

HEART
QUEST™ BOOK #4



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Isle of Illusion

BY MADELEINE
SIMON



PICK A PATH TO ROMANCE AND ADVENTURE™



Crouched in the shadow of the sinister tower, you and your two companions, Max and Tym, discuss possible routes into the evil Treg's citadel from which you hope to rescue your brother, Garlind . . .

Max and Tym exchange glances, and Tym says to you gently, "No, Licia, the bridge would be the worst choice. It's obviously a trap set by Treg."

"But the ring detects an evil presence along each of the other two routes," you protest, "and none near the bridge." The ring on your finger pulsates and glows.

"Don't trust that ring," Max insists. "It's merely a ring of protection. It can't detect evil."

But I must trust someone or something! you think to yourself.

*Should you trust Max, the scholar with
the enchanting eyes and a way with women?
If you want to follow his route, turn to page 86.*

*If you trust Tym, the intriguing fortune-hunter,
to scale the cliff and drop you a rope,
turn to page 122.*

*Or will you trust the power of the ring and
cross the bridge alone? Turn to page 75.*

Whichever path you pick, you are sure to find romance
and adventure as you sail to the
ISLE OF ILLUSION

Have you read these
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#1 RING OF THE RUBY DRAGON

#2 TALISMAN OF VALDEGARDE

#3 SECRET SORCERESS

#4 ISLE OF ILLUSION



**HEART
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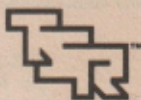
#4

Isle of Illusion

BY MADELEINE SIMON



Cover art by Elmore
Interior art by Jim Holloway



TSR, Inc.
PRODUCTS OF YOUR IMAGINATION™

To Andy, Sean, and Ward

ISLE OF ILLUSION

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You are about to set off on a romantic adventure in which *you* will face many decisions. Some choices you will determine with your head—others with your heart. Each choice takes you on a different path to a separate ending. So be careful . . . you must choose wisely!

Do not read this book from beginning to end. Instead, as you are faced with a decision, follow the instructions and keep turning to the pages to which your choices lead you until you come to an end. you may meet a handsome adventurer or chance upon self-discovery. Success or disaster—the choice that leads you there is yours!



he warrior's battle-axe gleams sharply in the early dawn light. He studies every move you make as you circle around him. Your father's enchanted sword glows softly in your hand as you try to spot a weakness in the fighter's armor. Suddenly you see it! Each time he raises the battle-axe higher than his shoulder, his small shield drops at least six inches, exposing his naked throat!

You circle the warrior another time, just to make sure about the careless habit. Yes, there it is again! You scream your war cry and rush toward the tall figure. His gleaming axe towers above your head; the shield drops. Your magical sword lunges, its glowing tip aimed for the vulnerable spot at the base of the fighter's throat. You raise your own shield above your head to parry the axe blow.

The young warrior's brilliant blue eyes widen in surprise as he realizes his mistake. Your sword tip presses against the metal chain-mail armor, ready to plunge upward into the tanned, muscular throat. Your opponent's thick blond curls tremble with laughter. A broad smile brightens the smoothly shaven cheeks. Garlind falls to his knees in mock surrender.

"Please, noble fighter, let me live," he jokes. "Give me my life and I will never challenge you again." He removes the heavy helmet, allowing his shimmering golden hair to fall loose. Your brother's blue eyes are bright with excitement as you grin and lower the sharp point of your father's enchanted sword, Avenger.

"You know, Lindy," you scold, "you really need to watch that shield. If I could get through, imagine what Treg will do to you. You're not ready yet!"

Scrambling to his feet, Garlind looks fiercely at



you. "I can't put it off any longer, Licia. Treg grows in power each day. Father's getting old and I want to give him at least a glimpse of sunshine before he dies. I'm leaving today," he adds seriously.

"No, Lindy!" you cry. "You're not ready to fight Treg's sorcery or his sword! Do you think I've been helping you train all this time just to see you throw it away? I'll be sixteen soon and I can go with you. We'll have a better chance against Treg if we're together."

Your brother's face stiffens as he grabs your shoulders with his strong gloved hands. "I've told you before, Licia, this is a man's job! Our father was once the wealthiest and most famous fighter-lord in this kingdom. Now, he is a helpless blind man living in a farmer's cottage. Treg's a devil, Licia! His magic and influence make him more powerful than the king himself! My mind is made up. I leave today."

That was three years ago. Tears flood your eyes as you remember the frustration you felt on that cool morning. Garlind left to fight Treg, the evil sorcerer who blinded your father and stole your family's great wealth. And now, Garlind, with his beautiful platinum hair and flashing smile, has disappeared from the face of the earth! No one knows where he went. You have waited these long years for news—good or bad—but none has come.

The secret practice field, hidden by haystacks in an abandoned pasture, fades from your memory. You are sitting at your bedroom dresser before its large mirror, one of the few pieces of furniture that survived the fires set by Treg's sorcery. The young woman in the mirror is very different from the hoyden of thirteen who

helped her brother train for his dangerous quest.

Long ash blond tresses drape softly over the flannel nightgown, framing your suntanned face and stunning blue eyes. Your lips are rose-colored, full, and beautifully sculpted. In the past two years, you have grown several inches. Your figure has become fuller and more shapely. The long hours of secret training which you have continued since Garlind's disappearance have given you the firm, healthy body of a mature woman.

You will be sixteen in just three months, and your father wants you to be married before your seventeenth birthday. Ever since Garlind disappeared, you and your mother have had to handle most of the hard farm work by yourselves. Your father hopes that you will marry someone who will take your brother's place at work on your run-down estate.

"Are you ready for bed, Licia?" Your mother's tired voice interrupts your thoughts. Her thin body, clad in a faded blue nightgown, stands in the doorway to your bedroom. Her tired, drawn face is heavily lined with the kind of wrinkles that come with hard work in the sun rather than with age. It is difficult for you to remember her as the noble daughter of a Viking prince, dressed in the finest silks and jewelry.

"It's good to see you primping in front of the mirror," she says with a smile, mistaking your startled look for one of embarrassment. "I'm glad you're beginning to notice how beautiful you are. Perhaps it will make you decide to stop wearing those awful leather trousers and shapeless shirts of Garlind's."

Oh no, you think to yourself, she's starting again with her ideas of what a proper girl should be. . .

"We're going to ask the oldest Stoddard boy

to come for dinner, Licia," your mother states. "I saw him watching you at the market yesterday. If you ask me, he's truly interested in you, and he'd be a fine catch! You'd be the envy of every girl in the county. I bet that if you put your mind to it, he'll ask you to marry him before Christmas."

"Mama, I'm not ready to marry Kevin Stoddard or anyone else! I want to find Garlind and finish his quest! As long as Treg lives, I could never even think about a husband or settling down."

"Licia, dear," your mother cries. "I have lost my son to that evil man. He blinded your father. I don't want anything to happen to you. You're such a beautiful girl, almost a woman. You could marry anyone you choose and live in peace."

"Mama, none of the boys around here want to marry me, and that includes Kevin Stoddard! I scare them! They know I could beat them in a fair fight. There's not a real man among them!"

"Well, if you'd stop sneaking off to the woods with that wretched brownie to play with your father's sword, maybe a few of them would start seeing you as the beautiful girl you are! A man wants a woman who knows how to cook and sew. He doesn't want a warrior with muscles stronger than his! Men want to see you wearing gowns, not leather pants and tunics like a stablehand!"

It is an old argument. Your mother has been saying the same things since you were ten, tagging along behind Garlind everywhere he went. You never wanted to play with dolls or gossip with the village girls about the boys in the neighborhood. You were always too busy, either with farmwork or with battle practice.

"You two are at it again, hey?" Hildric's booming voice comes from the doorway. The old warrior's sightless eyes stare straight ahead. His clothes are richly made but worn. Fine lace at his collar and sleeves suggests the grandeur of the fighter-lord's prime years. Hildric's beard is pale blond, hiding the silver strands threaded through his thick curls.

"You must try to forget your brother's quest, Licia." Your father takes your hand. "He is gone forever, and we must think of our future without him. A true warrior never questions his duty. Only you can help us now, Licia, but not by fighting Treg. My sight and our wealth, like my son, will never return. You must marry soon and bring to this house a husband who can take Garlind's place."

"No one can take Garlind's place, Papa!" you exclaim. "I know that he is alive. We must try to find him and destroy Treg. That is my duty, not marriage to one of those spineless farm boys!"

"Stifle your insolence, daughter!" Hildric's strong voice commands. "You're only a child—a girl. Treg's sorcery is stronger than ten of the mightiest seasoned warriors! We must rebuild our fortune without your noble brother. Treg has killed him, Licia! You must face that fact!"

Your father's words fill you with sorrow. You know that he is right. Even if you are strong enough to face Treg, you do not know where to begin looking for the evil sorcerer. With a sob, you clutch your father's strong arms.

"Papa, I miss Garlind so much! And I just don't know how to be someone's wife! It doesn't seem right to make myself into something I'm not! I want to do

the best thing for all of us, but I don't know how."

Hildric's battle-scarred face softens. "It will come to you, Licia," he reassures you. "Just have patience. I do not need eyes to know how beautiful you are. In time you will find a man who will love you and be a good husband. But first you must do as your mother says and begin to act like a woman. Tomorrow I want you to start sewing some proper clothes, some gowns and frocks, to replace those farmhand things you like to wear. You must begin to see yourself as my daughter and not as a son to take your brother's place."

Your father's strong hand grips your wrist tightly. "As long as your hatred for Treg fills your mind, you are in his evil control, Licia. You must not let your life be ruined by that monster's presence. A true warrior conquers such hatred. When the time to face an enemy is at hand, your thoughts must be clear. A fighter who enters battle in hatred has already lost."

"I'll try, Papa," you say firmly.

"Excellent!" Hildric's joyful voice booms. "Now, get some sleep. You have a busy day ahead of you."

Your mother hugs you warmly and kisses you good-night. Her tired face is bright as she and Hildric leave your room. You blow out the candle on the dresser and lie down on the feather cot. Soon, you drift into a sleep troubled with nightmares.

You dream you are being courted by Kevin, and he is to be your husband. The dream is pleasant, and you find yourself falling in love. Kevin's handsome features and gentle words caress your thoughts. You can feel his strong, tanned hands brush your cheeks, softly holding your face. His lips come closer to yours, and you close your eyes to kiss him

Then suddenly his touch becomes rough. You open your eyes in horror. Kevin's youthful beauty has changed into something evil. A terrifying creature with a filthy bald head and savage yellow eyes, leers at you. Its toothless mouth is close to yours. The hands on your face have turned to wrinkled paws, their sharp claws piercing your face. Treg! You try to scream but not a sound comes from your paralyzed throat. The sorcerer pulls you closer, closer . . .

You jerk awake, sitting upright in your cot. The darkened room is still except for the low rumble of your father's snores next door. The panic of the nightmare leaves you wide awake, as it has many nights before. Without a sound, you swing your legs to the floor and tiptoe through the dark cottage to the ladder that leads to your brother's old room. Silently you climb to the attic.

Garlind's room is exactly the same as the day he left. Your mother still dusts it as if he will be returning at the end of each day. Bright moonlight streams through the small attic window, shining on the cot and trunk. Garlind's clothes hang from pegs on the wall, casting long shadows on the bed. You sit on the floor by the window, staring at the empty cot.

The polished brass buckles on your brother's trunk glitter in the moonlight as a gentle breeze causes the thin curtains to flutter. Garlind always let you watch while he searched the jumbled trunk for some particular item—slingshot, penknife, fish hook—things that girls never owned. The sturdy little trunk, with its leather and brass wrappings, became a treasure chest for you, full of mysterious boy-things that were much more interesting than dolls. Since your brother's

disappearance, the trunk has become a shrine at which you renew your resolve.

Tonight you are rummaging through the varied collection when you notice that the cloth lining of the trunk lid has come loose. You try to stuff the torn cloth back into the edge of the lid, but you stop when you feel something under the lining. You carefully loosen the cloth enough to slip your hand into the opening. You feel an object, no thicker than a small stick, and pull it out with two fingers.

In the bright moonlight, you can see that it is a tight roll of parchment, tied with faded bits of red ribbon. You untie the bows and then carefully unroll the scroll. It is an ancient, faded map, drawn in black and red ink, with "Pitlic Isle" written in fancy old letters at the bottom.

Pitlic Isle is shown as a high, mountainous plateau surrounded by a thick jungle. A twisting river starts on the slopes of a smoking mountain in the center, winding to the jungle below. There the river divides into many streams, each flowing through the low swampy area of the delta and into the sea.

In both the jungle and the sea around the island, crudely painted illustrations show hideous dragon-like monsters with enormous bodies, long necks, and fierce teeth. Flying dragons with huge bat-wings are painted above the cliffs by the river.

Several dotted lines mark trails that lead through the jungle and along the river banks. One of the trails ends mysteriously at a faded red X. There on the side of the smoking mountain, just above the river's source, is a single word in your brother's handwriting: "TREG!"

Your heart pounds as you realize what you have discovered. This must be Garlind's map for finding Treg's stronghold! At last you have some idea of how to find your brother! All you need to do is reach Pitlic Isle and then follow one of the paths to the place marked on the map. And maybe, just maybe, you could return home with your brother and restore your father's sight by destroying Treg's evil sorcery!

Only a few hours ago, you had decided to give up your dream of finding Garlind and obey your parents. But now, with Garlind's map in your hands, a new feeling of hope surges through you. Somehow you know your brother is still alive!

You know this map will lead you to him—and to Treg!



You must choose either to please your parents by settling into a safe and peaceful life with a loving husband, or to risk everything by following Garlind to the evil sorcerer's island.

*If you decide to follow your father's wishes
and stay at home, turn to page 18.*

*If you choose to use the map to try to find
Garlind and Treg, turn to page 22.*

Max's bright smile convinces you of the young scholar's eagerness to help.

"All right, I'll go with you, but only for an equal share of the treasure!" you demand. Max studies your firm expression for a moment and chuckles.

"Agreed! You're quite a lady, Licia! Now, all we have to do is get my partner to agree to your coming in for a third. You'd better leave that to me," he warns. "Tym is a very suspicious person. Come on, he's already at the docks, trying to hire a ship." You follow Max to the central pier.

"It might be better if you stayed here while I find Tym," he says in a low voice. "If anyone talks to you, be careful about what you say. Most of these pirates make their living by robbing adventurers."

You nod in agreement. Max walks up a gangplank to a ship. You sit on a bollard, lazily watching the busy scene around you. But in only a few minutes, Max reappears, followed by a strange young man dressed entirely in soft leather, from his shirt to his boots. As they walk toward you, you see that a coil of thin, shining cord is looped through a broad rawhide belt. A shortsword hangs in its scabbard on the opposite side. His muscular figure gives the impression of robust strength and graceful, panther-like motion. Coppery brown hair frames his tanned, freckled cheeks.

"Licia, this is my partner, Tym," Max says. "I've told him about our conversation, and he wants to talk privately with you before he agrees to share the treasure." Giving you an encouraging wink, he adds, "I'll leave you two alone to talk."

Please turn to page 39.

For a long time, you stare at the old map. The idea of leaving your parents when they need you most is too painful. You roll the parchment into a tight cylinder and replace it in the lining of the trunk where Garlind had carefully hidden it. Then you close the chest and return quietly to your room.

You lie across your bed for a long time, but, unable to sleep, you decide to get dressed. You reach for your favorite leather trousers and one of Garlind's old shirts but stop as you see yourself in the mirror.

