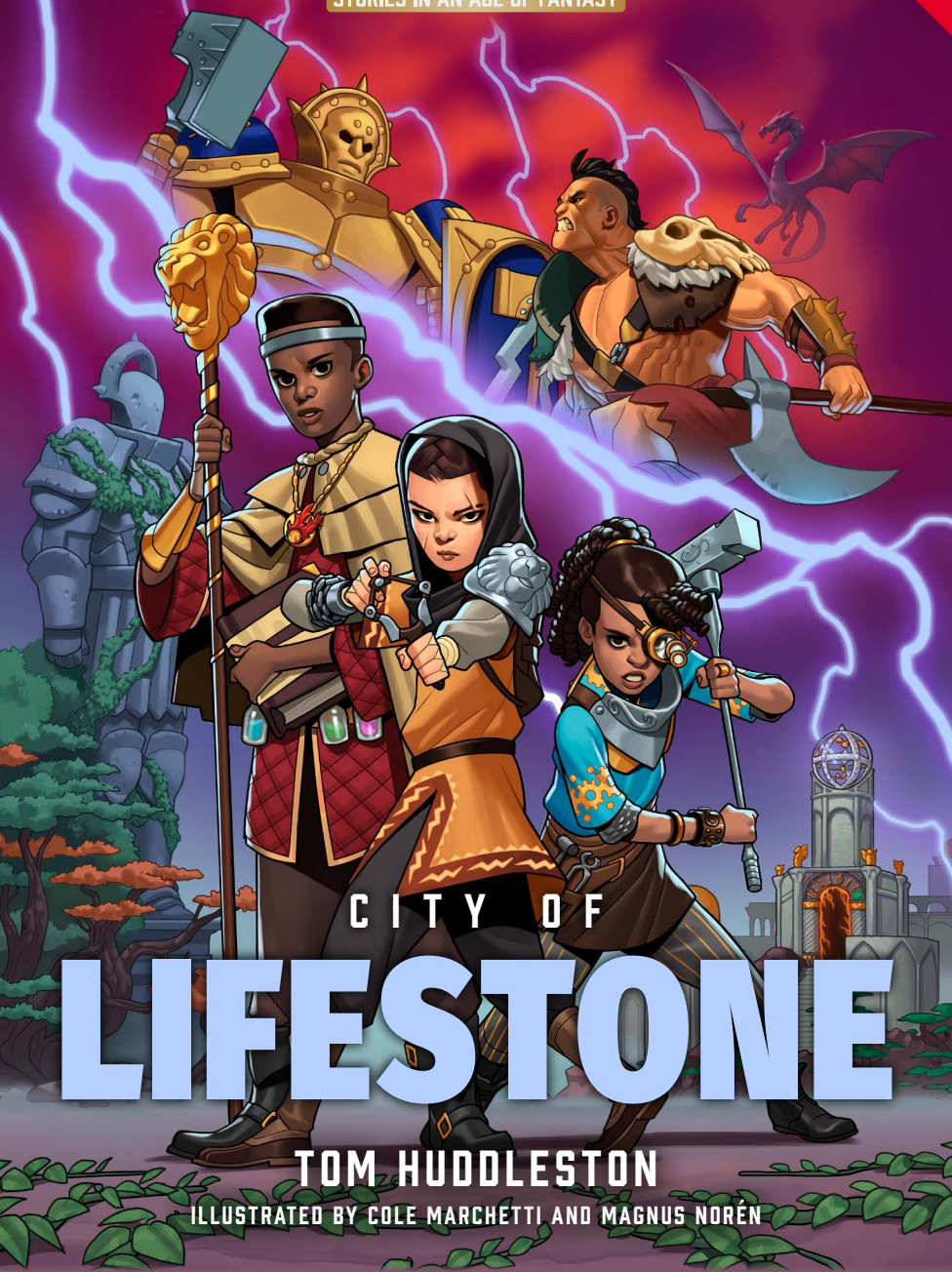


WARHAMMER ADVENTURES

STORIES IN AN AGE OF FANTASY

FREE
EXTRACT



CITY OF

LIFESTONE

TOM HUDDLESTON

ILLUSTRATED BY COLE MARCHETTI AND MAGNUS NÖREN

An extract from



CITY OF

LIFESTONE

WARHAMMER
ADVENTURES



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TOM HUDDLESTON

For my cohort Cavan Scott, with immense gratitude.

WARHAMMER ADVENTURES

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PROLOGUE

One year ago...

The great beast soared on tattered wings, riding a current of stifling air. Its cry echoed from the stony slopes as it spotted another fearful runaway, sprinting for the shelter of a ravine. The creature lowered its black beak, long tail lashing with an audible thrum. Then it folded its hooked pinions and dived. Kiri heard a startled shout, then silence.

‘Get moving!’

The scar-faced barbarian raised his whip and Kiri stumbled forwards, the black boulder balanced between her shoulder blades. Ahead of her a line

of shuffling, bent-backed figures went winding up the mountainside, dusty brown rags clinging to their scrawny, sweating bodies. The sun was a dull copper coin wreathed in black cloud, and the air was sulphur-scented and sweltering. Here in Aqshy it was always hot. They didn't call it the Realm of Fire for nothing.

Huge fortifications loomed over her, half-built ramparts and shield walls topped with leering stone beast-heads and twisted mystic symbols that hurt Kiri's eyes just to look at. The walls clung to the mountain's peak, a vast black fortress constructed to protect... what? No one in the slave camp was entirely sure. Some said it was an ancient artefact, a mystical weapon that could turn the tide of this centuries-long war. Others claimed that the mountain was the resting place of some dormant creature, a fire-drake of impossible size that the Darkoath Barbarians planned to unleash against

their enemies. But the wisest suspected that behind those ramparts was a Realmgate – a doorway between the worlds, and a strategic gift to whichever side managed to claim it. This last idea appealed most to Kiri. The thought that just behind that hulking pile of hewn rock might lie a way out of this nightmare... well, that was just too good to be true. Meaning, of course, that it probably wasn't.

The last push up the scree-slope was always the worst, the ground shifting and sliding and threatening to topple her. But Kiri managed to scramble to the top, unloading her burden onto a pile of misshapen stones in the shadow of the outer wall. Straightening, she allowed herself a moment to appreciate the sudden weightlessness in her limbs before it was time to go back for another load. Her eyes stung, her body was riddled with scrapes and bruises and her limbs were ready to collapse. But – for those few seconds – she felt

almost human.

On the slopes below the slave camp she could make out the Darkoath horde, wedged defensively between the arms of the mountain. From up here they looked like a nest of vermin, clad in boiled leather and dull armour, black-furred warhounds straining at the leash. When the citadel was completed they would occupy it, but until then they were exposed, out here in the open. That's why they keep telling us to work faster, Kiri thought. They're afraid of what might be coming.