She's right, you say to yourself, thinking of your mother's words. *I have never bothered to look like a girl, much less like a woman. I'm not even sure I know how.* You turn, looking at yourself from different angles. *If I'm supposed to act like a farm wife, I guess I'd better use the right costume, and no more of these "ugly men's things."* Tossing the work clothes into your closet, you find the only dress you own and slip it on.

It is a handmade frock of linen and lace. The low neckline was comfortable before your figure matured, but now, the bodice feels tight. It molds itself to you, emphasizing the full curves of your strong body in a revealing way that embarrasses you.

You comb your hair and wash your face in the basin by the bed, then cross the hall to the kitchen, where your mother is already cooking breakfast. When she turns, her eyes grow bright, she smiles happily.

"Why, Licia, you're beautiful!" she exclaims. "I haven't seen you wear a dress in almost two years. In fact, I think it was that same frock!"

"Mama, I've decided to try to be the kind of daughter that will please you and Father. But I'm not

sure I know how or what to do. Will you help me?"

Her eyes fill with tears, and she embraces you warmly. "Of course, my dearest. The first thing we need to do is sew you a new dress. That one's getting a little tight!" she adds with a laugh.

"What's this?" Hildric's voice booms from the door.

"Licia has thrown away her boyish clothes! She wants to be a lady. I wish you could see how beautiful she is this morning in her dress."

The old warrior's sightless eyes begin to moisten. "I can see her, Nellie," he answers, his voice faltering. "How could I forget the vision of my own daughter? This makes me very happy, Licia. You're doing the right thing."

Am I? you ask yourself. Is this the best thing to do?

Please turn to page 20.

The days at home pass slowly for you. At your parents' invitation, Kevin Stoddard becomes a regular supper guest. A handsome man with a wonderful smile he is tall, tanned from outside work, and well-built. Your mother was right about Kevin's interest in you. You become the envy of the village girls.

You manage not to think about Garlind and Treg for several weeks. You even begin to enjoy your new life as a country girl being courted by a beautiful man. But then Kevin kisses you.

It is late autumn, after the fall harvest. All of the farm families in your neighborhood have gathered to celebrate. Sometime around midnight, Kevin whispers in your ear, asking you to come outside. Laughing, you agree. In the cool night air, the two of you walk by the pond.

"I love you, Licia," Kevin says suddenly. "More than anything or anybody else in the world. You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, and I want you to be my wife. I'll be the best husband any woman could have, Licia. Please marry me."

You've known of Kevin's interest, of course, but his words still shock you. You stare at the ground without answering.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

"Kevin, I—I can't say anything. You should ask my father first."

"I already have! Lord Hildric leaves it entirely up to you!"

Before you can answer, he slips one arm to your waist and pulls you tightly against his muscular chest. His other hand moves to your face, caressing it gently.

The magic warmth of Kevin's lips so close to

yours, of his tender hand on your cheek, combine in a startling rush of feeling. You embrace his broad shoulders with both arms and, closing your eyes, touch your lips to his. Kevin's kiss is wonderful... until you feel his body and arms tighten. His lips began to crush yours.

Suddenly, the nightmare returns. You know that if you open your eyes, it will not be Kevin kissing you. Instead you will see a horrible toothless creature with a bald head and yellow eyes! You will be kissing Treg, the evil sorcerer!

With a sobbing scream, you twist away from Kevin's embrace and run crying all the way back to your cottage and bar the door.

A month goes by. The nightmares still wait for you each night in your bed. Kevin stops coming for supper, and there is a rumor of his engagement to another girl. Neither of your parents have asked you about him, so it is likely that they misunderstood your panic. You cannot bring yourself to leave your parents, but you know that you will find no rest until Garlind has finished his quest. He *must* still be alive, still be fighting Treg. You only hope he will return victorious soon!

THE END

Staring at the old map in the moonlight, you remember the brave look on Garlind's face whenever he spoke of finding Treg. The memory of your brother's courage and your certainty that he is still alive make your choice clear. Somehow you must go to Pitlic Isle!

Your mind racing, you begin to plan. You will take your father's enchanted sword, Avenger, and the shield of course. But you need money to pay for passage to Treg's island. That could be a problem because Garlind took all the family's extra money with him. You ponder a moment and then remember the necklace your mother gave you. A single large emerald on a fine golden chain, it is one of the few pieces of jewelry left after Treg's destruction of your estate. Your mother keeps the pendant in her jewelry box, but it belongs to you. You are sure that your mother will understand if you sell it to buy your passage to Pitlic Isle.

Clutching the map, you creep quietly down the ladder and grope your way through the darkness to your room. You dress in your most comfortable leather trousers and tunic and stuff a change of clothes into a knapsack. Then you cross the hall to your parents' bedroom.

Your father's loud snoring covers any small sound you make as you rummage through the jewelry box. The emerald pendant is easy to find in the dark, and you place it carefully in a pocket of your tunic. The magical sword and shield hang from a peg in your father's closet. With practiced skill, you swiftly buckle the enchanted sword around your slender waist and strap the magical shield to the knapsack.

You look sadly at your parents asleep in the heavy four-poster bed, hoping they will understand

why you must disobey them and follow Garlind. Then you tiptoe from the bedroom and slip quietly out the front door into the bright moonlight.

You have one more important mission before you leave. So you take the path that runs past the practice field to a magnificent oak tree. The base of the tree appears to be hollow, but you know that your old friend, the brownie Nysla, has disguised the entrance to his burrow in this way.

You poke your head into the cleft of the tree and call softly. "Nysla! Wake up! It's Licia. Come on, get out of bed!"

A muffled scrape comes from the ground beneath your feet. Then the darkness in the tree is broken by a shaft of light illuminating the heavy, gnarled roots. The sour-faced little brownie squints out at you from his burrow. A soft leather stocking cap dangles over one ear.

"What's going on out here?" demands Nysla. "Why're you yellin' and screamin' in the middle of the night, young'un?"

"I've got something to show you, Nysla. I know where Lindy is and how to get there!"

His wizened dark eyes glare at you from the hole in the tree. "Hold on to yer britches and let me get my clothes on!" Nysla says gruffly, ducking back into his burrow. In a moment or two, the old brownie drags himself into the moonlight.

"Let's get a fire going so we can have some light on the map I've found," you suggest, pulling the parchment from your tunic.

The brownie circles the air above his head with a tiny pointed finger, muttering words you do not under-

stand. A dazzling magical light flares above you, illuminating a wide circle around the brownie. In the glare of Nysla's Light Spell, the details of the map show clearly. Your friend studies the parchment carefully, his sharp eyes widening with interest as he begins to understand what you have found.

"Treg!" he whispers coarsely. "This must be . . ."

"Yes, I know, Nysla! I need your help. Tell my father where I've gone, if I don't come back within a few weeks. He should be told why I disobeyed him, too, so please tell him about the map, but not right away."

The brownie nods, then smiles brightly. "I'll help you in another way, too, Licia. You wait here, Missy. Old Nysla has somethin' special for you." The little figure disappears in front of your eyes, extinguishing the glare of his magical light. Nysla astonished you the first time you saw him do that vanishing act. Now you know that forest brownies travel in ways known only to magicians and sorcerers.

In a few minutes, the bright light of Nysla's spell floods your eyes again. The spritely little man is back, dragging a huge cloth sack behind him. The bulky sack is almost as large as the brownie, but he seems to have no difficulty pulling it. He drags it to your feet and smiles with sly excitement.

"Here's your present, child. Go on—open it!"

Looking inside the sack, you see the soft glimmer of polished metal. Suddenly you know what it is—armor! Magical armor! Crafted with the skill of brownies, lighter than leather but harder than iron! You hurriedly dump everything on the grass in front of you.

In the glare of Nysla's light you see a complete



suit of fine chain mail, a breastplate, and a helmet. It is all made of the finest metal, called mithral, and it gleams with a bluish glow.

"Help me get this mail on, Nysla, please," you urge excitedly, already unbuckling Avenger's scabbard and removing the knapsack. With the brownie's help, you slip the suit of mail over your tight leather tunic and trousers. You watch, wide-eyed, as the glowing metal links adjust themselves magically to the rounded contours of your body. The mail gauntlets fit your hands like the finest, softest kid gloves, allowing your fingers to move with ease.

Nysla then buckles the molded breastplate over your shoulders and to your side. The skillful brownie has tailored every detail of the armor to fit even the slightest curves of your youthful woman's body. The armor is so light and cool that you can hardly feel it, yet you know that its magical strength will protect you from most ordinary weapons.

The old brownie hands you the helmet. It is more like a cap, decorated with engraved *fleurs-de-lis*, and it has a row of sharp boars' tusks arranged around the rim. A plume of golden lion-hair trails from a pointed crest on top. The armored cap is lined with soft leather and lamb's wool. As you place it on your head, you are astonished to feel the comfort a perfect fit.

"Oh, Nysla! It's splendid! And I can move in it so freely! But how did you know?"

The little man grins slyly and then confesses, "I didn't. It was to be your birthday present. By the way, that armor will grow with you. I guess you could call it a 'life-time' suit of mail. It's magic, so you can afford to make a few mistakes—but only a few!" he cautions. "It

will not save you from yourself. Do the wrong thing, and you might as well be wearing armor made of oak leaves."

"Thank you, good friend, thank you!" The wizened little brownie avoids your affectionate hug and gestures irritably with his hand.

"That's enough! You need something else. Treg is no ordinary fighter. His power as a sorcerer lets him alter everything you see or hear. When you are within his range, you will not be able to trust your own senses, Licia. Things will not be what they appear to be! Much of what you see may be only an illusion, produced by Treg to control you."

"You mean Treg is so powerful he can change real things?" you ask.

"No, but he can change the way you see them," Nysla replies, "and that amounts to the same thing! If you can see, hear, smell, and feel a giant spider grabbing you, it's really there as far as you're concerned! Only after you slash it to pieces will you see that it really was a palm tree, or a friendly puppy, or—"

"Or Garlind!" you gasp.

"Now you're beginning to understand how tricky your enemy can be," the brownie says softly. "If Treg ever discovers you're Hildric's daughter, he will use every sorcerer's trick he knows to control you. You must trust no one with your identity, Licia. No one!"

"But, Nysla, how will I be able to tell the difference between things that are real and those Treg makes me see?"

"That's what this is for," says Nysla, reaching into his forest-green leather breeches. He holds up a shining silver ring, encrusted with tiny red jewels, and

hands it to you. Even through the small gauntlet, you feel the ring throb in your hand. On the inside of the ring, you can see an inscription etched in gold, but the letters are foreign to you.

"You're holding an elven Ring of Protection, Licia," Nysla explains. "An old friend of mine owed me a small favor and gave it to me years ago. It is an enchanted ring that will strengthen you against evil powers such as Treg's illusions. Whenever you approach an evil force, the ring will warn you and give you time to guard yourself. Put it on and leave it on, Licia. It is far more valuable than this fine armor if you have to face Treg!"

You pull the armored glove from your left hand and slip the enchanted ring on your third finger. Almost immediately, the throbbing of the metal merges with your own heartbeat. The ring generates its own heat, but it is only slightly warmer than your skin. Soon, your finger becomes accustomed to the pleasant throbbing and warmth. The ring is perfectly comfortable. You slip the chainmail gauntlet back over your hand, covering the ring.

"Thank you again, my old friend," you say. "With the ring, this armor, and my father's enchanted shield to protect me, and the magic of Avenger to help me fight, I will find Garlind and destroy the sorcerer." Your hand on the jeweled hilt of Hildric's magical sword begins to tingle and glow as the intelligent weapon senses your meaning.

"Give me the map, Nysla. I want to reach Skipton by dawn to catch a boat and start my journey."

As the brownie hands you the parchment, the Ring of Protection comes alive on your finger! It throbs

rapidly, and its warmth increases. The change startles you so that you drop the map. Instantly, the ring returns to its normal, pleasant feeling.

"What is it, Licia?" cries Nysla.

"The map!" you whisper. "It made the ring grow hot! Look!" Jerking the gauntlet from your left hand, you gingerly touch the brittle parchment with one finger. As soon as your flesh contacts the map, the red stones of the ring start to glow and pulse.

Nysla's sharp eyes study the glowing ring. Then he frowns at you. "It's a trap, Licia! That map is cursed, probably by Treg himself. Garlind followed it and never returned. You must not use it, or you, too, will walk right into Treg's evil hands!"

You step back from the ancient parchment at your feet. If Nysla is right, it would explain why Garlind has never returned. You must decide whether to heed the warning of the enchanted ring or to ignore it.

*If you decide to follow the map anyway,
turn to page 34.*

*If you decide that the quest is too dangerous
and you prefer to stay in the village, turn to page 30.*

The pulsating glow of the enchanted ring fills your mind with uncertainty. Nysla's insistent warning is too strong to ignore. You want to follow the map to Pitlic Isle, but the old brownie's words make sense. The evil parchment must be a trap from which Garlind never returned. You cannot let yourself fall into it.

"Father wants me to stay home and marry someone like Kevin Stoddard, who can help us with the farm work. He says it's my 'duty,'" you say sadly. "I like Kevin, but I can't stop thinking about Garlind and Treg."

"Perhaps Hildric's right, Missy," your old friend says sympathetically. "Treg's a dangerous monster. If he trapped or killed you, your father would have no one at all." Then he adds brightly, "You know there's still a chance that Lindy'll get the best of Treg!"

You nod and remove the shining armor, replacing it in the cloth sack. Then you hand the ring to Nysla. "Save all these things for me," you urge the brownie. "I might still have an opportunity to use them."

Please turn to page 20.

Something in Max's voice disturbs you. You are almost angry at yourself for wanting to go with him. Everything seems to be happening too fast, too smoothly. *Is it just a coincidence that this handsome stranger is planning to go to Treg's island?* you wonder.

"I'd rather go by myself," you mumble nervously.

Max's dark eyes flash for an instant. "Do you think we'll try to rob you of the treasure?" he asks.

"It's just strange that you know about the island, too," you reply.

"Ha! Everyone in Skipton has heard of Treg's wealth! Each month at least one party of adventurers sets out to find it. None have returned."

All of those others knew nothing of the map! you think to yourself. You smile at the young scholar and shake your head. "No, Max. I want to seek the treasure alone. One person will have a better chance than three to slip through Treg's defenses undetected."

"Well, enough argument! I can see that you've made up your mind," he replies. "But if you'll allow one minor suggestion, guard your words around this city of thieves. If you start mentioning treasure, your beautiful neck will be in great danger!"

Without waiting to see the blush that his words produce, Max turns and strides silently around a corner. His parting words hang thickly in the salty air, and you wonder if you have made your first mistake in this quest.

You decide to try to find a ship that can leave quickly for Pitlic Isle, before anyone else learns about your mission.

You walk to the docks and begin asking around for a ship to take you to the island. The only vessel for hire is

a small, neat sloop called the *Wave Queen*. Its owner, Captain Jones, tells you that he can take you to Pitlic Isle tomorrow. "I have already been hired today," he says.

You reach into your purse and dangle the emerald pendant before the sea captain's astonished eyes. "This necklace is yours, Captain Jones, if you will cancel your arrangements and take me to the island today!"

Jones's sharp eyes open widely when he sees the glittering emerald. "Wait here," he instructs. The captain disappears below the deck. Within a few minutes, a sturdy young man steps through the hatchway from the captain's cabin.

The stranger is a rugged-looking man dressed entirely in soft leather garments. His sunburned face has a boyish charm, with soft brown eyes and a light sprinkling of freckles across his manly nose and cheeks. He is an athletic man, whose body moves down the gangplank with a confident, panther-like grace.