A hand touched her sleeve and Kiri jerked round, ready to tell the master how sorry she was for slacking. But she found herself looking into the windswept face of a young man, his red-rimmed eyes filled with sympathy. Kiri knew right away what that meant.

'Kellan,' she said. 'It's time?'

Kellan nodded quickly. 'Go. I'll distract him.'

He took a step towards the scarred

slavemaster, falling to his knees and begging for water. The barbarian sneered, kicking Kellan down with one booted foot. Kiri took her chance and bolted, scurrying back down the slope and through a shallow ravine, emerging into the maze of canvas structures and smouldering ash-heaps that had been her home these past months. Or had it been longer? She could barely recall her life before the Darkoaths took them.

She reached the tent, preparing to duck inside. Then for a moment she thought she saw a shadow on the horizon, shifting and rising. Coming closer? It was hard to tell; the Cindercaust Mountains were coloured entirely in shades of black and grey. But this was a different kind of darkness, a fog covering the far peaks one by one as it rolled in. For a moment she thought she felt a cool breeze on her face.

Then her mother called out and Kiri pushed into the tent. Chetan lay

wrapped in a thin sheet on a patch of smooth ground that Kiri had cleared for her. Her eyes twitched open and she smiled through cracked lips. Kiri knelt, and Chetan struggled up to embrace her. Her skin was like dry paper, the bones of her hands almost weightless. But Kiri could still feel the pulse of life inside.

Chetan pulled her daughter close. 'It's time... to leave,' she whispered, holding Kiri's gaze.



Kiri feigned surprise. ‘But mum, I only just got here.’

Chetan laughed despite herself, but it soon turned to coughing. ‘No jokes,’ she said. Then her hand squeezed a little tighter, her voice growing stronger. ‘We talked about this, Kiri. We’ve looked after each other this long, but there’s nothing you can do for me now. I won’t let you die a slave. Find a way out, take any risk you have to take, but *go home*.’

‘To Lifestone,’ Kiri said. She’d heard so many stories of her birth city that she almost felt she knew the place. Chetan had been born there, had spent her youth among its gardens and orchards. She’d fallen in love, been married, and twelve years ago she’d given birth to a daughter. Then some cataclysm had forced them to leave, to wander the wilds, to fall into the hands of slavers. Kiri wasn’t sure why her mother had abandoned the city she loved so much. Chetan didn’t seem to know herself, it

had just... happened.

‘Lifestone,’ Chetan said, savouring the word. She turned Kiri’s arm over, exposing the black birthmark on the inside of her wrist, a smooth circle with an arrow projecting from it. ‘Find the city. Make a better life. Promise me.’

Kiri nodded. ‘I’ll try.’

Chetan shook her head. ‘Don’t try.’ Her words were little more than a hoarse gasp. ‘Promise.’

Kiri turned away as the tears came. ‘I promise.’

Chetan slumped, her chest rising and falling, rising and falling, each time a little slower. Kiri hung her head. It was the way of things, she knew that. And wherever her mother was going, it had to be better than this. But still, her heart ached. Finally, Chetan’s hand slipped from her grasp, and she lay still.

‘Lazy little wretch,’ a voice snarled and a hand reached into the tent, dragging Kiri out. The barbarian

leered, swollen lips drawing back over foul yellow teeth. 'I'll teach you to go slinking off for a nap.'

Kiri twisted away and his whip glanced off her shoulder. 'No,' she protested. 'My mother... She's...'

'She's what?' the slaver asked. 'Dead? She won't be the only one if you don't get moving.'

He reached out with a leathery fist, pulling Kiri towards him. She felt the grief and horror rising up inside, threatening to overwhelm her. *No*. There'd be time for that later. She smelled the slaver's putrid stench, tasted ash in her mouth and heard her mother's voice one last time.

Promise me.

Kiri twisted, swinging her fist as hard as she could.

Her blow caught the slaver on the jaw and he cried out in surprise, losing his balance and landing hard on his backside. Kiri's home-made catapult was strapped to her waist, beneath her

rags. She snapped it loose, slipping in a lump of shot from the secret pouch sewn into her cloak. But before she could take aim, everything changed.

Lightning struck the slopes below, jagged forks of electricity slicing down through the still air. She recalled that shadow on the horizon; somehow it had overtaken them, a churning storm front circling overhead. The lightning bolts descended from it, and where they struck Kiri saw a flash of gold, like a beacon in the darkness.

Horns blared and drums boomed as the Darkoath horde sprang into action. Swords and axes were hastily drawn, and she heard a mighty roar and groan as a hideous troll-like troggoth was unleashed from its cage, lumbering into the fray. Lightning struck again, and again, and she heard the clash of swords.

The scar-faced barbarian picked himself up, rubbing his jaw. Two of his fellows came lumbering in, gripping

steel clubs. Kiri raised her catapult, watching keenly as they circled closer.

Then a voice rang out in the valley, louder than any voice she'd ever heard or imagined. It was deep and resonant, shaking the very stones beneath her feet. Far down the slope a figure stood alone, gleaming gold in the darkness.

'In the name of Sigmar,' it proclaimed, and she saw the barbarians clutching their ears and staggering as though the sound itself was excruciating. 'Prepare to be destroyed.'

The slavers fell to their knees, wailing. Kiri drew herself up, the voice from the valley filling her with a kind of wild hope. She gritted her teeth and ran.

She headed back uphill, realising she had no idea where she was going. All around she could see her fellow slaves gazing in awe down the mountainside, their work forgotten.

Kellan ran towards her. His eyes were shining. 'The Army of Sigmar,' he said.

‘They’ve come to save us!’

But Kiri wasn’t sure it was that simple. Yes, Sigmar’s soldiers fought to restore order – her mother had told her all about the mighty king in his celestial realm of Azyr. His forces might break the barbarian lines; they might batter down these unfinished fortifications and claim whatever was inside. But the battle would be fierce, and anyone caught in the middle could expect no mercy.

‘We can’t stay here,’ she told Kellan. ‘My mother’s gone, she’s... We have to run, while there’s still time.’

But Kellan shook his head, crouching to pick up a large rock. ‘No, Kiri,’ he said. ‘We have to fight.’ He raised his fist defiantly, and looking around Kiri saw others doing the same.

‘For Sigmar!’ they shouted. ‘For Azyr!’

Kellan charged up the hillside, other slaves rallying to his call. Above them loomed the half-built keep, those hideous stone faces shifting in every

flash of lightning. Kiri started after him, then stopped herself. *Wait*, she thought, *I should be running away*. But somehow, her feet didn't want to.

Hearing shouts, she saw the three slavers moving to cut her off, their boots gripping the scree. She ducked under the wooden scaffold at the base of the wall, where a heap of loose boulders lay waiting to be lifted into position. Crouching, she tugged out the wooden pikes that held the rock pile in place, giving the uppermost boulder a hard shove. The rocks rolled free and tumbled down the slope, the barbarians scrambling desperately out of the way.

Then she heard a crash, and a loud creak. One of the rocks had slammed into the base of the scaffold, jarring it. Slaves peered over the edge. The scaffold groaned as another boulder struck it.

'Jump!' Kiri shouted, crouching in the shelter of a huge flat stone as the scaffold began to fall. She saw men

leaping to safety as the entire structure collapsed, the outer wall slumping as its support weakened. The stone beast-heads toppled, snarling mouths biting sand as they hit the ground and rolled, the great fortification sliding in pieces down the mountainside.

A cheer went up, and as the dust cleared Kiri saw men and women grabbing stones and wooden stakes. More slavers charged in but their captives fought back, overwhelming the barbarians through sheer force of numbers. Whips cracked and fists flew, and any sense of order disintegrated.

Kiri scrambled over the wreckage of the outer wall, moving deeper into the half-built stronghold. She had no idea where she was going. Or did she? It was as though a voice were calling to her; she couldn't hear it but she knew what it was saying. She'd never felt anything so strange.

She dropped into what would've been the courtyard, an open space between

the outer wall and the keep itself. An archway opened ahead of her, a black mouth leading deeper into the fortress. Around the entrance foul signs and symbols had been carved, seeming to shift and writhe beneath her gaze. She shuddered. But that was where the voice, or the feeling, was telling her to go.

Shouts erupted as groups of slaves came bounding over the wall, running to join their fellows inside the courtyard. She saw Kellan among them, handing out pikes and swords taken from fallen slavers. Then the ground began to shake, a deep drumming emerging from the tunnel. One by one they turned to the archway.

The barbarians charged into the courtyard three abreast, their faces leering in the dusty light. Their swords were notched, their armour clattering with skulls and sigils. Their warhounds sprang forwards, attacking without mercy, driving the slaves back. Kiri saw

blood on the stones. The battle would be a short one.

She looked up at the dark doorway. The way was blocked with tumbling bodies, but the urge to enter was somehow stronger than her fear. She started forwards.

The first barbarian who came at her went down easily – one catapult shot between the eyes and he dropped, shouting. The next took her by surprise, but she spun and pushed him into a group of armed slaves, who swiftly overwhelmed him. The archway was close now. She was going to make it.

Then five more figures emerged from the darkness and her heart sank. Kiri raised her catapult but there were too many, their whips and blades lashing closer. She dodged back and their lunges missed; she ducked and their whips snapped overhead. But she was surrounded on all sides – there was no way out.

There was a roar of thunder. The

ground shook. Her attackers froze, staring up into the sky.

The eye of the storm was directly overhead, the darkness whirling as the wind raged. Stones rattled from the high walls of the keep, slamming into the courtyard. The very air felt charged.

Lightning struck the courtyard, a bolt of pure white shattering the flagstones. Kiri rubbed her eyes, the flash imprinted on her lids. When she looked again a figure stood there, face masked, golden armour rippling in the light. It



was a man; his sword was drawn, his blue cloak whipping in the wind.

Kiri gasped. A Stormcast Eternal. She'd heard tales of their bravery all her life, but never expected to come face-to-face with one. Sigmar's fiercest warriors rode the lightning into the heart of battle, wherever their strength was needed most. Their helms were spiked with a golden crown and their shields bore the symbol of Ghal Maraz, the fabled hammer of King Sigmar himself. Kiri grinned. These barbarians wouldn't stand a chance.

Lightning struck again, and again. Two more figures appeared in the courtyard, then two more, and two more. Slaves and masters alike stared in wonder as Sigmar's warriors took their battle stance, marching in lockstep across the bloody courtyard. The barbarians roared and charged. Kiri couldn't tear her eyes away.

Then she felt a sudden pain and grabbed her wrist. Her birthmark was

on fire, as though her skin had been branded. And in that moment she knew: this was the source of the voice inside her. The mark had been guiding her, leading her on, and it couldn't stand to wait.

She fled through the archway into a broad, unlit tunnel, trying not to look at the twisted inhuman figures hewn into the walls on either side. The cries of slavers rang in her ears as she ran, entering a large round room of bare rock, the roof open to the sky. Ahead of her was a perfect circle of polished stone, around ten times her height. Looking into that dark frame she could see nothing but the far wall; it was just an empty ring, with pale runes carved upon it. Could this be what all these people had been trying, and dying, to protect?

She took a step closer. There, near the base of the circle, was a rune she recognised. It was the same symbol she bore, her birthmark tingling as she

approached. Energy crackled and inside the circle of black stone she could make out a faint red glow, a threaded web sewn into the empty air. She'd never seen a Realmgate before; at least, not that she could remember. But somehow she knew this was one. A portal into another world, awake and calling to her.

For a moment, she paused. What would await her when she stepped through? The gate could lead anywhere – to the Realm of Shadows, or Light, or Death or... yes, it might lead to Ghyran, the Realm of Life, where the city of Lifestone waited to welcome her home.

The stones of the citadel echoed with the din of battle. Lightning arced overhead, again and again, as more Stormcast Eternals joined the fray. Soon they would claim their prize; the Realmgate would be theirs, and she'd never know what lay on the other side. Balling her fists, she stepped closer.

Wisps of red energy darted towards her, and she felt the hairs on her skin stand upright.

Kiri took a breath. What was she waiting for?

She stepped into the circle, and vanished.

CHAPTER ONE

The Silent Market

The direwolf's jaws snapped and Kiri threw herself sideways, tumbling into a rocky ravine. Thorny bushes snagged at her cloak as she picked herself up, loading her catapult. The wolf bounded alongside, its shaggy black mane outlined against the tall trees and the pale sky. Up ahead she could see her travelling companion, Harvin, casting a panicked look back as he fled, his pedlar's pack clanking with copper pots and iron tools.

Then the wolf darted closer, paws scrabbling on the edge of the ravine, preparing to spring. Kiri loosed her

shot, and to her satisfaction it struck the creature square on the snout. The direwolf whined, sprawling in the dirt. Kiri put on a burst of speed, hearing the creature scabble to its feet and continue the pursuit.

They'd been running since dawn. A fallen bridge had delayed them the day before, forcing them to camp in the forest. Kiri had been woken by strange sounds and a smell of decay, the air so cold she could see her breath. Then the direwolf had attacked, bounding from the darkness, threatening to drag Harvin away until a shot from Kiri's catapult drove it back. They hadn't had a moment to rest since.