"Who are you?" he asks abruptly.

"I have business with the captain of this ship," you say coldly.

"Captain Jones has just told me that you're attempting to interfere with my plans," the stranger charges. "That makes your business my business, too. I have already hired this boat for the day. You'll simply have to wait your turn."

"Why don't we let the captain decide," you reply haughtily. "Who do you think you are, anyway?"

"My name is Tym," he replies. "My partner and I intend to sail from Skipton today on this ship without delay. I suggest that you go back to your mama and papa before someone has to teach you some manners."

Stung, you reply, "If anyone needs to learn about manners around here, it's you!" Your hand moves to the hilt of your father's enchanted sword.

"Ha! A little warrior! Don't cut yourself with that borrowed sword, girl!" the thief chides.

"So you two have met," calls a laughing voice from behind you. The handsome scholar is standing at the gangplank.

"What's going on, Max?" Tym demands. "This child is trying to buy her way aboard the *Wave Queen* and force us to delay our expedition!"

Max smiles at you. "It seems that the only way you're going to reach Pitlic Isle is to go with us," he says. "That is, if you can convince my partner here to share the treasure!"

"Ha!" Tym snorts and walks toward you.

You have no choice but to win over the hostile thief.

Please turn to page 39.

"I don't have a choice, Nysla," you cry. "This must be the map that Garlind followed. I must follow it too if I want to find him."

With a decisive toss of your head, you pick up the map, roll it into a tight cylinder, and thrust it into your knapsack. The enchanted ring continues to send its magical signal for a moment, then returns to its normal condition.

"If you won't change your mind about following that map, Licia, at least try to remember what I said about trusting people," Nysla urges. "Always be on your guard, and expect the unexpected. Don't tell anyone who you are or what your real purpose is."

"I appreciate everything you've given me, my friend, and I will heed your advice. Goodbye, Nysla, and thank you!"

The sun has already begun to warm you by the time you have walked to the outskirts of Skipton. The smell of saltwater and fish is everywhere. The dingy houses of the small coastal town are crowded together along cobbled streets. Curious eyes stare at you from shuttered windows and shadowy doorways, but no one calls or approaches you until you near the wharf, when you feel eyes upon your back.

Turning to look, you see a young, breathtakingly handsome man standing a few paces behind you. His dark brown hair is soft and clean and hangs almost to his broad shoulders. His frame is wiry and strong, the body of a youthful runner. His face is so beautiful you find it difficult to stop gazing at its strong, perfect features. He smiles at you through his thick, carefully trimmed beard. His dark, intense eyes capture yours instantly and seem to penetrate the layers of magical

armor covering, going straight to your heart.

Even though you want to look into his deep eyes, you have to control a warm blush when he sees you staring at him. You have never even imagined such an enchanting man, such a captivating face!

"Allow me to introduce myself," he says in formal but offhanded manner, as if he were accustomed to such phrases. "My name is Maximilian Troy—Max for short," he adds with a friendly grin. His voice is clear and musical, matching his bold appearance.

You hesitate for a moment while Max's laughing eyes wait for you to return the introduction. Recalling Nysla's warning about trusting strangers, you decide to tell him as little as you can.

"You may call me Licia, Master Troy," you reply, trying to sound cool.

"Only if you will call me Max," he responds lightly. "But, tell me, Licia, what brings you to Skipton? This dim refuse heap of a town is the last place I'd expect to find someone so young—and so beautiful."

"I can take care of myself, sir," you reply haughtily, ignoring both his question and his flattery. "This seems like a strange place to find someone dressed as finely as you are, for that matter."

Indeed, the lean young man is attired strangely for such a place. He wears a bright red cloak over his shoulders, draped nearly to the ground behind him. A matching red plush cap sits jauntily on the back of his head. His shirt is of the finest white silk, its ruffled collar open at the neck. Striped blue and black trousers of some gleaming fabric are tucked into his polished boots of soft, black leather. Except for a magnificently decorated dagger at his side, the stranger is unarmed.

Max's smile is charming. He stops staring so intently, and you begin to feel at ease with him.

"I'm known as a sorcerer, I'm afraid. One of my teachers was a well-known magician named Ostar, whose powers staggered the imagination. Most of the superstitious sailors and pirates around here remember Ostar's strength and believe that I, too possess it."

Max's mention of magic alerts you, putting you on your guard. "Are they correct?" you blurt out. "Are you a magician?"

"Ha! Unfortunately, no, beautiful warrior," he answers with a sigh. "I became a simple scholar, a student of languages, medicine, and mathematics. Ostar died before I could learn more than a tiny portion of his secrets. But a rumor can work as well as the truth. If these ruffians could see me in my study, tutoring some nobleman's son in Latin, they'd probably run me out of town. Let's not tell them, Licia. Fear works wonders."

Max's disarming smile and his modesty relax you, and you laugh lightly.

"There, that's better," says Max. "But you never answered my question. Why is a beautiful young warrior with such splendid armor and weaponry wandering through the roughest street of Skipton? I have no doubt that you can take care of yourself, but you must admit that you're a curious sight in this seedy place."

"I'm here to hire a boat, Max. I need to find an experienced sailor who will take me to Pitlic Isle."

Instantly, Max's dark eyes widen in surprise. "Pitlic Isle is a dangerous place, Licia. It is said that terrible monsters live there, creatures as large as buildings. Sailors also say that dragons guard the sea and air

around the island so that it is nearly impossible to land a boat there. Now why are you wanting to travel to such an inhospitable place?"

Max's concern tempts you to reveal your intentions, but Nysla's ring throbs gently, reminding you of the brownie's warning. You to look away from the scholar's melting eyes.

"Two months ago, I heard a story from a leprechaun named Quilligan," you lie with downcast face. "Old Quilly said he stowed away on a pirate ship several years ago and heard a story from a castaway, the pirates had rescued from a raft off Pitlic Isle. It seems that this castaway had managed to land on the island and explore the jungles. Somewhere in the interior, he discovered an enormous treasure in the castle of an evil sorcerer named Treg. This sorcerer almost destroyed the castaway, but he managed to escape the island on a small raft."

A quick glance shows that you have captured Max's attention with your false story. The young scholar's face grows very serious and quiet. His dark eyes stare intently into yours.

"There's not much more to tell," you shrug. "When Quilly told me the story of such treasure, I decided to see for myself. I'm no stranger to adventure, and the quest seems worth the trouble. If this Treg gets in my way, Avenger will change his mind!" you brag, patting the enchanted sword's jewel-encrusted hilt.

Max's serious face is motionless for a long moment. Then, suddenly, he laughs, and his dark curls dance against his scarlet cloak.

"What's so funny?" you demand.

"I'm laughing at myself, Licia. And at the coinci-

dence! You won't believe this, but a friend of mine and I are in Skipton for the very same reason. We heard about this sorcerer's treasure hoard, too. Listen, Licia," he adds in a hushed tone, moving closer to you, "we can use an experienced warrior, if all the stories about that cursed island are true. If you want to go with us, I'll talk to Tym about it. He's a thief from Bixby—a good one, too—and we've been waiting for the right tides to set sail. Today's the day, Licia! You couldn't have picked a better time!"

Max's friendliness and courteous manner make you comfortable. You have never been this close to a strange man before, and you feel a warm flush spread through your body. You want more than anything to go with this smiling, beautiful stranger and to trust him, but Nysla's warning continues to worry you. For an instant, you find yourself wishing that Max would just hold you and let you stop worrying about everything.

*If you want to accept Max's offer of help,
turn to page 17.*

If you prefer to go on your own way, turn to page 31.

Tym's strong features are expressionless as he stares down into your face. Only his soft brown eyes move, studying everything about you.

"I hope you like what you see, Tym. Why don't you just relax so that we can both talk more comfortably?" you suggest in a friendly voice. You begin to think he is not going to reply, when he looks directly into your eyes with a cool gaze.

"Tell me something, Licia—if that's your real name," he begins in a calm, serious tone. "I'm a master thief. I make my living by stealing from people who have stolen from others." Tym's calmness, his quiet authority, and powerful appearance impress you.

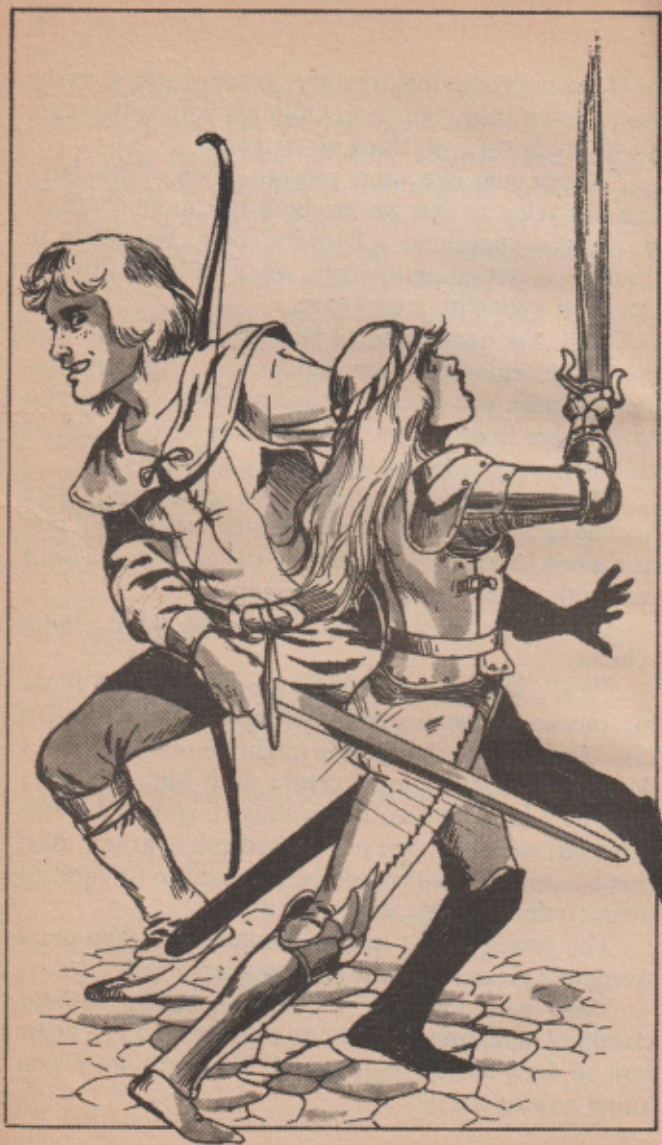
"As a professional thief," he continues, "I've learned to trust no one. Max is a business partner. I met him when I arrived in Skipton two weeks ago. He has a way with people, as I think you know . . ."

You blush, thinking about the charming young scholar.

"Yes," Tym says grimly. "I see you do know about his power to make people—especially women—like him. At any rate, that power might be useful to me. I don't mind sharing my treasure with him. But one-third of it is more than I'm willing to give to a fresh-faced girl wearing a fine but unused suit of armor. And that beautiful sword should be returned to its rightful owner before you get hurt with it!"

The young thief's insult infuriates you. You draw Avenger's gleaming blade with practiced skill.

"Very good reflexes," Tym says coolly, without changing his expression. "I was wondering if you knew how to draw such a large sword. Now let's see if you know how to use it!"



The thief draws his own sword. A small crowd of dockworkers gathers round. You realize that you are being tested by the thief, and that you must demonstrate your ability with the magnificent weapon.

Lifting the small, enchanted shield, you crouch in the familiar fighter's stance and hold Avenger in front of you. Tym smiles and starts toward you with smooth, catlike movements.

"You have no shield!" you exclaim.

"Why should I need one?" he retorts. "You'll never get that close!"

The taunt makes you furious, and you lunge toward the insolent man. As you thrust, Tym's muscular body leaps into the air so quickly that all you see is a blur. The flat blade of his sword whacks you soundly on the seat of your armor. The crowd laughs loudly as you rub a hand quickly over your stinging rump.

Relax, you tell yourself. Don't be angry. Stay cool and wait for the right moment.

You manage to control your fury and begin to think about your movements. You start circling around the thief, who turns smoothly and watches every move you make. His amused smile never fades as he allows you to get closer.

A sudden blur of motion from the thief causes you to spin around just in time to avoid another embarrassing slap from behind.

"Not again, thief!" you shout. Then it dawns on you that Tym always dodges around you on the left side, away from your sword. In a swift movement, you thrust to the right with your sword and throw your shield on the ground at the same time.

Just as you planned, Tym leaps into the air, only to

land on the wobbly shield. He loses his balance. The agile thief falls forward, catching himself with his hands. For an instant, Tym's taut, leather-clad buttocks are the most prominent part of his anatomy. With a mighty swing, you hit the flat side of Avenger a stinging slap against the tightly clad hips. Tym's athletic body somersaults forward. He lies flat on his back, staring cross-eyed at the gleaming point of the enchanted sword.

The hoots and jeers of the crowd are deafening. Tym's tanned features blush a deep crimson when he realizes what has happened.

"Finished?" you ask with mock sweetness.

Tym's eyes narrow. "For now!" he growls.

With a polished flourish, you swing the intelligent sword in a wide arc, allowing it to thrust itself into the waiting scabbard. Reaching out with your gloved hand, you offer to help Tym to his feet, but the angry thief brushes your hand away and leaps up by himself. He pushes through the taunting crowd and disappears among them.

You say nothing because just as the young thief's hand touched yours, the Ring of Protection began to throb forcefully and is now almost too hot to wear! You stand in fearful, confused silence as the enchanted ring throbs its ominous warning of an evil presence.

"That was a fine display of swordsmanship, Licia!" Max's laughing voice cuts into your thoughts. He is standing quite near you. "You've made an enemy of my young friend, though. He won't forget this humiliation for quite a while."

"Well, he asked for it!" you exclaim angrily. "We just swapped slaps on the backside, and he started it! If

he's such a hothead, I'm not sure I want him for a business partner!"

The scholar's handsome face darkens briefly. "He'll get over it, and so will you. I've hired a sloop to take us to the island. We can leave immediately. Why don't you buy some food for us while I find Tym and try to soothe his injured pride."

You are torn between trusting Max's judgment and heeding the warning of the ring. You must choose quickly either to go with the two men or to back out of the partnership.

*If you decide to risk being partners
with Max and Tym, despite the ring's warning,
turn to page 51.*

*If you wish to find your own way to Pitlic Isle,
turn to page 44.*

Everything has happened so quickly! Can it be wise to go into a partnership with the two men you just met? Especially when you cannot tell Max about the ring and its warning after the fight with Tym. He would only demand to know more, which might expose your true identity and your mission.

"I'm sorry, Max, but I've made up my mind," you say firmly. "This is something I must do alone. Let's just say that I find it difficult to trust strangers."

A flash of anger sweeps Max's handsome face, but only for an instant. "All right," he says coldly. "Have it your way. Just be careful about the boat you hire."

"Thank you, Max. I really appreciate your help. If things weren't so confused in my mind, I'd like to go with you. Please believe me."

"Well, that's about it, isn't it?" Max shrugs. "Perhaps we'll see each other again . . . under other pleasant circumstances."

"I hope so, I really do," you reply earnestly.

"Good-bye, Licia. Take care of yourself!"

Gazing after the tall, lithe figure walking away from you, you feel a sudden loss. You have never been so attracted to a man before, and you have to fight an impulse to change your mind and run after him.

You leave the main pier and wander along the waterfront toward the smaller docks on the fringe of Skipton. The wharf is crowded with ships of all sizes—sloops, schooners, and frigates. At the end of the first long pier, a small schooner with two masts is moored to the dock. The name *Merwolf* is painted in faded gold letters on a barnacle-covered hull. No one is in sight.