But in truth, Kiri reflected, she'd been running for the better part of a year. Yes, the Realmgate had brought her to Ghyran, just as she'd hoped. But that had been her last stroke of luck – from then on, every day had been fight or flight. The Realm of Life was rightly named, every corner of it

overrun with living things. The trouble was, most of them wanted to eat her. She'd battled packs of gryph-hounds in the Nevergreen Mountains and had spent two nights trapped in the nest of a long-tailed cockatrice, a meal for its caterwauling fledglings. And the towns weren't much better: the street gangs in the great city of Hammerhal were as dangerous as any wolfpack.

She glanced back, expecting the direwolf to be hard behind them. But to her surprise the animal had fallen back, sitting on its haunches and narrowing its yellow eyes. Kiri slowed her pace, tugging on Harvin's sleeve.

'What's it doing?' she hissed. 'Waiting for reinforcements?'

The pedlar shook his head. 'I told you we'd be safe if we made it to Lifestone – those hairy fiends won't go near the place. And here we are. Look.'

He pointed and Kiri raised her eyes, tugging back her grey headscarf. A wide valley fell ahead, the trees replaced by

slopes of scrub-grass and stony soil. Beyond was a wall of dark mountains, rising peak upon jagged peak to the limits of her vision. But closer, at the valley's head, was a sprawling shadow, a darkness that couldn't be natural.

A city. Limestone.

Kiri's heart tightened. This couldn't be the place her mother had sent her to find – the city was wreathed in mist and shadow, a flock of noisy ravens circling overhead. Rain began



to fall, a thin drizzle that somehow made her feel even more sweaty and uncomfortable.

‘Are you sure this is right?’ she asked. ‘I mean, absolutely sure?’

Harvin smiled, displaying his last remaining teeth. She’d met him on the road six days before, and he’d offered his guidance. He was a decent sort – a little slow-witted, perhaps, but generous with his supplies.

‘I’ve been peddling up and down this road all my born days. You think I don’t know where I’m going?’

‘But Lifestone is a place of healing,’ Kiri insisted, recalling her mother’s words. ‘There are gardens, and orchards and sparkling fountains. There’s... life!’

Harvin shrugged. ‘Once upon a time, maybe. When I was young they said this was the place to go if you had wounds that wouldn’t heal, and not just on the outside if you know what I mean. You had to walk a hard road to find it, but it was worth the effort.’

‘So what happened?’ Kiri asked.

Harvin shrugged, hitching up his trousers. ‘I dunno. The crops went bad, I s’pose. People moved away. This is how it’s been for as long as I remember. Sorry it’s not what you was expecting.’

Kiri tightened her fists until her knuckles turned white. Somewhere deep down she’d known it would be this way, that the city Chetan spoke of was just a figment of her imagination. Years of servitude had twisted her mother’s mind – who could blame her for retreating into some half-dreamed vision of the past?

That didn’t make it any easier, though. Because buried beneath all those doubts and fears, Kiri had also carried a little flame of hope. Hope that her mother’s words would prove true, hope that she would find Lifestone and all her hardships would be over.

That flame had just flickered out.

They drew closer, and now she could

make out individual buildings – wooden shacks nestled together in the crook of the valley, with larger, more ornate structures of hewn grey stone on the higher slopes. But even these once mighty manses looked battered and worn down – she saw fallen arches and crumbling spires, their jagged tops like dogs’ teeth biting at the sky. At the top of the rise was a structure paler than the rest, a huge white palace of towers and parapets, all centred around a coloured glass dome that sparkled in the light. But even this was falling into disrepair, its walls shrouded with vines, its minarets crumbling.

Ruined buildings were commonplace in Ghyran, of course; centuries of war had left even mighty Hammerhal in pieces. But this was different somehow – she didn’t see any scorch marks or cannon-holes, no signs of battle or siege. The place seemed to have simply fallen apart, and no one had bothered to repair it.

Kiri gritted her teeth, fighting down a wave of despair. She was strong, she told herself, stronger than she'd ever been. Life in the slave camp had toughened her body, while a year in the wilderness had done the same for her mind. The reason for this disappointment was because she'd let herself hope in the first place. But that hope was gone now; it couldn't hurt her any more. She would become as hard and unbending as life itself.

The outer wall of Lifestone rose above them, ravens crowing from the battlements. This at least seemed intact, a sturdy fortification of granite boulders so huge it must've taken a team of rhinox to haul them. The road led through an arch beneath a raised portcullis, and the two of them followed.

Harvin nodded to the Freeguild soldier minding the gate, a scruffy slob in a tatty black uniform with the faded symbol of a fountain stitched on the breast. He didn't respond, picking his

teeth with the point of his dagger. They passed into a massive courtyard, and Kiri stopped dead in surprise. The space was packed with stalls and busy with people, but all she heard was silence.

She'd been to markets all across the realm – they were good places to pick up work and news and, if she was desperate, to steal a bite to eat. But from the vast covered pavilions of Hammerhal to the tiniest village fayre they each had one thing in common – noise. Traders' cries, furious haggling, angry curses and joyful greetings, these were the lifeblood of any Ghyran bazaar.

Except, apparently, this one. Figures moved from stall to stall, selecting goods and handing over their coins; she saw men and women, children and old folk, their faces stern and joyless as they heaped their baskets with grain and root vegetables, hard bread and eggs the size of Kiri's head. A

sign above a herbalist's stall read 'Put the Spring Back in your Step with Archimband's Amazing Unguent!', but the words were faded and the owner looked as miserable as everyone else.

Hinges creaked ominously and Kiri saw a sign outside an old tavern: 'The Fountain', it read, clearly a popular symbol in these parts. She peered through the inn's filthy windows and saw men at the bar, perched on high stools in total silence. A rough-looking gang of stout, short-legged Duardin sat in the shadows of an alcove, smoking long pipes and staring sullenly into their stone tankards. She wondered if there were any Aelf-folk in Lifestone, but it seemed unlikely – the Wanderers were surely too proud to show their faces in a dump like this.

Harvin led her across the courtyard to a stall selling cookware, where a burly young man peered at them from below a dull green awning. 'Expected you yesterday,' he grunted as Harvin began

to unpack, lining his wares up on the counter.

‘We hit trouble on the road,’ he said. ‘Had to spend the night in the Stonewoods.’

The stallholder frowned, his bushy eyebrows meeting in the middle. ‘You don’t want to do that. There’s been stories.’

‘What sort of stories?’ Kiri asked.

He scowled down at her. ‘Who are you meant to be?’

‘That’s Kiri,’ Harvin said. ‘I showed her the way here.’

‘Why would anyone want to come here?’ the stallholder sneered. ‘Anyhow, Lord Elias sent a party of his best Freeguild soldiers into the Stonewoods last month, hunting Tuskers for his table. They never came back.’

Harvin’s eyes widened. ‘I thought I heard something in the trees last night. Didn’t you, Kiri?’

‘There’s been other tales too,’ the young man went on, gesturing up the

hill. ‘Giant rats up near the old theatre, walking on their hind legs and wearing clothes. Skaven, they say.’

‘Skaven?’ Harvin snorted. ‘They’re just a kids’ story.’

The young man shrugged. ‘Just telling you what I heard.’

‘What happened here?’ Kiri asked, unable to hold her tongue any longer.

‘Where are the orchards and the gardens? Where are the houses of healing? And why is everything so *quiet*?’

‘I don’t know what you’re on about,’ the young man snapped. ‘This is Lifestone – this is how it’s always been. Now go away, I’m not buying.’ He thrust Harvin’s goods off his counter and dropped the awning.

The pedlar turned to Kiri apologetically. ‘Brodwin’s never been friendly, but that’s rude even for him.’

She looked around. ‘I thought Ghyran was the Lady Alarielle’s realm, the Realm of Life. But this place is about

as lively as a mortuary. You said it used to be different, so what changed?’

Harvin shook his head, then he pointed up between the narrow buildings. ‘There’s a Sigmarite temple about three streets thataway. They always used to have a bed and broth for a weary traveller, and they might have some answers for you, too.’

Kiri nodded. ‘Thank you. For everything. You’re the first person in a long time who’s actually been kind to me.’ Harvin smiled and she grinned back. Then she remembered what she’d decided about being hard and unbending and straightened her face.

She weaved through the shuffling market crowds, the silence weighing her down. She saw a butcher carving up a rhinox carcass, hacking at it glumly with a blunt cleaver. A horse surprised her and she jumped, backing into a man hauling three baskets of wheat. He glared, gathering up his load and moving on. *It’s all wrong*, she thought.

He should've yelled at me and made a scene. She'd have been happier if he had.

The rough buildings rose above her as she headed for the street Harvin had gestured to. The rain was falling harder now, drumming on the canvas stalls and wooden roofs.

Then a soft voice said, 'Girl,' and Kiri turned. A lady in black stood beneath the awning of an apothecary's shop, crystal flasks and copper alembics gleaming in the window. Her face was half-hidden beneath a fur-lined hood and her elegant black robe was finely stitched with silken thread. She beckoned and Kiri joined her beneath the awning.

'Share my shelter, child.' The lady smiled through pale lips. Then she gestured subtly towards the courtyard. 'I wonder, did you know you're being watched?'

Kiri looked up in time to see a man in the crowd turning away, his head

wreathed in smoke from a curved arkenwood pipe. He was tall and thin, with greying hair almost to his shoulders. He wore a black hat with a wide brim and carried a wooden staff.

‘He’s been following you,’ the hooded lady said. ‘Around here folks call him the Shadowcaster, though Child Snatcher would be a better name, if you ask me. He takes children, they say, and carries them off to that big palace on the hill.’

Kiri felt her pulse quicken. The man didn’t glance back, stalking away through the market, his staff tapping on the cobbles. He was soon lost in the crowd.

‘Perhaps you should go,’ the hooded lady whispered. ‘Now, while he’s not looking.’

‘Thank you,’ Kiri said gratefully. Then she ducked into the rainswept streets and ran.

CHAPTER TWO

The Mark

The temple was right where Harvin had said it would be, a once proud edifice of sandy stone topped with a crumbling bell tower. The bell itself was huge, its hammer moulded to resemble Ghal Maraz, the weapon of Sigmar. But both bell and hammer were dark with rust, and the statue of the Lady Alarielle that stood on the steps below was patched with lichen. When Kiri banged on the heavy wooden door she could hear nothing inside but echoes.

She sank down at the statue's feet, pulling her scarf up over her head. There was nothing for her in this

dead city, she was sure of it now. Her mother must have meant well, but the Lifestone of Chetan's youth was gone. So where in all the realms was Kiri supposed to go now? This had been her only goal, her only purpose. Without it she was just another aimless, homeless orphan, like a thousand thousand others.

'You need guidance,' a voice said, and Kiri sprang to her feet. She was expecting a Sigmarite priest in his patterned plate and chainmail, but instead found herself facing a tall, grey-haired man – the Shadowcaster, she realised; the one from the market. The one the hooded lady had warned her about.

He puffed his pipe and frowned, and Kiri took a step back.

'N-no. I'm fine.'

'Are you sure?' His deep blue eyes seemed to sparkle beneath the circumference of his hat. 'You seem... lost.'



‘I’m not,’ Kiri said, backing away. There was something in that sharp stare that made her nervous, as though he knew something about her that even she didn’t know. ‘My dad’s waiting. And my, um, six big brothers.’

‘You’re here alone,’ the Shadowcaster said, stepping towards her. ‘I know why you came.’

‘You don’t know anything about me,’ Kiri spat. ‘Just leave me alone!’

And she broke into a run, darting away across the square. As she reached the far side she glanced back, sure that he would be right behind her. But he was still standing in the shadow of the temple, watching her curiously.

She hurried away, through a narrow downward-sloping street lined with hunched wooden houses and shops with faded signs and dusty windows. The roofs seemed to lean together, looming like an arch of dark trees. But the way was straight, and Kiri knew exactly where she was going – she'd follow this street back down to the market, then maybe she'd search out that lady apothecary and ask her advice.

Then abruptly the street ended and she stopped, surprised. She was in a little courtyard, a dry fountain in the centre topped with another statue of Alarielle, her body wreathed in stone flowers. One arm was raised, but the hand had snapped off leaving a rough stump. In the corner of the square a group

of children in home-made masks were playing at being Stormcasts, waving their wooden swords in total silence.

Kiri shook her head, confused. Had she turned without realising it? Or had she taken the wrong street to begin with? The city seemed bigger than it had appeared from outside, revealing more of itself with every twist and turn.

She crossed the courtyard, choosing another road that led downhill. Surely it would lead to the market eventually, or at least to the city wall. She took a turning, then another. Now she was moving uphill. She didn't want that. She backed up, retracing her steps. An uncertain feeling was building inside her. She clutched her wrist, pressing her fingers against her birthmark. She could feel it tingling, adding to her sense of unease.

She broke into a run, taking turns at random, breaking from shadow into light and back again. She was moving

so fast that she didn't see the boy until she was right on top of him. He looked up in surprise as she slammed into him and they crashed to the floor, landing in a tangle of limbs.

Kiri shoved the boy away. 'Get off me!'

'B-but you ran into me,' he protested, sitting up. He was short, wiry and black-haired, dressed in a loose grey robe with dull steel bracers and shin-guards. His skin was so pale it was almost translucent, and his grey eyes were sunk into the hollows of his sharp, watchful face.