"Hello!" you shout. "Is anyone aboard?" A clattering sound from below the filthy deck answers your cry.

A hatch slams open, and a man with a fierce scowl steps onto the deck.

"What ye want?" he growls. "It's too early in the day to be yellin' an' caterwaulin' loud enough to wake the dead!" The surly man's unkempt beard is a thick mass of matted black curls. A single golden earring dangles amid the oily hair.

"I want to hire your ship!" you state. The man's beady eyes change from suspicion to pleasure.

"Why'n't ye say so, m'lady? You're talkin' to Cap'n Billy Horne, master of this fine vessel!" he exclaims with an exaggerated bow. "Come aboard an' let's do business!"

Inside the dim, smoky cabin, the heavy stench of sweat mingles with odors of stale rum and tobacco. Empty bottles and tankards are scattered around the room. Horne motions for you to sit in the only chair.

"No, thank you, Captain," you reply. "This will only take a few minutes. I want to hire the *Merwolf* to take me to Pitlic Isle."

"Aha! Another one seekin' the sorcerer's gold! Them's dangerous waters, m'lady. It'll cost you plenty to risk my ship off that devilish island!"

Without a word, you pull the emerald pendant from your purse and dangle it in the murky light. Horne's bloodshot eyes stare greedily at the beautiful jewel. His hand grabs for the necklace, but you jerk it away from his grasp and stand defiantly before the hulking man, your hand on Avenger's hilt.

"After we get to Pitlic Isle, Captain!"

"You're a shrewd one, m'lady. Just when do ye want to sail to that island of demons?"

"Right away!" you respond quickly. Horne squints

at your determined stance and then grins.

"Come on, then. I'll show ye where you can rest."

"No, Captain," you refuse, not wanted to be trapped in a filthy cabin. "I'll take my chances on deck."

As soon as you reach the deck, Horne growls a series of unfamiliar commands in a loud voice. Soon, a dozen stumbling, cursing sailors begin readying the vessel for its voyage.

The dirty schooner is a surprisingly fast ship. It knifes through the waves of the open seas with the ease of a racing boat. But, as fast as the ship sails, it still takes eight hours for you to near the island.

Your first glimpse of Pitlic Isle is breathtaking. The moon is rising above it to shine on the white sands between the surf and the jungle. A crashing roar from the ocean draws your eyes to the line of breakers dashing against the rugged reef which protects the lagoon and the beach. As you draw near to the island, the Ring of Protection throbs more intensely—a compass pointing the way to evil.

A loud command from Captain Horne brings the sails down and the anchor rattling on its chain into the dark water off the barrier reef. Another order lowers a small skiff over the side of the ship. The burly sea captain approaches you.

"This be the cursed island you seek, m'lady," he announces ominously. "My man will row you through the reef to the beach, and then ye'll be on your own. But first, there's a little matter of payment!"

Sensing treachery, you know that once Horne has his hands on the emerald, he will not keep his word. "I'll give the necklace to the sailor when he leaves

me on the beach, Captain," you state firmly.

Horne grins evilly. "You ain't got a choice, m'lady. Give me the bauble now!" The big man reaches for your arm. You twist away from his huge hand and whip Avenger from its scabbard. The glowing sword blade shines in the night air.

"Back off, Horne!" you command. The captain steps away and watches you while you swing your body over the rail and climb down the rope ladder to the waiting skiff.

"Row!" you command the seaman.

"Nar, I ain't goin' to that cursed place!" the man snarls.

"I said *row!*" You point Avenger at the man's throat. Sullenly, he begins to pull at the oars.

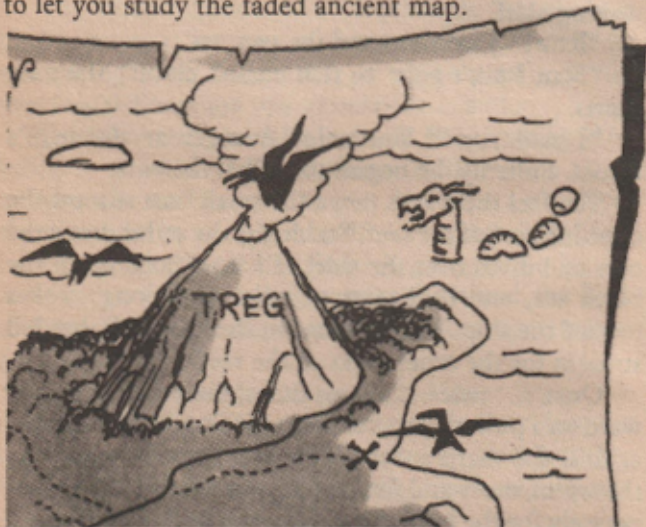
You feel the waves move the small boat toward the crashing surf of the reef. Suddenly, the sailor drops the oars and dives over the side! His head bobs up in the black sea, and he begins to swim with long strokes toward the ship. You are alone in the tiny craft, headed straight for the cruel rocks of the reef!

Once . . . twice . . . three times, the skiff surges forward on a powerful wave! Then the fragile boat crashes against the sharp rocks of the reef, throwing you into the warm water and foam of the surf. As you grab desperately for the hull of the shattered skiff, a large piece of it crashes against your head. You feel a brief but terrible pain.

THE END

You look at the two men while they gather firewood, and soon you realize that you are too uncertain about who and what they are to risk showing the map to them.

But I do need to look at it, you think. So, taking your cloak from your pack, you drape it like a tent over you as you kneel in the sand and spread the parchment out. As you pull the gauntlet from your hand, the magic glow of the Ring of Protection is bright enough to let you study the faded ancient map.



Once again, your pulse quickens as you see the single word "TREG" in Garlind's bold scrawl. When you have finished memorizing the details, you roll the parchment and cover the ring with your glove. Standing quickly, you spread the cloak to make yourself a bed in the sand and pull your pack on top of it for a pillow. You lie down on the cloak, slipping the map into the

pack as you adjust it to fit your head. Within minutes, the steady roar of the surf lulls your tired body into an exhausted sleep.

"... told you not to trust her!" Tym's angry voice wakes you abruptly. Still dazed from your nap, you stare at the two men facing each other across the campfire. Max's dark face glowers with rage while Tym shakes his fist at the scholar. You start to ask them why they are fighting, but stop when you see what Tym is holding in his other hand. It's your map! The thief has stolen the map from your pack while you slept!

You leap to your feet and draw Avenger with one smooth motion. The two men whirl around to face you. Tym's hand reflexively moves to his sword-hilt.

"Stop, thief!" you command flatly. "This will not be play, like our little session in Skipton. You'll feel the edge of my blade this time!"

Tym's hand drops to his side.

"You have something of mine in your hand. I want it back!" you demand with quiet authority.

Tym steps forward. His husky face is red, and his eyes are flashing.

"You can have it, traitor! I don't want anything from you! For all I know, you could be Treg himself, wearing a clever disguise!" The irate thief flings the map to the sand at your feet.

"Let her explain," Max intercedes in a calm voice. "She might have a good reason for hiding the map."

"How did you know about it?" you ask him.

"He didn't!" Tym snarls. "I saw you looking at something under that cloak and decided to see what it was. And all this time I thought you were so innocent!"

"I was looking at the map, trying to decide whether

or not to trust you with it," you explain. You sheathe Avenger and extend your hand to Tym. "I apologize, Tym. I understand why you were suspicious of me. But it was wrong of you to steal my map. Forgive and forget?"

The young thief hesitates, looking at your hand.

"Go on," Max urges. "Take her hand, and then let's look at that map!"

Tym grasps your gloved hand briefly, muttering an embarrassed apology. You kneel in the sand by the fire and unroll the ancient parchment.

Please turn to page 69.

You look at Max's bright smile. It reassures you that he will support you if necessary against Tym or whatever evil forces might confront you. The omen of the ring has made you uncomfortable with Tym, but you are confident that you will be able to handle the young thief, especially with Max by your side. You decide to go with the two men.

Max's dark curls and smooth complexion frame his laughing eyes and sensitive mouth. If anyone asked you to describe your idea of a perfectly beautiful man, you would have given him Max's face. He has made you feel so much at ease that it is difficult to believe that you only met him a few hours ago.

"Thank you for inviting me, Max. You've been so very kind to me, and I want to repay you."

Max's dark eyes flash. He places his smooth palms against your cheeks. For a moment, you think he is going to kiss you, but he only looks at you with a strange, soft glow in his beautiful eyes.

"Just let me be close to you, Licia," he whispers. "I want to be more than a friend to you."

Your heart pounds as if it will burst through your enchanted armor. No man has ever touched you like this before. Max rubs your cheek softly with a finger

"I know," he says softly. "I feel it too. You and I have a lot to talk about, Licia, but not now. We need that food, remember?" Max turns quickly and vanishes around a corner. Your thoughts in confusion, you start to search for the market.

In less than an hour, you meet the two young men on the pier. Your knapsack is filled with smoked meats, dried fruit, and hard bread. Tym does not say a single word to you and avoids looking in your eyes. Max

presses a finger to his smiling lips in a silent warning to drop the subject.

The *Wave Queen* is a small two-masted vessel. The hull has been freshly painted, the lines are all neatly coiled, ready to haul the clean white sails up into the warm sea air. Captain Ben Jones welcomes you aboard. He is a lean, tanned man dressed in spotless blue trousers and leggings. His light blue silk shirt billows in the gentle breeze as he shows you to his small, neat cabin.

"You can stay here in my quarters while we sail, my lady," the captain tells you. "The voyage will take around eight hours and may tire you. It will be dark before we land on that dangerous beach, and you'll need to be fully rested."

You start to protest, but you remember your sleepless night and thank the captain for his kindness. As soon as the men leave the tiny cabin, you shut and bar the door.

In the privacy of the captain's quarters, you remove all of Nysla's enchanted armor, stripping to your soft leather clothes. You listen at the door to make sure no one is eavesdropping, and then take Garlind's map from the knapsack. As you spread the parchment on the table, the Ring of Protection on your finger throbs its warning signal.

For a long while, you study the hand-drawn map. But soon, the lines of the map begin to blur together as your tired eyes strain to follow the faded trails to the place marked "TREG." With a sigh, you roll the map and stash it in the bottom of your pack.

You lie on top of the neatly made little cot without undressing further. Just before you drift to sleep, you think about the two men who have become your part-

ners. Tym's unfriendliness bothers you, especially after feeling the magical warning from Nysla's Ring of Protection. Your worry soon lessens as your thoughts turn to Max's enchanting beauty and his unsettling words. "I want to be more than a friend to you," he had said. His lips are near to yours in your dreams when sleep finally comes.

The distant clanging of a ship's bell slowly rouses you from your exhausted slumber. The cabin is dark except for a ghostly silver light seeping through a small porthole above your head. A persistent, painful throbbing from your finger causes you to glance at the ring. You are alarmed to see that the tiny red jewels are glowing brightly! The ring has become almost too hot to wear!

Bounding up from the bunk, you peer outside the porthole only to see an endless expanse of moonlit ocean. Hurriedly, you slip the enchanted armor over your light leather clothes and buckle Avenger to your waist. Leaving your helmet and shield behind, you unbolt the door and scramble quickly up the short stairs to the deck.

The first person you see is Max. The scholar's slender figure is bent over the rail. He is gazing out to sea on the opposite side of the sloop.

"Max!" you call. "Is everything all right?"

The scholar turns toward you quickly. In the bright moonlight, you see the flash of his teeth as he smiles.

"Sure," he replies. "Come over here if you want to see something really beautiful."

You join Max at the rail and follow his gaze over the ocean. "Treg's island!" he whispers.

The moon hangs like a magic lantern over the dark

outline of Pitlic Isle off the bow of the *Wave Queen*. In its eerie light, you can make out the white beach beyond the calm lagoon. A thrill rushes over you as you scan the moonlit dark shapes of the jungle and mountains outlined against the starry sky.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Max's soft voice blends delicately with the whispers of the sails and the distant crash of breakers against the reef.

"It's the most enchanting thing I've ever seen," you murmur in a hushed tone. "It seems so peaceful, as if it were the end of the world."

"That's exactly what it has been for countless adventurers, Licia," says Max solemnly. His features glow in the ghostly light like a perfectly sculpted marble statue. He steps to your side and puts his arm around you. His touch is so warm, so gentle, that you relax against his strong, slender body, resting your head on his shoulder.

"You're a beautiful, exciting woman," Max whispers into your hair. His words fill your thoughts, caressing you like the tropical breeze blowing softly on your skin. You have never felt this way before. This handsome man is arousing new feelings in you which are both stimulating and relaxing. You want to remain in his gentle arms, allowing the beauty of this romantic night to envelop your senses.

"Where did you come from, Licia? How could such a lovely woman become a practiced warrior? I find myself drawn to you, wanting to know everything about you, to be closer to you." Max's words are so caring that your eyes fill with tears. For the first time since Garlind left, you feel the need to confide in someone.



"I have a quest, Max," you whisper as a few warm tears run down your cool cheeks. Max's darkly beautiful eyes reflect the silver moonlight and glisten brightly as they penetrate your soul. "Many years ago—"

"Am I intruding?" Tym's husky voice interrupts you. Max grunts in anger. For an instant, the shadows of night deepen the lines in his contorted face, and he looks like a snarling animal. The change is so great that you pull away from him.

Tym approaches you. His stocky figure is outlined against the sky as he loom over you. "So this is how you convinced Max to take you! I should have known he couldn't resist a pretty face. Tell me, 'partner,' are you sharing your one-third with him?"

"Mind your own business, Tym!" Max hisses in a coarse whisper.

"This *is* my business, Max! I don't care how you handle your personal life or your women, but this new friend of yours is costing me more than wounded pride. We started this project as equal partners, and I mean to protect my interests. For all I know, you and she planned this from the start. After all, two-thirds is a lot more than one-half!"

Max's eyes flash with rage, but only for a few seconds. Then his expression softens, and he extends his hand toward Tym. "I understand your concern, Tym, but I won't apologize for the change in our plans. We needed another partner to help face whatever dangers await us on that island, and now we have one. Let's shake hands and put this unpleasantness behind us."

Tym stares at Max's hand for a long moment, then grasps it firmly. "I'm sorry I lost my temper, Max. I

just seem to be getting more irritable as we near that cursed island. And I apologize to you, too, Licia," he adds stiffly, but without offering his hand. The young thief's face hints at some charming, boyish embarrassment lurking beneath the sullen exterior. You wish that your dealings with Tym were more friendly.

"Let's just forget it, Tym," you say softly. "I want to do my share of the work. As far as I'm concerned, this is an equal partnership. I'm not plotting with Max against you." The athletic thief's face remains serious, but his eyes study yours carefully.

"There it is, Pitlic Isle," calls a voice from the deck. Captain Jones points off the bow toward the reef. "That channel's big enough for a small boat. We don't have a map of the island, but I do know the sea around here."

Following his pointing finger, you see a break in the white surf crashing against the jagged reef. A black shadow, surrounded by swirls of white foam, marks the channel passing through the coral reef. You remember seeing the reef represented on the map by crudely drawn waves. If the map is correct, the first streams of the river delta are only a few hundred yards east of the beach of the lagoon beyond the reef. There are paths leading through the jungle not more than a mile from where you will land.

"I'm going below for my gear," you tell the men, leaving them at the rail.

By the time you rejoin the others, the sloop is anchored near the reef, and a small skiff has been lowered into the choppy sea. Watching Max and Tym load the boat, you realize that you were about to reveal your identity to the handsome scholar, despite Nysla's warn-

ings. *Why was I going to tell him everything?* you wonder. Then you recall his warm touch and wonderful words and wish that Tym had not interrupted you.