Kiri leapt to her feet, suddenly annoyed. 'You should've looked where you were going, shouldn't you? Is everyone in this city half-asleep, or are you all just really stupid?'

The boy's mouth dropped open. 'I... I don't...'

'Do you know how far I travelled to get here?' Kiri went on, her frustration spilling out. 'I nearly died, more times than I can count. I fought gangs of

bandits, and packs of direwolves. And for what?

The boy climbed to his feet and Kiri braced, reaching for her catapult. To her surprise, it wasn't there. The boy backed away, one hand inside his robes.

'Thief,' Kiri snarled. 'You're a thief!' She strode towards him, holding out her hand. 'Give it. Now.'

The boy sighed and handed her catapult back sheepishly. Then he gasped in disbelief. 'Your arm!'

Kiri flushed, covering her wrist. 'What about it? You never saw a birthmark before?'

'Yes,' the boy said. 'I have.'

He turned his hand over and there on his white skin was a black mark. It wasn't identical to Kiri's – the symbol was different, a line with a spike jutting from it rather than the circle-and-arrow printed on her own flesh. But they were the same shade of ebony, and located in precisely the same place.

'You're one of us,' he said, reaching for

her. 'You have to come with me.'

'You have to back off, thief,' Kiri said, slapping his hand away.

The boy turned abruptly, cupping his hands and calling out. 'Thanis! Alish! Come quick!'

Kiri looked around. The street seemed deserted. Then a figure strode around the corner, moving fast. It was a girl, taller than Kiri and broader too, with flame-red hair and skin the colour of dry sand. She looked like a fighter, with powerful muscles and a breastplate emblazoned with the twin-tailed comet of Sigmar. On her hands were gloves of interlocking steel, creaking as she flexed her fingers.

'Kaspar?' she asked, lumbering closer. 'What's up? You found them rats?'

She was carrying something on her back – a pack, or a weapon, or... No, Kiri realised, it was a person, hopping down onto the cobbles and hurrying towards them. This was a girl too, short and spry with bunches

in her hair. Tools clattered in a belt at her waist and there was a hammer strapped to her back with a steel head half the size of Kiri's own. She looked a little young to be an engineer or an inventor, but anything was possible.

'She's got the mark,' the boy was saying, gesturing to Kiri's wrist.

The smaller girl's eyes widened. 'Hammer of Grungni, he's right. Thanis, don't let her run.'

The tough-looking one circled Kiri. 'You got to come with us,' she said. Then she turned her wrist and Kiri saw another mark imprinted there, shaped like a key with a hook curving from it. 'My name's Thanis. This is Alish, and Kaspar you already met. We're your friends, honest.'

'Some friends,' Kiri snarled. 'That boy stole my catapult.'

Alish nodded ruefully. 'He does that. I bet he's sorry.'

'Not as sorry as he's going to be,' Kiri growled.



‘Now listen,’ Thanis said, her cheeks flushed. ‘Before I lose my temper. You think you’re tough, but you’re out of your depth here. So just come with us, and there’ll be no need to— Kaspar, grab her!’

The boy had circled behind Kiri and now he lunged in, trying to take hold. But she kicked back, lightning quick, sending him flying across the cobbles. Kiri backed up, loading her catapult

and aiming it at Thanis.

‘Nice try,’ she said. ‘Do that again and it’ll hurt.’

‘It already hurts,’ groaned the boy.

Thanis seethed, her cheeks flushing. ‘We’re not messing around,’ she said. ‘You come along, now, before I do something I’ll feel bad about.’

Kiri stared, sizing her up. Then she shook her head. ‘I don’t think so,’ she said, and bolted.

She fled uphill this time, ducking through a vine-wreathed arch into a wide road lined with bare trees, their branches like bones in the dim light. She could hear the others calling after her and put her head down, breaking left, back down the slope. She took another turn, and another, sure by now that she’d put plenty of space between herself and those strange children. How was it even possible they all bore the same kind of birthmark?

She slowed, approaching another square – not the market, but she

had to be close. She stepped into the sunlight and her mouth fell open.

Just ahead of her were three familiar figures – one tall, one short and one skinny. The boy spotted her first and pointed, the big girl sprinting towards Kiri, a snarl on her face.

‘Get back here!’

Kiri backed away, her head spinning. It wasn’t possible – she’d come so far; how could they have tracked her? She darted right and right again, hurtling down long streets. The houses closed in around her and she felt panic rising in her gut. The city seemed determined to trick and confuse her – every time she thought she knew where she was she’d look up and see that the sun wasn’t where it had been, or that the slope of the hill had twisted at right angles to where it was last time.

She turned into another broad thoroughfare and almost screamed. There they were again, rounding a corner just a short distance away. Her

head spun as she staggered into a narrow alleyway, sweat coursing down her back. She could hear their shouts, their feet ringing on the stones. She took one last turning and gave a cry of rage as she found herself facing a wall of cracked red bricks. She booted the wall in frustration. The voices drew closer.

Then she felt shifting shadows on her face and looked up. A tree grew over the wall, a single knotted branch with a few dead leaves clinging to it. It wasn't much, but it was a chance. She stepped back, giving herself a run-up. Then she sprinted and leapt, using the wall for leverage. She grasped the branch, hearing it groan as she swung up and over the wall.

She dropped silently on the other side. She could hear muffled voices beyond the wall, full of confusion and disappointment. She smiled and started forwards, pushing through a dense thicket of trees.

She stopped, startled. A figure stood there, grey and hooded, perched atop a stone plinth in the centre of an overgrown garden. It was a statue, she realised, but a very lifelike one – she kept her eyes fixed on it as she drew closer, half expecting it to turn towards her. It clasped a long-bladed scythe in bony hands, and beneath the hood was a gaunt face, almost skeletal in appearance.

Kiri shivered. The statue was unnervingly realistic, its eyes sunk so deep that they seemed almost bottomless. Symbols were scratched on the plinth below, twisted death-runes and baleful marks cut into the stone. She tore her gaze away, those blank eyes watching her as she moved towards a tall building that loomed imposingly over her.

This, too, made Kiri's skin crawl. It was narrow, pale and high-sided, with rows of black windows rising up towards the low clouds – she tried to

count the levels and somehow couldn't get a grasp on the number, as though her eyes and mind kept slipping. She peered through the ground floor window and saw scorch marks on the walls, as if a fire had swept through this building and gutted it from the inside out.

It seemed deserted, she reflected; it might be a good place to hide out until she was sure those kids had gone. But as soon as the idea came to her, she rejected it – the thought of actually entering this grim, haunted structure was too much to bear.

So she turned away, glancing back at the statue, making sure it hadn't crept up on her. It stood where it always had, scythe raised as the rain fell. A narrow passageway ran along the edge of the building and she hurried through it, emerging into another drab, deserted street.