The small skiff cuts silently through the smooth, dark water of the sheltered lagoon. Tym's strong pull on the oars moves you quickly through the choppy waves, while Max's skillful hand on the tiller guides the tiny craft through the narrow coral inlet. From the bow of the boat, you see the white sand of the beach gleaming in the moonlight. The gentle surf of ebb tide rolls softly into the beach, lightly slapping the sand. Your companions have no trouble maneuvering the little boat close to the shore.

"Get ready, Licia!" Max calls in a hushed voice. You stand with the rope in your hands, waiting for the right moment to jump. A gentle wave lifts the boat and moves it forward a few feet.

"Now!" Max prompts. Leaping into the warm surf, you splash in water up to your thighs toward the beach, pulling the skiff behind you.

Tym pulls the oars inside the boat and leaps into the surf to join you on the rope. His shoulder brushes your arm, and you can feel the firm muscles rippling under his tight, thin leather shirt. The young thief's boyish face is filled with excitement in the silver light. There is a look you have never seen before in Tym's eyes, and it makes you feel good to be sharing the simple task of pulling the rope with him.

Tym's surge of strength on the rope makes you move quickly to keep up with him. Your feet begin to slip in the sand. Suddenly you slip and tumble down flat on the beach. Tym trips over your legs and falls on his back next to you. His head is only inches from

yours. He grins a little boy's smile that you find irresistible, and you both begin to laugh uncontrollably, releasing the tensions between you.

Tym's strong body presses against your side. His strong arms hug you briefly; his boyish charm makes you comfortably warm, unlike the confused emotions aroused by Max's intense attentions.

"How cozy!" Max's sharp voice cuts like a knife. Your laughter dies quickly. Tym's face stiffens. He bounds to his feet without offering to help you get up and immediately begins to unload the boat. Max's strong hand grips yours a little roughly as he pulls you to your feet. His eyes glare at you with a strange new expression that frightens you.

"This is not a time for playing in the sand, Licia!" he says sternly. "We're in a dangerous place, and we can't afford to relax our guard."

The man's sudden shift in mood surprises you so much that you are speechless with a growing anger. Then Max notices your troubled expression, and he smiles sheepishly.

"I'm sorry, Licia. That was a bit heavy-handed of me. I'm only concerned for your safety. Now let's get our stuff together and find a place to rest until daylight." He squeezes your arm in a familiar way and then joins Tym at the boat.

Within minutes, all your belongings are piled up on the beach, away from the waves. As you sort through things, Max walks to the edge of the jungle to hunt for firewood. Tym, his youthful face serious, briefly studies the night sky and then turns to you.

"It's four hours until dawn. Try to get some rest, Licia. Max and I can keep watch," he suggests softly.

"I can stand guard, too," you protest. "This is an equal partnership, remember?"

"I'm not saying you're weaker than we are," Tym snaps. "But we need your fighting reflexes in good shape. You can take your turn on watch tomorrow night."

"Let's just wait and see," you suggest coldly. "I may not get sleepy." Tym shrugs and walks toward the trees to help Max gather firewood.

You turn your head toward the beach to the east, where the river delta is drawn on Garlind's map. Suddenly you realize that it will be difficult for you to use the map without telling your companions about it! Even if you manage to sneak away to look at it now and then, what will you do when your partners want to go a different way?

You must decide whether to share the secrets of the map with Max and Tym or to hide it from your companions.

*If you want to tell Max and Tym
about the map, turn to page 62.*

*If you decide that you cannot trust
your partners and want to keep
the map secret, turn to page 48.*

"It looks like a trap to me," you decide. "There's something strange about that creature. I don't think it's a snake, and I doubt if we should fight it. Let's be smart and turn around. We'll only lose an hour, which is a lot better than losing our lives!"

"Some fighter!" Tym grumbles.

"All right, you take my sword and see if you can handle whatever that thing is! The way it's draped into the water, you don't know how big it is or even what it is! Part of being a good warrior is knowing when to avoid a fight, and I think this is one of those times!"

"Well said!" Max exclaims. "I agree entirely. Let's backtrack to the beach and see if we can find the delta."

You move quickly behind the lithe, scarlet-cloaked figure of Max, who understands you so easily. *Perhaps too easily?* you wonder.

In less than half an hour, you are at the beach again.

Please turn to page 84.

Max and Tym return to the small campfire with armloads of dry wood. Both men seem excited. They look nervously around at the darkness beyond the fire.

"What is it?" you demand.

"Come with me." Tym selects a long burning stick from the fire to use as a torch. You follow him to the edge of the dense forest. Tym crouches low and holds the torch just above the sand at the beach's edge.

"Look at those tracks, Licia," he whispers.

You look down and see a very large, circular depression stamped deeply into the damp sand. Nearly twenty feet away there is a duplicate footprint, with a deep furrow between the two.

"What is it?" you cry.

"Unless I miss my guess, it's one of those 'thunder lizards' the sailors in Skipton talk about and fear," Tym says calmly. "These are its hind feet and tail marks; the front ones are more than a hundred feet away!"

You scan the dark outline of the jungle against the white sand, wondering how you would fight such a gigantic creature. Tym's large hand suddenly finds yours in the darkness. You look at his torchlit face and begin to see more than boyish charm. There is something strong and firm about his face which you had not noticed before. It makes you feel safer and warmer to have him standing with you in this dangerous place.

"Let's get back to the fire, Licia," Tym suggests softly. You return the gentle pressure on his hand as you walk quickly back to the campfire.

Max's slender figure, wrapped in the scarlet cloak, stands motionless. The flames flicker on his angry face.

"I see that looking at tracks in the sand can be fun," the scholar says sullenly.

Tym releases your hand and steps menacingly toward the fire.

"What I do, or what Licia does, is none of your business!"

In the glow of the flames, the men's faces are grim. For an instant, you fear they might leap for each other's throats.

"Settle down, both of you!" you snap irritably. "If we start fighting among ourselves, we might as well go back to Skipton! Let's talk about something important, like what made those tracks!"

Max turns away from Tym, shrugs, and studies the fire. "I know a little about the creature," he begins. "Some scholars call it a 'brontosaur.' They say it eats nothing but leaves, and it feeds at night."

"Well, I want to know what we should do if we see one," you say abruptly.

Tym nods. "Right, Max! How dangerous are they?"

"If my sources are correct, our only concern should be to stay out of its way. It is too large to fear anything, so it won't attack us. But it could just run over us. Or its massive tail could crush us. We should wait until dawn to travel—that's when they sleep."

"It doesn't make any difference whether we travel by night or by day," Tym says sarcastically, "since we don't know where we're going!"

"You don't?" you ask quietly, knowing that your decision has been made. And so you announce, "I have a map," drawing the parchment from your knapsack and spreading it on the sand.

Please turn to page 69.

The dark tower of Treg's citadel blends into the black rocks of an old volcano so well that it is almost invisible. Vapors from the ancient crater stream into the overcast sky behind the somber cylinder. Numerous sparkling streams spill from the black rocks at the foot of the citadel. Almost directly below the tower, a magnificent waterfall cascades into the narrow ravine, forming the bubbling source of the river. A flimsy rope bridge crosses the chasm to the tower.

"Let's have a look at that map, Licia," Tym urges.

The three of you squat at the edge of the trail, studying the faded lines of Garlind's map. Max's slender finger points to the X marked on the side of the volcano, directly across the stream from your present position.

"According to the map, something important is near that strange boulder. I'll bet there's a way into the tower just at that spot!" Max exclaims.

Looking at the black cliff across the river, you see a curious white rock in the place indicated on the map. The perfectly round boulder appears to be embedded in the black glassy surface.

Tym clenches his strong jaw tightly as he scans the cliff toward the base of the sinister tower, glancing occasionally at the map to check details. "I wonder about that faint trail disappearing into the waterfall." He points at the plummeting water below the base of the citadel. "It looks like the water might be covering a cave of some kind."

"Maybe so," snorts Max, "but look at that cliff! It's almost straight up! Maybe a thief could climb that wall, but we can't!"

Tym smiles determinedly and pats the shining cord



coiled at his side. "I could climb up there and throw you a rope," he answers quickly.

"Well, I'd rather try something a little more definite," Max objects. "Besides, we can make it to that boulder without any problems."

"Hey, you two! We don't have to argue," you interject. "What's wrong with the bridge? It leads straight to the tower! There's no sense in guessing when we see a direct way."

The two men stare at you silently, then look at each other and smile.

"What's so funny?" you demand.

Tym's eyes soften when he realizes that he and Max have offended you. "The bridge is the most dangerous route, Licia. Treg leaves it there as a trap. And, as far as I'm concerned," he adds with a sideways glance at Max, "that mark on the map could be a trap, too. That's why I'd rather try the path leading to the waterfall."

"Perhaps the ring can give us a clue," you suggest. You face the cliff and move your arm in a sweeping arc toward the bridge. As the ring passes by the white boulder and the waterfall, its glare becomes brighter. But when your arm points toward the bridge, the stones grow dimmer and the ring seems cooler on your finger.

"Did you see that?" you cry. "The Ring of Protection says that the bridge is safer than either of your routes into the tower!"

"Nonsense!" exclaims Max. "The ring is unreliable. We can't trust that piece of elven foolishness. It might even be evil itself! If I were you, I'd throw that cursed ring into the river!"

A chuckle from Tym causes you both to glance at the thief. He points to the ring. "That's just a simple Ring of Protection," he says. "It is not designed to detect evil, although it might work that way sometimes. The evil on this island comes from the tower. If you stand with the ring facing the tower, its magic works to protect the wearer. Turn away from the tower,



like toward the bridge, and the magic turns off. But you mustn't throw it away, Licia. You may need its protection!"

"Don't trust him!" shouts Max. "Throw that thing away!"

The scholar's handsome face is distorted and dark with rage. For a moment, you think he may attack Tym.

"Listen to me, both of you!" you demand. "I can make up my own mind without your assistance. This bickering will not get us into that tower! As for the ring, I trust the person who gave it to me far more than I trust either of you."

Max stares at you with a strange look. Tym shrugs and then gestures toward the cliff. "If either of you is coming with me, let's go before Treg gives us a personal invitation."

You have to decide upon a way to enter the sorcerer's stronghold.

*If you want to go with Max to explore
the boulder, turn to page 86.*

*If you go with Tym and try to climb the faint
trail by the waterfall, turn to page 122.*

If you would rather use the bridge, turn to page 75.

"Where on earth did you get that map?" Max asks in amazement.

"I'd rather not say," you reply.

"Ah, a mystery!" Max exclaims with a curious glint in his eyes.

"It's not a joking matter!" Tym says seriously. "Maps like that one can be used to mislead as well as lead. We might follow those paths right into some kind of trap. Licia, you have to tell us who made that map!"

The thief's insistence shocks you. His powerful figure towers above you as you kneel in the sand.

"Hold it, Tym," Max says quickly. "I doubt if she even knows who made this map. Look how old and faded it is. Those lines must have been drawn many years before her birth."

Max's defense seems to satisfy Tym. It makes you admire and respect the wise young scholar. He smiles tenderly at you, and a pleasant melting sensation runs through you. You have to look down at the map to control your sudden excitement.

Tym drops to his knees beside you and leans close to the parchment. "Well, if we're going to use the map, let's see what it says." He studies it briefly, then points at a spot on the map.

"We must be right here," he says positively. "We could probably avoid a lot of travel through thick swamps by taking one of these trails, *if* they're still there, and *if* this map isn't a trap!"

The thief frowns suddenly. "Some of the trails twist and turn so much that I doubt if we can follow them very well without a compass. I don't suppose you conveniently have a compass to go with the map, Licia," he suggests sarcastically.

"Not exactly," you reply, "but this might work." You remove your armored gauntlet and reveal the Ring of Protection's glowing aura. It has become even brighter and warmer than it was on the ship.

"What's that?" Max asks curiously.

"Come on, magician!" exclaims Tym. "Surely you recognize an enchanted ring when you see one. Unless I'm mistaken, that's an elven Ring of Protection. Am I right, Licia?"

"Yes! But how did you know?"

"Thieves run across a lot of strange items in their profession," Tym says with a sly smile. "That's a nice toy, but how do you think it will help us?"

You explain that the glow increased as you approached the island and suggest that it will become even brighter as you near the tower. Tym looks at Max and they both smile. Thinking they are ridiculing you, you feel your excitement turn to anger.

"What's so funny?" you demand.

Max pats your shoulder. "We're enjoying your innocence, Licia. Rings like that work to protect their wearer. Whenever the ring glows brighter, it means that evil power is being directed toward you. Distance has nothing to do with it. It is the strength of the evil force that makes the glow change. The evil source could be right beside you or across an ocean!"

"So it only tells me when I'm being attacked by an evil power?" You remember the ring's glow after your fight with Tym.

"That's true," Max replies. "Now that we know about your ring, why don't you wear it outside your glove? It'll work just as well, and you'll be able to see it better."

"And we'll be able to see it, too, if you need our help," Tym adds.

You are disappointed to learn that you cannot use the ring as a compass but glad to discover how it works. You slip your gauntlet on your hand and slide on the ring, which changes to fit your armored finger. Its soft, throbbing glow is constant.

"I suggest we try to find this first trail," Max says, returning to the map. "Or we could follow the streams of the delta back to the river's source."

Tym snorts in disagreement. "I just don't trust this map!" he says gruffly. "We don't know where it came from or who drew it. As far as I'm concerned, we ought to ignore it completely and find our own way into the interior."

"Licia, Tym and I obviously disagree which way to go," says Max. "What do you think? Should we follow the trails or the streams, or should we ignore the map and start exploring the jungle?"

The scholar's question fills you with doubts. Nysla has already warned you that the map might be a trap. And, you wonder, what was Garlind's decision three years ago?

*If you want to take Tym's advice
and ignore the map, turn to page 72.*

*If you think the trails marked on the map
might lead you to the sorcerer,
turn to page 80.*

*If you decide the streams are the best
way to reach Treg's stonghold, turn to page 79.*

You remember that the ring reacted to evil in the map. And Garlind, who probably followed the map, has disappeared. Now Tym's suspicions make you distrust the map completely.

"I think Tym's right," you say slowly. "I've never really trusted the map and was already thinking about avoiding these trails marked on it."

"I guess I'm outvoted," Max says with a weak smile. "Lead on, Tym. The sun is rising—we can travel now."

"Good!" exclaims Tym. "I saw an animal path of some kind where we were gathering firewood. Let's start there."

The thief shows you where the trampled bushes mark the regular trail of some wild animal going toward the beach.

"Looks like a tiger," Tym comments. "But I doubt if it would attack three large creatures like us!"

"I hope you're right!" Max whispers, as you begin to follow the rugged trail in single file. Tym takes the lead, using his shortsword to hack through vines and bushes. Max is next, walking in Tym's footsteps. You guard the rear, far behind the scholar and out of Tym's sight.

You have traveled the winding trail behind Max for nearly an hour, when he stops suddenly.

"What is it, Max?" you whisper.

"Tym! He's gone!" Max exclaims.

"What do you mean, 'gone'?" you demand. "Haven't you had your eyes on him all this time?"

Max's dark complexion reddens. "I'm afraid I lost sight of him, Licia. I was thinking about all of those paths and marks on your map and, when I looked

around, Tym was gone! He was moving so fast I could hardly keep up with him!"

"Surely his trail won't be difficult to follow," you say, shrugging. "He was hacking a wide path."