But as she stepped out she heard those voices again, distant but drawing

closer. Would they never give up? Across the street was a curved brick building, crumbling and clearly abandoned. The windows were boarded, but as she approached Kiri saw that one of them had been forced open, the planks pried loose. She peered in. There was no bad feeling here, just a strong smell of dust and damp. So she climbed inside, dropping over the sill. The dust on the floor was marked with footprints – splayed feet with three toes. Some kind of animal? If so, it walked on two legs – her time in the mountains had taught her to know the difference.

A sign hung on the wall, and she wiped the dust from it with her sleeve. The words ‘Upper Circle’ were painted in age-worn lettering, an arrow pointing to a flight of steps that led up into the dark. She climbed, and before she reached the top she could hear voices.

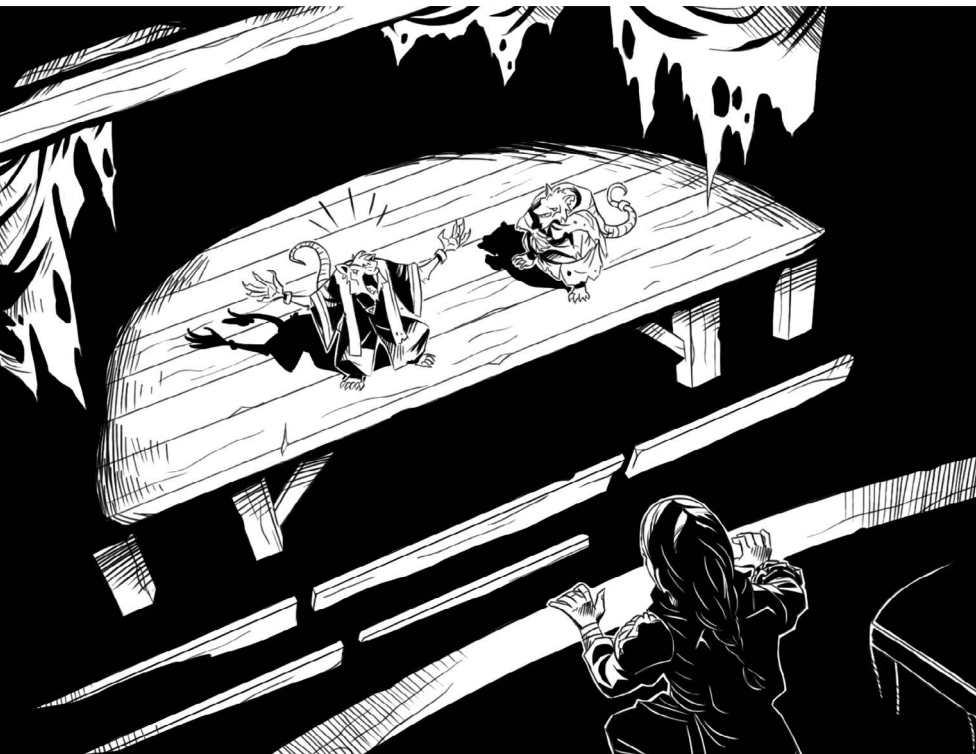
CHAPTER THREE

Ratmen

The top stair creaked, and Kiri froze. But the voices kept speaking, somewhere in the darkness up ahead. She emerged into an impressive, almost circular hall. The ceiling was adorned with flaking frescoes depicting scenes from the Age of Myth – she saw Alarielle planting souldrakes in a wooded glade, and Sigmar riding into battle on the back of his mighty Stardrake. Daylight slanted through rotted holes in the roof, illuminating rows of wooden benches. She moved between them, coming to a low barrier and peering cautiously over the edge. Beneath the

balcony was a wooden stage, and on the stage was the oddest creature she had ever seen.

It had two furred legs and two clawed arms, throwing them wide as it spoke. It wore a purple waistcoat and a sable cloak, and its red eyes glimmered above a twitching, fang-filled snout. Kiri had always assumed the Skaven were a myth, a bedtime story to frighten misbehaving children. But this walking, talking ratman was very real indeed.



‘My lady calls and quick-quick comes Kreech. Her wish is my command, yes-yes!’ The Skaven sniggered, as though sharing a secret. ‘Oh fine-fine lady, oh good-best queen, Kreech is yours to use as you desire, yes-yes! Or so it seems. Am I right, my dutiful Lesh?’

Kiri crouched, peeping over the railing. There was another figure in the shadows, a large, black-furred Skaven with dirty white robes stretched over a tight round belly.

‘True-true, most high Packlord Kreech,’ he snickered. ‘You are her trusted agent, her good-good captain. Great riches await, surely-surely.’

The first Skaven smiled, hideous lips drawing back over pointed teeth. ‘Riches, yes-yes. But more than that, oh Lesh. Infamy. Respect. Fear! They take us for fools-fools, but we’ll show them. Yes-yes, we will.’

Kiri ducked, backing away. There was no telling how many more of these monsters might be lurking around. But

as she started to turn a hand grabbed her shoulder, another clamping over her mouth.

‘Quiet,’ a voice hissed. ‘If those things hear us we’re in proper trouble.’

The hands pulled away and Kiri twisted, her back to the railing. The tough girl, Thanis, was crouching in front of her, one finger pressed to her lips. Behind her Kiri could see the others, little Alish with her hammer and that thieving boy, Kaspar, hunched in the shadows with his hooded cloak wrapped around him.

‘How did you find me?’ she whispered.

Thanis held out her wrist. ‘The marks. When there’s three of us we can sort of tell where someone is.’

‘Vertigan calls it Triumverance,’ Alish added. ‘But I was the one who figured it out.’

Kiri shook her head. ‘I thought the streets were moving.’

‘Maybe they were,’ Kaspar said. ‘Sometimes I think this city’s got a

mind of its own.'

'That's just your excuse for always getting lost.' Alish grinned. 'Look, we found the rats like Vertigan wanted. Can we go home now?'

'Only if she'll come with us,' Thanis said, nodding at Kiri.

Kiri sighed. 'Where is this... home?'

'It's called the Arbour,' Alish said. 'We live there, with Elio and our master, Vertigan. He brought us together.'

Kiri's eyes narrowed, then she nodded. 'All right. Lead the way.' She'd play along for now, and once they were clear of these ratmen she'd look for another way to escape.

Kaspar crept back towards the stairway, the others at his back. With a start, Kiri realised that the voice from below them had ceased. She peered over the balcony. There was no sign of the Skaven.

'Wait,' she hissed. But it was too late.

Kaspar stepped back out of the stairwell, his eyes wide. Over his

shoulder Kiri could see a dark figure, and another, and another. The ratmen swarmed silently up the steps, their claws raised. They were shorter than the one on the stage, scantily armoured in boiled leather. But there were so many of them, and more pouring in all the time. Kiri could see cold light in their red eyes.