"That's the problem, Licia," Max says sadly. "I guess I led us away from his trail. We've been following a different one quite some time now."

The impact of the scholar's words chill your blood. You and Max are lost in this deadly jungle! Just then, a loud snarling growl, followed by a terrible cry, comes from the trees to your right!

"Tym!" you gasp.

"Help! It's got me! I can't move!" someone screams.

The silence following the thief's desperate cry is broken only by horrible snarls and growls.

"Where did that scream come from?" you demand.

"By that hollow tree!" answers Max excitedly.

You look to where he is pointing and see in the distance a flat clearing covered with ferns. Across the open space, stands a gigantic dead tree, which time has hollowed out. As you watch, a human hand flops out of a crack near the base of the tree. The leather sleeve is blood-stained. Tym has been trapped by some terrible creature inside the tree!

Brandishing Avenger's glowing blade, you scream, "Noooooo!" and bound into the clearing. Just as your feet touch the ground where the ferns are growing, you realize that you have made a horrible mistake. The earth is not solid beneath your boots. You have jumped into a large pool of quicksand and are already up to your breastplate in the mire!

For an instant, you panic, fighting to extract your-

self from the bog. But it only makes things worse.

"Max! Help!" you yell.

There is no answer. Turning your head with difficulty, you see that the scholar has disappeared! In the quicksand just behind you, the plush scarlet cap floats on the oozing surface! Twisting in panic to see if Tym is still alive, you watch as his arm and hand are jerked back into the hollow tree. You close your eyes in horror as the dreaded snarls continue from inside the tree.

As the quicksand reaches your nose, you hope that Garlind did not choose to ignore the map as you did.

THE END

"I think you're both afraid of Treg," you accuse your two quarrelsome partners. "I don't care where you go, I'm crossing that bridge. If it's a trap, we need to find out about it now." Without a glance at the two surprised men, you march toward the edge of the ravine.

"Wait, Licia! I'm coming with you!" Tym calls loudly. "Someone needs to go with you to Treg's front door," he says with a grim smile, "and it might as well be me." You glance back at Max, who is just staring at both of you in exasperation. Turning away, Max splashes across the stream toward the white boulder.

"Before we cross this canyon on that rotten spider web, I want to check it for traps," Tym growls.

He starts feeling each of the strands of rope that form the flimsy bridge. With the practiced skill of a master thief, he tests each of the lines by pulling, twisting, and shaking the bridge.

"No traps," he announces. "But let me go first—I'm used to this kind of footwork. Stay a few steps behind me in case I decide to practice flying."

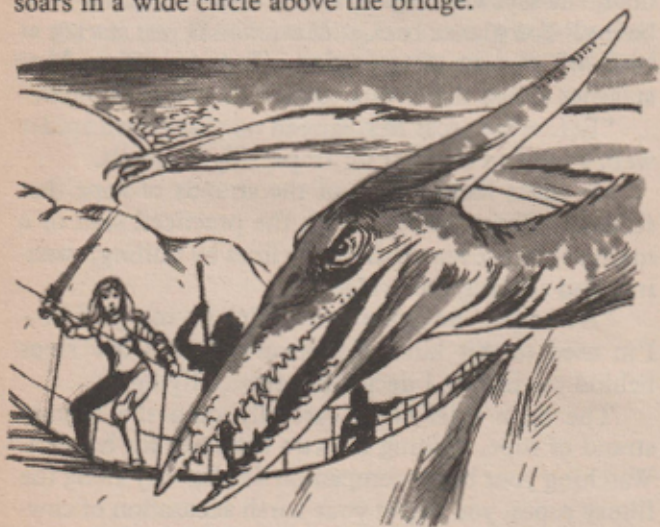
The agile thief steps carefully onto the bottom strand of rope, holding the two top lines for balance. Watching your brave companion feel his way along the flimsy ropes, you regret your harsh accusation of cowardice. As soon as Tym has traveled several feet away, you follow him onto the dangerously swinging bridge.

"Try to move with the sway of the ropes," Tym calls over his shoulder. "Don't make any sudden motions."

After a few clumsy steps, you master the technique of walking on the slack rope. Soon, both of you are swinging precariously over the dizzying canyon.

You have just reached the center of the bridge, at the rope's lowest point, when Tym gives a shrill cry of alarm that almost makes you lose your balance.

"A dragon! In the sky!" he screams just as the sky darkens above you and you hear a loud flapping sound. Clenching the ropes as tightly as possible, you jerk your head upward. A huge flying figure, with a long pointed snout and large leathery wings like a bat's, soars in a wide circle above the bridge.



"Keep moving!" Tym yells. "We have to get across this chasm before that thing attacks!" You realize that there is no way to fight this ugly flying monster. You cannot use your hands to draw your sword without losing your balance and plummeting into the canyon. You try to run but you miss your step on the bouncing foot-rope. You slip. Your legs dangle in space.

"Hang on, Licia!" Tym cries. He turns to grab your arm, but you are already back on the bridge.

"I'm all right!" you gasp. "Let's keep going!"

You have just managed to stand when great gusts of wind from the giant flapping wings cause the bridge to sway and bounce. A dark shadow blocks the sun as the terrible creature dives straight toward you! Ugly talons at the tips of its wings gleam darkly against the midday sky. The monster's feet clutch at your face, large claws extended. You stand frozen at the sight of its beak-like snout, lined with rows of dagger-sharp teeth, heading toward you. Then Tym's loud shout penetrates your fear.

"Stare at it, Licia! It's only an illusion! One of Treg's spells!"

The thief's words suddenly make sense to you. You become aware of a throbbing heat from Nysla's Ring of Protection, a sure signal of an evil force directed at you. But it is difficult to believe that the dragon-like creature swooping down upon you is only an illusion! The sound of its great wings and the feel of the wind blasting your face are all too real. You twist your head away from the horrifying monster, almost losing your grip on the ropes.

"Do it, Licia! Look at it! Now!" Tym's commanding voice floods your mind, but you are unable to move. Paralyzed with fear, you keep your eyes tightly shut. The bridge whips and bucks so viciously that you know your hands will soon slip from the weathered ropes. A terrible cry from Tym causes you to open your eyes just in time to see the thief's body plummeting through space to the sharp black rocks below.

The gigantic weight of the beast forces the rope

bridge downward as the dragon lands on it just above your huddled body. In desperation, you reach for Avenger's humming hilt, but you do not have time to draw the enchanted blade. You feel a violent jerk as the rotten ropes suddenly snap under the monster's great bulk.

For an instant, you float above the deep river canyon like an armored bird. As you start falling toward the dark cliff, you realize your quest is over.

THE END

"TREG"—the single word in Garlind's handwriting is the only thing on the old map which means anything to you. It is scrawled at the beginning of the river that eventually forms the delta as it flows into the ocean. You decide that the most direct way to follow your brother's three-year-old trail is through the delta.

"Since we should be looking for a way to the river's source, the most logical thing to do is to follow the river upstream. I vote for the delta," you tell your two partners.

"I couldn't have said it better myself," Max says with a pleased smile.

"Well, it makes better sense than using that map," Tym admits. "I'm ready if you are!"

Please turn to page 84.

The image of the trails marked on the map has been burned into your memory, and you cannot ignore it. "Let's follow a trail!" you say firmly.

The first light of dawn begins to waken the early morning sounds of the jungle. Tym disappears into the thick bushes, scouting the nearest path shown on the map. Max, strangely quiet and distant ever since his confrontation with Tym, waits patiently beside you.

A shrill whistle calls your attention to Tym's sturdy figure emerging from the jungle several hundred feet away. He waves excitedly.

"I found it!" he exclaims as you approach. "It's almost exactly where the map showed it would be!"

The excited thief leads you through the dense vegetation to a narrow path that looks like an eerie tunnel penetrating the dark jungle.

Tym leads, with you behind him and Max in the rear.

You follow the trail in this way for nearly half an hour when you notice that the ring's red glow now comes in sharp, bright flashes. Tym has disappeared around a bend in the trail, and Max is following you at a slow pace, lost in some private thought. You are alone and cannot tell anyone about the warning.

Rounding the bend, you see Tym standing in the middle of the path, his full attention caught by something in the path. You creep forward slowly, while Tym motions you to be quiet. Reaching his side, you look ahead and see a strange creature.

It is a giant green snake with the head of a lizard. The strange head lies across the trail, and its body disappears into the murky water of a stagnant pool on the left side of the path.

“What kind of snake is that?” you whisper.

“I don’t know. It seems to be a cross between a giant python and a lizard!”

“Is it dead?” you ask hopefully.

“No. I think I saw it move its eyelids a while ago. I believe it’s only sleeping.”

“Here’s Max,” you whisper. “See what he thinks!”

“I’ve never seen an animal like that,” Max soon whispers.

“Well, what do we do now?” you ask anxiously.

Max studies the sleeping monster for a moment, then says, “We can throw something at it and try to make it move, or we can backtrack to the delta.”

“Scaring that thing would be dangerous,” you protest. “If you want to touch it at all, we should kill it while it sleeps.”

“What’s wrong with trying to sneak around it?” suggests Tym. “It seems to be sleeping pretty soundly. We could take a wide detour around it and then come back to the trail.”

“Licia, you’re the fighter,” says Max. “What do you think?”

Once more, you must decide what to do.

*If you think you can sneak safely around
the monster, turn to page 82.*

*If you want to take the time to go back
to the delta and find another trail
turn to page 61.*

*If you think that you can kill the creature
and go over it, turn to page 93.*

"I think we should try to sneak around it," you decide finally. "That way, we won't be losing so much time."

"Great!" says Tym. "Let's go! Stay right behind me." Tym creeps to within a few feet of the dozing snout. He turns to the right, ready to leave the trail, then he stops. The look on his face tells you he has bad news.

"There's quicksand here!" he whispers. "We'll have to stay on the trail and try to step over its head!"

Without waiting for your reply, the agile thief approaches the sleeping beast. He lifts one leather-clad leg over the head, jumps, twists in midair, and lands lightly on the other side of the serpent. He motions for you to follow.

You creep forward until you can see the creature's nostrils flaring with each breath. When you are standing in Tym's footprints, you bend at the knees and jump as high and as far as you can. Tym's strong arms catch you in midair and set you gently on the ground. The sleeping monster startles you with a sudden snort, sending a chill down your spine, but then it sighs and breathes normally again.

Max leaps gracefully over the snout without difficulty, but a large clod of mud drops from his boot right into the monster's eye! With an abrupt snort, the monster blinks, and its head jerks up. Black beady eyes stare at the three of you for a split second. Then the entire jungle explodes!

The head suddenly shoots into the sky. The ground shakes, knocking you to the muddy earth. It's not a serpent at all, but a brontosaur! What you thought was a snake is really the long, thick neck of the largest crea-

ture you have ever seen! The massive creature rises from the pool where it was sleeping and turns around with surprising speed.

"Run!" Tym yells. "Watch out for the tail!"

The tail, thicker than a tree trunk, whips from the muddy water and swings in a wide, tree-toppling arc toward you. You scramble frantically down the trail as fast as you can. The blast of wind caused by the thrashing tail nearly knocks you from the path into the quicksand. By the time you regain your feet, the thunder lizard has thundered away, leaving a deathly silence in the dense rain forest. It seems incredible that such a large creature could vanish so quickly, like a chipmunk into a hole!

The three of you stand speechless, staring into the now-tranquil jungle.

"Well, our path is no longer blocked!" Tym says, smiling wryly. He turns and starts walking toward the interior. You and Max take deep breaths, smile at each other, and follow the agile thief.

The terrain is gradually growing hilly, and the trail begins to twist toward the right. Soon you hear the sound of rushing water and catch occasional glimpses of white rapids through the trees.

"We've reached the river!" Tym calls. "Bring the map, Licia!"

The thief's news thrills you, and you run to join him, with Max following. As you realize that several trails have joined yours, you see Tym resting on a large rock jutting over the shallow river. You step onto the rock and pull the map from your pack.

Please turn to page 91.

Within a few minutes, you have reached the first stream of the delta. It is a sparkling rivulet of crystal-clear water cutting through the beach and flowing into the sea. The banks of the small stream are completely overgrown with the thickest vegetation you have seen on the island.

"How do we get through that?" you ask, discouraged.

"We don't," Tym replies confidently. "Look at the stream bed. It's nothing but rocks and coarse sand. The water's only ankle deep. Until this river gets deeper and rougher, we've got a perfect, cleared path through the jungle, all the way to Treg's front door!"

Tym's suggestion is so good that you hug his powerful arm and kiss him lightly on the cheek. It is only a happy, impulsive kiss, just as you might have given Garlind. Max and Tym, however, both stiffen. Tym's face reddens, and he looks away from your laughing eyes. Max glares at you so fiercely that for an instant you feel threatened. You realize that you have become something more than a partner to both men. The experience is so new that you can only try to joke about it.

"Max! Do you feel left out? Here's one for you, too!" You kiss him playfully on the cheek, just as you did Tym. Instead of relaxing the tense situation, your light-hearted pecks make both men even more tense.

"What's the matter with you two?" you challenge. "Can't you just relax and be friendly? Quit taking yourselves so seriously!"

Tym's face gets even redder, then he grins sheepishly and turns away, shaking his head at the scolding. Max's expression becomes blank.

"Come on!" you urge. "Let's see how far this

watery path will take us!" Without waiting for an answer, you splash into the shallow stream and start wading. Tym and Max follow, and the three of you are soon swallowed by the thick jungle.

With every step, the forest gets wilder and thicker. The sounds of countless jungle creatures, large and small, dangerous and harmless, surround you. The rivulet soon rejoins other streams which have split to form the delta. As the terrain starts to get hilly, the water becomes swifter and deeper. Finally, at the last junction of the major tributaries, where only one river leads upstream, the rapids are so powerful that you must leave the swift, hip-high current.

You signal to the others to follow you to the bank. There, you can rest, look at the map, and decide what to do next.

When you step onto a large overhanging rock, the first thing you see is a trail. Then you realize that it's a *well-used* trail! And it follows the river into the foothills.

You are already excitedly studying the map when Max and Tym join you on the rock.

Please turn to page 91.

Max and Tym stare at you while you study the approaches to the tower. Finally you turn toward them and announce your decision.

"That mark on the map must mean something important, Tym," you tell the young thief. "I agree with Max—we should see what's there."

"Excellent!" smiles Max.

Tym looks at your serious face and at Max's expression of relief. "Well, good luck!" he says with a casual shrug of his broad shoulders. "I'll be waiting for you inside the tower, if you get there. Won't you change your mind and come with me, Licia?"

"No, Tym, but I wish you'd come with us."

"She's right, Tym. It would be the safest thing for all of us," Max urges.

The young thief's mouth tightens as he looks at you and Max, then broadens in a careless grin. "Take care of yourselves. If you change your mind, I'll be waiting behind the waterfall."

Tym turns and splashes quickly across the small river. His figure is lost for a moment among the thick bushes near the water but reappears at the base of the cliff by the waterfall. He begins to climb the sheer wall of black stone. The agile thief's hands and feet find invisible steps as his body clings to the glassy surface. As he nears the water, his head turns toward you. You can see that he is yelling, but the roar of the waterfall drowns his words. In another instant, his powerful body disappears into the mists and water.

"He's found something!" you cry.

"All he'll find behind that waterfall is wet stones," Max says sullenly. "I'm glad you decided to stay with me, Licia. Let's try to reach that boulder."

Max's thin, strong hand holds yours tightly as he steps from rock to rock across the stream. As Max suspected, there are no problems, and within a few minutes, you are immediately below the huge white boulder that juts from the smooth black wall.

The stone is almost perfectly round. You reach to feel the strange surface with a gloved finger. Instead of the hard rock you expect to touch, a shocking, cold sensation envelops your arm. Your armored hand disappears to the wrist inside the opaque white boulder!

"Max! My hand is gone!" you shout in alarm. The scholar repeats the same action with his own hand and pulls you away from the mysterious rock. You clutch his shoulders and press your trembling body against his solid chest. The enchanted ring glows more brightly than ever. You can feel its strong heat through



the magical armor of your gauntlet. Max wraps his sinewy arms around your shaking body.

"It's all right, Licia," he whispers comfortingly. He begins to caress the back of your neck very gently. You relax as the warmth of his touch spreads over you.

Then slowly, you become aware that Max's wiry body is pressing against yours. He grabs your arms, pulls you close. You are so surprised by the sudden change in Max's gentle touch that you grow limp for a moment, unable to protest. As his strong grasp draws you more tightly against him, you become frightened.

"Don't, Max! Please let me go!" You look up into his face. The handsome scholar is no longer recognizable. His dark eyes are clouded, and his hot breath is rapid. His powerful hands grip your arms so tightly that he bruises you, even through the armor.

"Max, you're hurting me! Let me go!"

The dazed look on his handsome face lingers for an instant, then fades. His fingers relax and loosen their hold on your arms. As you jerk your bruised body away from him, Max covers his face with his hands.

"Licia, I don't know what happened," he apologizes with a frightened look in his eyes. "You were so near. I wanted to . . . I guess I just lost control of myself."

The sincerity of Max's apology relaxes your anger and fear. His beautiful face softens the memory of the powerful hands bruising your arms.

"Please forgive me, Licia," he pleads. "I never meant to frighten you or force you to do anything against your will."

"Forget it, Max," you say lightly. "I enjoyed being close to you, until you started getting rough. Let's just

think about getting into that tower. Did you see what happened to my hand when I touched that boulder?"

The scholar nods and turns toward the mysterious rock. He cautiously prods the dull white surface with one finger.

"Wait here!" he commands. Pressing himself against the dark cliff, he slides his arm in behind the strange rock.

"There's an opening!" he yells. "This boulder isn't real! It is an illusion meant to hide a cave. I'm going in!"

Max's slender figure merges with the light surface of the rock. His outline fades into a thick cloud and finally vanishes completely. You are alone, near the magical boulder. Nysla's words of warning become clear. On this island, you can never be sure of what is real and what is an illusion!

"Max! Can you hear me? Answer me!" you call. But the only sound you hear in reply is the distant roar of the waterfall. Then Max's enchanting voice suddenly fills your head.

"Follow me, Licia," his voice says. "Step into the boulder just as I did. I can't get out, but there is a passage in here."

A feeling of panic rushes over you. The eerie voice in your head sounds like Max's. Could it be some strange psychic ability of the young scholar? Or is someone—or something—else trying to lure you into a trap? *If only we had not split up, you think. If only Tym were here to help me decide what to do!*

Glancing at the waterfall, you see the thief's shining rope blowing gently in the wind. He has left it hanging on the cliff so that you and Max can follow

him if you change your minds. It is only a few hundred yards away. You could reach it easily. Or you could cross the river and take the trail over the suspended bridge to the tower. You must do something quickly.

*If you decide to follow Max
through the magical boulder, turn to page 97.*

*If you want to climb the rope and find Tym,
turn to page 102.*

*If you wish to cross the bridge to the tower,
turn to page 94.*

"Look at the map!" you exclaim. "This is the main trail leading to Treg's stronghold!" All of the paths shown on the map converge where the river becomes one stream, just above the delta.

"Then let's follow this trail. It's certainly the easiest way to go," Max suggests.

"But whenever there's only one trail," says Tym, scowling, "there's more likely to be a trap!"

"Let's scout this trail for a while, just to see what the terrain is like," you suggest. "We'll go one at a time, spaced far apart. I'll take the lead."

"No, Licia," Tym replies quickly. "I'll lead. I'm a professional thief, and I can recognize a trap a lot sooner than either of you."

The courageous thief takes the path and is soon several hundred feet away. You glance at Max and set off after Tym. The scholar follows.

The path follows the ground as it rises higher and higher above the river, where white water cuts into the plateau. Soon, you are walking along the edge of a steep cliff, looking down into a shallow river.

After walking for an hour, you suddenly come upon Tym sitting on a pinnacle of rock. He has tied his gleaming rope around a tree trunk.

"What's the matter?" you ask.

"I think it's time to leave the trail and stay on the river bank," says Tym. "We're too close to Treg's castle to take any more chances. Wait until I get to the bottom, Licia, then you and Max follow me."

Tym's voice is compelling. You feel that you will be safe if you follow his instructions. You watch him descend the cliff and wait for his signal.

When he calls, you grab the thin cord and let your-

self over the edge. The rope's fibers cling to your armored hands so even if you relaxed your hold, you could not fall. You reach the rocky bank of the river just as you reach the end of the slender cord.

"It's a good thing this cliff wasn't much higher," you say, gesturing to the rope's end.

"Oh, the rope is never too short," the thief replies mysteriously.

Max descends the rope and, on reaching the bottom, demands angrily, "I want to know why we left the trail! I didn't see any danger."

Tym offers Max the same cool explanation he gave you, but Max protests.

"I'm beginning to wonder if we can trust you, Tym!" he says suspiciously. Tym's expression doesn't change. He looks very much as he did in Skipton when you first saw him.

"Too bad we've lost the rope." You look up to where it is tied to the tree.

Tym walks casually to the rope and gives it a quick flick with his wrist. The end tied around the tree trunk unties itself and spins like a top as it falls to the thief's waiting hands. You watch, astonished.

"All in the wrist," Tym says, winking.

As soon as everyone has rested, you start walking upstream along the bottom of an ever-deepening canyon. The river grows swifter with each step. You round a bend and suddenly stop in awed silence. You have reached Treg's grim citadel!

Please turn to page 64.

Staring at the sleeping serpent, you feel an urgency and a restlessness—maybe a recklessness!—at being so near your goal. *It should be simple, you think, to sneak up close and kill it with one blow from Avenger.*

“Let’s not risk going around it. We might meet something too powerful for us to handle,” you suggest to the others. “We can probably kill it while it sleeps!”

“You may be right,” Tym says thoughtfully. “But watch out. That bog is quicksand!”

You and the thief creep toward the giant head. It shows no sign of awakening. When you are directly over the snout, you raise Avenger as high as you can. Tym stands ready to help with his shortsword.

Tym nods, and you swing the enchanted sword with all your might against the neck of the sleeping creature. The instant Avenger’s blade touches the reptile, the entire jungle seems to explode, and you fall to the ground. The breath is knocked from you.

You watch in awe and pain as the huge wounded creature blasts from the pool of murky water, rising higher and higher and higher into the sky above you. The body of the “snake” expands and thickens until you realize that it was the neck of a gigantic brontosaurus! The dying monster charges from the pool. Legs as thick as trees make the earth quake beneath your feet. The monster’s frenzied hulk twists and turns, knocking down trees with its heavy tail!

Caught between the quicksand of the bog and the crushing body of the giant thunder lizard, you know that you’ll never learn more about Tym and Max and, indeed, that your quest has failed.

THE END

Max's voice tells you that he is trapped inside the strange boulder. If you follow him, there is a danger that the trap will catch you, too. You know that you must act quickly to save the scholar.

Climbing down the pile of black rubble to the flat bank of the river, you see the thief's shining rope dangling at the base of the cliff, but Tym has vanished. Without him to help you scale the sheer wall of black glass, you doubt if you would be able to reach the ledge.

Your only alternative is the flimsy rope bridge spanning the steep sides of the canyon. If you can get inside the dark tower, perhaps you can find your companions. Splashing across the shallow stream, you reach the footpath and follow it to the edge of the gorge.

The primitive rope bridge is very old and looks rotten in places. It has one rope for your feet and two higher ones to use as handrails. Very carefully you step onto the wobbly footrope and start across the terrifying ravine. The spidery ropes swing more and more with every step you take. It becomes harder to keep your balance on the bouncing, swaying bridge, but you keep inching forward.

You reach the lowest portion of the swinging bridge where it starts its upward climb to the tower. Below you, the sparkling river is only a tiny ribbon of blue threading its way between the dark green forest and the black cliffs. You keep your eyes on the bouncing rope beneath your feet, trying to judge its motion in order to take each step safely.

A sudden sound from the direction of the tower causes you to raise your head. At the end of the bridge, you see a tall warrior clad in full battle armor. He is

only about fifty feet away, and you can see him clearly. His light blond hair and sky-blue eyes highlight the burnished armor, making him gleam like an eerie statue against the glossy black stones of the tower.

"Hello!" you shout, but you receive no answer.

Glancing down, you begin to take quicker steps. The incline of the rope is difficult to walk. You clutch the handropes more tightly. After several yards, you look over once again at the statuesque warrior . . . and almost lose your balance! The warrior's youthful face is partially hidden by his visored helmet, but it cannot conceal the man's identity. He is your brother, Garlind!

"Lindy!" you cry aloud. "It's me, Licia!"

Your brother only stares coldly at your clumsy movements on the rope bridge. As you get even closer, you see a strange dazed look in his eyes. Moving more rapidly, you try to reach your brother. You are only ten feet away when the glint of a sharp knife catches your eye.

You are horrified to see that Garlind has drawn a dagger. He grabs one of the handropes. Before you can scream, he has sliced the taut rope! It jerks out of your hand with the force of a bullwhip. In a frantic motion, you grab the other rope to keep from falling.

"Don't cut it, Lindy! This is your sister, Licia! Put the knife away!"

Garlind has already grabbed the other rope and cuts it neatly with the same snapping recoil. As soon as the second rope whips from your hands, you are left standing on a wobbling slack rope. For a brief moment, you manage to balance yourself and try to walk the swinging rope toward your brother, but it is too difficult.

After only a few steps, your feet slip and your body falls into space. In desperation, you grab the footrope with both hands and are left dangling over the dizzying depth of the canyon.

Your sweating hands start to slip from the armored gloves. With strength you never knew you possessed, you climb hand-over-hand, toward the tower. Just when you have reached safety, Garlind stoops and starts swinging the single strand of thick rope.

"Please stop!" you scream. "I can't hold on much longer!" You feel yourself growing weaker, and know that your hands will soon lose their hold on the rope.

You wish that you had followed Max or had gone with Tym to the waterfall, but it is too late to change your mind. As your tired fingers slip one by one from the rope, the last thing you see is cold death in the face of your brother.

THE END

"Max is in trouble, and he needs me!" you decide.

Drawing Avenger from its scabbard, you take a deep breath and step into the thick, cloudy substance of the strange boulder. A chill envelops your entire body, as if you had plunged into a wall of dry snow. The ground is solid beneath your feet, and you step forward carefully, brandishing the enchanted sword in front of you.

Suddenly, the cloud vanishes and you find yourself standing inside a tunnel of black glass! The coldness of the magical barrier is gone, replaced by a humid warmth.

Max is nowhere in sight. Two bright torches on the tunnel walls make the dark glassy stones shine like ebony jewels. A glance behind you shocks your already frightened senses. The mysterious white boulder has disappeared. The entrance is gone! In its place is a dead-end of smooth black glass.

"Follow the corridor, Licia!" Max's voice whispers in your brain. Realizing that you have no choice, you begin to tread softly along the narrow passage.

The corridor, well-lit by evenly spaced torches, curves slightly to the left. The air becomes more humid, and the glassy walls drip with moisture. Overhead, you see the bottom of a raised rusted iron gate. Sharp spears of steel jut menacing from it. A flash of fear rushes over you as you imagine the heavy gate crashing down on you as you walk beneath it.

"In here, Licia! Through the gate!" calls Max's eerie, muffled voice. With a glance up at the sharp steel spikes, you dart quickly through the opening. There is a loud crash behind you. The gate has fallen into place, sealing you inside a large black room.

Stepping cautiously into the center of the torch-lit room, you smell a horrible odor like rotting meat. Your Ring of Protection throbs its red glow strong enough to cast a strange aura on your face and body.

"Come to me, Licia. Help me!" Max's distorted voice draws you toward a dark corner where a flight of stairs leads upward. Strange shapes move among the shadows.

Suddenly, an evil face floats out of the darkness. It is a bald humanoid head with gaunt skeletal features. Glowing red eyes burn into your mind, paralyzing your arms and legs. You quickly throw your shield in front of your face to block the hypnotic stare. A slithering, hissing sound fills the large chamber. Peering cautiously around the enchanted shield, you see that the man's head is attached to a huge black and red serpent's body.

"Look into my eyes, Licia," Max's unreal voice commands. "Gaze upon my true form, child. Know my terrible beauty!"

A sudden feeling of helplessness and fear overwhelms you. You drop the charmed shield and stare in dumb fascination at the horribly enchanting creature. The head weaves hypnotically above you with an evil grin. Suddenly the monster's features start to assume Max's youthful appearance!

"Put away your sword, Licia, and come to me," the voice hisses in your head. Avenger's magical blade starts to hum and glow strongly. Nysla's enchanted ring throbs. The power combining the ring and your father's intelligent sword flows into your numbed arms, flooding your mind with the strength you need to resist.

With a shrill battle-cry, you lunge toward the slithering giant. Avenger's glowing blade slices through the dank air. The monstrous serpent's bearded mouth snarls. A flurry of fiery sparks streams from its flickering tongue. Each spark turns into tiny darts of magical fire. Avenger sweeps the air in front of you. The enchanted blade catches the fiery darts in flight, causing small explosions of light to fill the cavern.

The shadows at the foot of the stone steps dissolve in the magical flashes. Max stands frozen against the glassy black wall behind the serpents thrashing tail. The scholar's soft dark eyes stare straight ahead, as if he were a living statue.

"Devilish monster!" you shout. In a controlled rage, you rush toward the black coils. But sudden darkness envelops you, a darkness broken only by the multicolored glow of your sword, armor, and ring.

A cold scaly mass thrashes against your armor-clad body, knocking you to the stone floor. Avenger's magical blade flares, flooding the chamber with its strong green light. The monster's evil face leers inches from your eyes, its mouth gaping to reveal venomous fangs.

With trained fighter's reflexes, you jerk away from the terrible fangs. Bounding to your feet, you swing Avenger at the nearest coil. The enchanted blade bites deep into the scaly hide, causing the head to recoil with an angry hiss. You pull your sword free and rush toward the sinister bald head. Just as Avenger's point touches the evil face, the cavern fills with a blinding flash of light.

For an instant, you cannot see anything. The glare fades quickly. The evil monster has disappeared! The torches are burning again, and the chamber appears



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to be empty. You turn quickly in all directions but see nothing except glistening black walls.

A low moan from the dark recess by the steps sends a tingle of fear through your body. Max's wiry shape stumbles into the light and collapses on the floor at your feet.

"Max! Are you all right?"

"Licia! Where is it? Where did it go?" he gasps.

"It disappeared after I hit it," you explain. "But what was it?"

"A spirit naga! An evil guardian of Treg's citadel," Max whispers hoarsely, stumbling to his feet. "It paralyzed me before I could reach those stairs."

"It had your face and voice! For a moment, I thought . . . never mind. Let's go before it returns!"

Max's hand touches your cheek tenderly. "It won't be back," he says with certainty.

"You saved my life, Licia. I want to hold you, to feel you close to me." His arms encircle you warmly, pulling you gently to his chest. "Let me kiss you, Licia. Let me know that you care for me."