Alish cried out, and the Skaven answered with a screech of pure animal savagery. They charged up the steps, claws scraping on the narrow walls. They were almost upon them.

‘Help me with this,’ Thanis barked at Kiri, her muscles straining as she lifted one of the long wooden benches. ‘Grab that end. Now turn it.’

Together they angled the bench so that it was aiming down the steps. Thanis gave a shove, driving it down like a ram. The ratmen tumbled into one another, landing in a heap.

The black-robed Skaven put his head into the stairway, letting out a

chittering cry of anger and disgust. 'Fools-fools!' he cried. 'Don't just lie there! Get them!'

The creatures gathered themselves and started up, scrambling over the fallen bench.

'They're coming again,' Alish said, unclipping the hammer from her back and swinging it in front of her. 'We need to get out of here.'

'Look!' Kaspar said, pulling his hood back and pointing up into the rafters. Above the stage was a metal gantry with ropes hanging from it. 'Thanis, boost me up. It might be a way out.'

The tall girl cupped her hands and Kaspar stepped into them, steadying himself on the top of her head.

'Three, two...' Thanis gave a mighty shove and he sprang into the air, fingers scrabbling on the rusty gantry. Kiri's breath stopped as Kaspar hung one-handed above the stage. Then he swung and grabbed on, pulling himself up.

‘Nothing to it,’ he said, his face flushed.

‘For you, maybe,’ Thanis said. ‘But how are the rest of us meant to get up there?’

‘We don’t go up, we go down,’ Alish said. ‘Kaspar, toss one of those ropes to Thanis.’

Kaspar nodded, grabbing a rope and tying it fast to the gantry before throwing the loose end down. Thanis caught it, wrapping it around her wrist. ‘Will it hold?’

Kaspar bounced on the metal platform. It creaked but seemed sturdy. ‘Hopefully.’

Thanis held out a hand to Alish, and the smaller girl turned. But one of the Skaven leapt from the stairwell behind her, slashing with a blunt blade. Alish stumbled in surprise, dropping her hammer.

‘Sigmar’s beard!’ she spluttered as the creature’s sword swiped overhead, missing her by a hair. The Skaven

raised it again, letting out a gleeful cackle.

Kiri's catapult shot took the creature under the chin, and its laughter turned to a gurgle of surprise. Kiri grabbed Alish, pulling her to her feet and returning her hammer. Alish clipped it onto her back, then she took hold of Thanis's arm.

'You too,' Thanis told Kiri, her hand outstretched.

Kiri looked up uncertainly. 'Are you sure that rope'll hold us all?'

'No choice!' Thanis cried, tugging her forward. Kiri felt wind on the back of her neck as a sword sliced the air. She clutched Thanis's waist and they toppled over the edge of the balcony, swinging out into empty space.

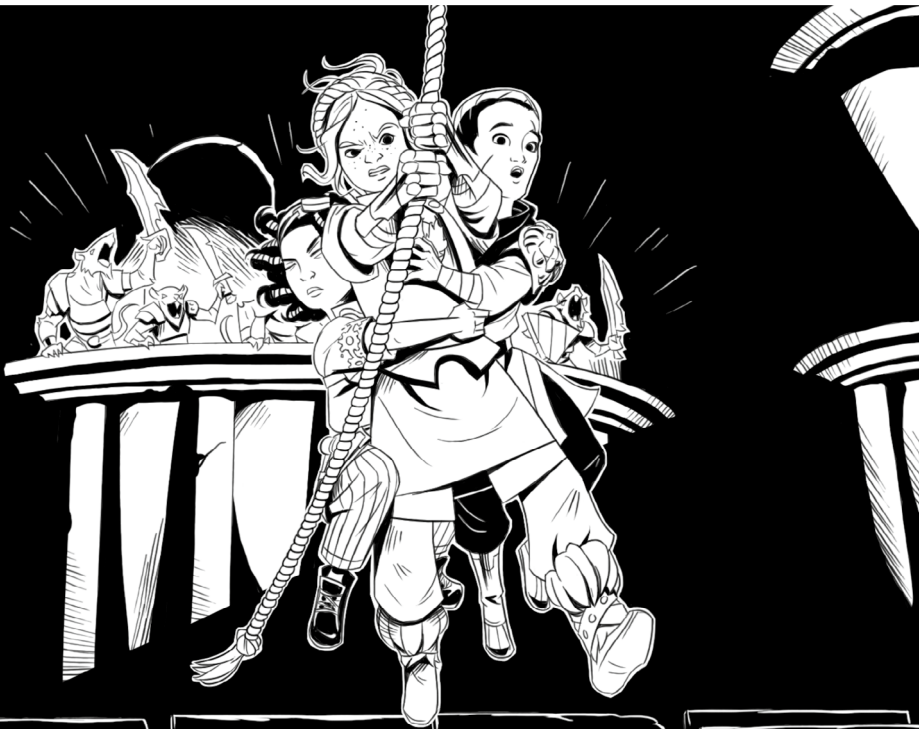
They hurtled towards the stage and over it, the rope groaning, Alish's whoop of excitement ringing in Kiri's ears. The rope was strong, but as they swung back she heard a creak and a snap, and looked up to see the gantry above

them crumpling, and finally breaking in two.

They hit the stage with a thump, tangled in the heavy curtains. Thanis struggled to her feet, swaying dizzily. Then there was a cry overhead and she looked up, holding out her arms as something dropped right into them.

‘Thanks,’ Kaspar said, grinning up at Thanis. ‘I guess it wasn’t as secure as I thought.’

With a clang, the gantry landed in



two pieces on the stage.

‘You’re lucky,’ Thanis said. ‘You always got me around to catch you.’

Hearing a screech, Kiri looked up. The Skaven crowded along the upper railing, waving their swords and making rude gestures. Some were climbing over and dropping from the balcony, while others bounded through an opening at the back of the auditorium, swarming towards the stage.

‘We should leave,’ she said. ‘Right now.’

Thanis led them to the back of the stage, where a stout wooden door was held shut with a loop of rusty chain. She charged, striking the door with all her strength. The chain snapped and it sprang open.

Kiri looked back to see the Skaven coming after them, blinking in the daylight. The black-robed leader pushed forward, gesticulating wildly.

‘What are you stop-waiting for?’ he screeched. ‘After them!’

TO BE CONTINUED...

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Tom Huddleston is an author and freelance film journalist based in East London. His first novel, future-medieval fantasy *The Waking World*, was published in 2013. He's since penned three instalments in the official *Star Wars: Adventures in Wild Space* series and is also the writer of the *Warhammer Adventures: Realm Quest* series. Find him online at www.tomhuddleston.co.uk.