The young scholar's handsome face is close to yours. The fear and excitement of the battle with the spirit naga gives way to overwhelming desire. You want to surrender yourself to Max's comforting embrace, but you still feel uncertainty and danger.

*If you want to let Max kiss you,
turn to page 104.*

If you decide not to kiss him, turn to page 106.

Max's muffled voice in your head troubles you. "I can't get out!" it calls. If the scholar is trapped behind that strange boulder, you might fall into the same trap. The only thing to do is to find Tym and tell him what has happened.

It takes only a few minutes to climb over the rubble along the river bank and reach the end of Tym's rope dangling from the ledge by the waterfall. You try to shout above the thunderous sound of the cascading water to the thief. Without him to pull the rope, you will have to climb the glassy wall alone. You wait but there is no answer over the roar of the waterfall.

The cord is no thicker than a leather thong, and you doubt that it will support your weight. When you grab the thin line to test it, something very strange happens. The shining cord seems to come alive, wrapping itself snugly around your waist and tying itself in a mountaineer's knot. Before you can resist, the mysterious rope lifts you, raising your body straight up the sheer face of the cliff. It deposits you gently on the narrow ledge by the roaring waterfall and unties itself from your waist.

"I see you changed your mind!" shouts Tym over the crashing torrent of water. He is standing at the edge of the waterfall. Behind you, the rope returns to its position, hanging from an iron stake and falling over the edge of the cliff. "Come on, Licia!" Tym yells. "There's a cave back here!"

You inch your way along the ledge toward Tym, feeling his large warm hand envelop yours firmly and securely. The thief leads you slowly behind the waterfall, where the ledge forms the floor of a small cave entrance. Tym's hand relaxes its powerful grip, and

you sit on the damp rocks at the mouth of the cave.

"What happened down there?" asks Tym.
"Where's Max?"

In a rush of words, you describe the strange boulder, Max's disappearance, and the eerie voice. "So, I came to find you," you conclude your story. "I didn't know what else to do."

"I think you did the right thing," Tym says quietly. "From what you've said, that boulder sounds like a sorcerer's trick of some kind. You might have been trapped, too. I'm glad you came to me, Licia." The thief's voice is completely sincere, but his expression remains a little odd.

"Where did you get that rope? I almost screamed when it grabbed me!" you exclaim.

"It was a present from an old friend of mine, an elven thief who also dabbled in magic." Tym smiles. "It seems that Max has already found an entrance, so he won't be needing it," he adds.

Tym points his finger at the magical cord, which rises quickly and coils itself around the stake.

"Now then," he says, looking into the dark cave. "Shall we try to find a back door to Treg's tower? Maybe we'll run across Max in the bargain."

At the mouth of the cave, the floor is level, pock-marked with scattered pools of water from the waterfall spray. The cave is pitch black inside. Tym takes a tinderbox and a torch from his pack. He lights it easily despite the heavy mist.

Please turn to page 119.

The closeness of Max's lips and the gentle touch of his hand on your cheek erase the memory of the evil monster with the scholar's distorted face. Your fear and uncertainty dissolve in the comfort of his nearness.

Closing your eyes, you tilt your head and feel his soft mouth press gently on your lips. Your sword and shield slip from your hands and clatter to the floor as your arms embrace his strong shoulders. Max's hands caress your face as you lose yourself in the magic of his kiss.

Your pulse races as the scholar's kiss spreads its wonderful warmth throughout your body. You feel yourself being drawn closer and closer to Max's slender form. The scholar's hands finally push you away. For a moment, your head swirls with a dizzy sense of longing to have his lips touch yours again.

"Hold me, Max," you murmur, nestling your cheek against his soft silk shirt. His strong arms embrace you tightly.

"Look at me, Licia," Max whispers. His dark eyes flame. "I'm falling in love with you. We must not let anything or anyone come between us. Not Treg or his monsters. Not Tym, not anyone!"

Max's intensity makes you shiver and pull away.

"Oh, Max, I'm so new at this," you cry. "I've never kissed a man before. I'm having all kinds of confused feelings. Please give me time to think. I need to understand what is happening inside of me before I can let myself love you."

Max's beautiful eyes flash. "I want your love, Licia. I'll never let you go now that I've found you!"

A wave of emotion sweeps over you. Even in your most romantic dreams, you never imagined that such

an exciting man could fall in love with you. You wish that your mission was finished so that nothing might stand in the way of learning to love and be loved.

"Max, please understand. Until this business is over, I can't think of romance. I only hope you will still love me, Max, whenever I am able to love you in return."

Max takes your gloved hand lightly in his. "I am trying to understand, Licia, but there's a lot you're not telling me. This quest is much more than a mere fortune hunt for you. I can see it in your eyes. Tell me why you're so reluctant to talk about yourself. Why did you try to hide that map? And how did you overcome the magical powers of the spirit naga?"

The scholar's eyes are wide with concern and curiosity. *Max is too intelligent not to have noticed that I was not telling all the truth, you think. Perhaps it is time to trust someone. If I tell Max who I am and why I must fight Treg, he will understand me better.*

But then you recall Nysla's warning: "Don't trust anyone, Licia. Nothing will be as it seems to be on that cursed island." You want so much to trust Max, to believe in him, but you are torn between your need for a friend and the wise old brownie's advice.

If you decide to trust Max and to reveal your true identity to him, turn to page 108.

If you want to keep your secret, turn to page 112.

The memory of Max's distorted face on the horrible head of the spirit naga chills your mind as his mouth nears yours. Tears well in your eyes. You turn your head away and push against his chest with your hands.

"I'm sorry, Max, but I can't," you cry. "Not yet, anyway. I still see your face on that monster. I can't think of romance now. We'll have a better chance to know each other after this dangerous mission is over."

Max's soft expression fades. His dark eyes flash with disappointment and anger.

"It's Tym, isn't it?" he demands quickly, dropping his hand from your cheek. "You're attracted to that thief! Why did you choose to come with me instead of climbing the cliff with him?"

Max's outburst leaves you speechless for an instant, until a rush of anger fills your thoughts.

"Tym has nothing to do with it! He's a conceited, selfish person and I don't want to be with him. Or I didn't, until just now! You don't own me, Max! I can do whatever I want to do, and go wherever I choose! If you must know, I wanted to kiss you and to be close to you only moments ago. I told you the truth, and if you can't accept it, that's your problem!"

Max's mouth tightens grimly. "Then I shall have to solve it myself, won't I?" His voice is low and even, unlike his normal pleasant tones. "But I don't believe you've told me the truth, Licia. There are many mysteries about you—how you stopped that naga, for example. No mere fighter could have resisted the naga's spell. It had the powers of a master sorcerer, yet you were able to defeat it. Where did you get enchanted armor and a magic sword? How did you come by an

elven ring? You're keeping many things from me, Licia."

Max's sudden suspicions make you wonder if you should tell the scholar about your father and Garlind. Perhaps he will understand that your quest is too important to be threatened by his jealousy. Perhaps he will realize you cannot become romantically involved until your mission is finished!

"Ah, I see by that look on your face that you are hiding something!" Max says with great satisfaction. "Before we continue this partnership, I think you owe me an explanation."

You must decide whether or not to reveal yourself to Max.

*If you decide to tell Max everything
and ask for his help, turn to page 108.*

*If you think you cannot trust Max
and wish to keep your true identity a secret,
turn to page 112.*

A look of intense interest fills the scholar's darkly handsome face, as he waits silently for you to make your decision. Taking a deep breath, you meet Max's penetrating gaze and start your story. You tell him about Treg's feud with your father, Garlind's ill-fated quest, Nysla's assistance in your fighter training, and the brownie's magical gifts.

"So you see, Max, I must finish Garlind's quest and face Treg in order to restore my father's sight. I know that my brother is still alive, and I want only to recover my family's plundered treasure. You and Tym can have everything else," you conclude.

The scholar has listened to your story without changing his interested expression. Now he smiles broadly and take your hand. "I not only understand, Licia; I'll help you find your brother. Together we will destroy this evil sorcerer. You will soon discover that I'm a very resourceful friend." Then his eyebrows furrow in a deep scowl. "Just promise me one thing—if we find Tym, don't tell him about any of this."

"You sound as if you don't trust Tym!" you exclaim, remembering your own doubts about the young thief.

"I haven't wanted to tell you, Licia, but I've been watching our partner very closely. Have you noticed how he prefers to be by himself most of the time? And did you see his reaction when you caught him with your map? There's something very strange about Tym."

Max's suspicions about Tym make you recall the thief's hostility toward you and the ominous throbbing of the Ring of Protection after your confrontation in Skipton. Still, you find it difficult to believe that the

boyish, light-hearted thief is as evil as Max suggests.

"I know Tym has been unfriendly, but I thought he was still angry about our fight."

"I hope you're right, Licia, but until we know something more definite about him, promise that you won't tell Tym what you've told me."

"I can't promise, Max. Tym is our partner. We should be able to trust each other!"

"Yes, Licia, we *should*, but that doesn't mean we *can*!" Max's eyes flash so intensely you become embarrassed.

"Let's forget about Tym for a little while," you suggest, "and see if we can find a way into Treg's castle." Max looks at you with a strange expression and turns silently toward the steps, pausing for you to join him.

The steps curve upward to the left, past a level landing. A narrow corridor leads off to the right. Max looks up at the stairs and then down the passage.

"Let's try this corridor first, so we don't miss anything important," he urges. You nod silently.

The corridor is long and narrow, with many twists and turns. It gets darker with every step, but Max moves ahead swiftly. You have to hurry to keep up. Suddenly Max stops abruptly, raising his hand.

"It's a dead end, Licia!" he says in alarm.

"But how can it be a dead end?" you cry. "Surely this corridor was meant to lead somewhere! Let's try the walls for a secret door."

"Good idea," Max agrees. "You search along this wall, and I'll try the other one." Nodding, you start examining every little crevice and rough surface you can locate on the smooth wall. You are nearly at the corner when your hand simply vanishes into the wall, just

as it did when you were at the white boulder!

"Max! There's a—" You cannot finish your report because a powerful hand grabs your wrist and jerks you through the wall!

You find yourself on the floor of a tiny cubicle, surrounded by a dense fog like the opaque cloud at the boulder, but even dimmer.

The Ring of Protection glows brightly enough for you to see a hazy outline of your captor, a tall warrior dressed in a suit of heavy plate mail.

"Let me go!" you gasp, but the ghostly figure holds your arm in his strong grip. A blurred motion from the warrior's side catches your eye. You look just in time to see him raise a sharp battle-axe. In panic, you twist your arm painfully from the warrior's grip and bound to your feet. Then Avenger's green blade shines through the mist.

The heavy axe crashes to the floor where you were sitting! In a smooth motion, you thrust Avenger into the mist, hoping to hit the warrior's side where his armor is buckled to his body. The enchanted sword thrusts itself into that vulnerable spot. With a deep moan, the warrior collapses on the floor at your feet.

The thick fog begins to separate. It swirls together and disappears with a whistling sound into the black walls. Your victim's face, turned upward, shows in the light of the ring and sword. You look into the blue eyes of your brother! Sobbing, you drop to your knees beside him.

"Lindy! Can you hear me? Can you talk? I didn't know it was you!" you cry. "Please talk to me!"

Your brother's dazed eyes stare at your face as if he were trying to remember it.

"Licia, is it really you?" he asks weakly. "How did you get here? Did the thief lead you here?"

"What thief?" you cry.

"Treg! In Skipton . . . in disguise . . . tricked . . ."

Garlind manages to gasp out a few words. "Be careful, Licia! Watch out for the thief! He's Treg! His—" Your brother's words abruptly die, and his armored head falls limply to one side.

"Lindy!" You scream, holding his lifeless head between your hands. Suddenly fiendish laughter floods the small chamber. You leap to your feet and search every inch of the stone walls, but there is no way out! You are trapped in a magical cage of stone! You glance at the floor, only to discover that your brother's corpse has vanished!

You begin to realize that Treg's sorcery is more powerful than you imagined. You regret your failure to heed the warning of the ring about Tym in Skipton.

You yell loudly for Max, but hear only absolute, deathly silence. As you collapse against the stone wall, you realize that your mission has failed. Troubled thoughts of Garlind, Max, and Tym confuse you. *Is Lindy really dead?* you wonder. *Was he ever really here, or was it just another of Treg's illusions? Was Tym the thief who deceived Lindy in Skipton?* The questions swirl in your mind as you grow weaker with the passing days. Your last thoughts before you drift into unconsciousness are confused memories of Max's gentle words, which touched your soul.

THE END

Max's curiosity makes you feel uncomfortable. Old Nysla's warning rings in your ears.

"There's really nothing more to tell, Max," you lie. "I'm just another adventurer here on this island for the same reason as you and Tym—to find Treg's treasure!"

"No, Licia. You'll have to do better than that," Max insists. "I saw your sword glow."

"My sword is special," you admit, "but only because I bought it from an old brownie. I was as surprised as you when the naga retreated."

"All right, Licia. If you want to remain mysterious, go right ahead. You don't have to trust me," Max says stiffly.

"It doesn't have anything to do with you, Max! Please believe me," you cry, noting the hurt tone in his voice. "After Treg is defeated, we can get to know each other better." Max shrugs, then turns toward the stone steps.

"Well, come on," he calls coolly. "Let's get on with it."

Sighing, you slide Avenger into its scabbard and bound up the stairs after the tall scholar.

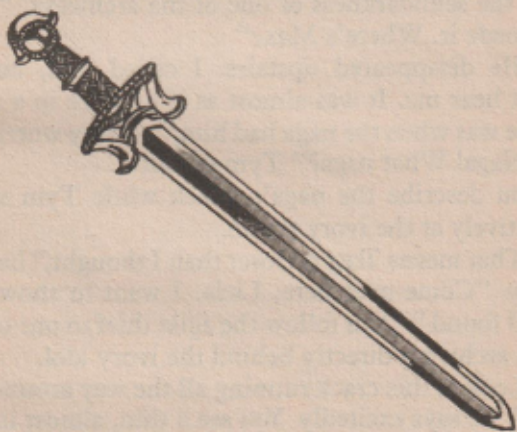
The steps curve to the left, past a level landing with a narrow corridor leading to the right. Max pays no attention to the corridor when he reaches the landing. He seems to be in a daze, staring forward glassily. He walks up the spiraling steps, out of your sight.

When you arrive at the landing, you stare curiously down the narrow corridor but see nothing. Suddenly a small tapping sound reaches your ears. Your hand slips to Avenger's jeweled hilt.

"Max!" you call. "Come back! There's something down here!"

You wait for a moment or two, but the scholar does not respond. The silence of the stairwell grows ominous. You are torn between following Max upstairs and investigating the tapping sound down the narrow corridor. Just as you start moving toward the steps, a heavy scraping noise in the corridor startles you.

Pulling your father's enchanted sword from its scabbard, you step forward cautiously into the dark passage. Avenger's green aura is your only light. The narrow passage twists and turns. Then you finally see a bright glow in the distance.



The corridor opens abruptly into some kind of ceremonial alcove. It is a round arena, walled with false archways chiseled into the black volcanic rock. The only opening is the one in which you stand. Lighted torches are arranged in pairs outside each of the arch-

ways. In the center of the circular alcove, there is a large ivory statue of a strange monster with six arms and two grotesque heads. A pair of ritual lamps cast soft light on the two ugly faces. The dancing shadows seem to make the monster wave its many arms, a sight that chills your blood.

You move closer to the idol, trying to locate the source of the tapping and scraping sounds. Out of the corner of your eye, you glimpse a sudden movement on the opposite side of the statue. Brandishing Avenger's glowing blade, you leap behind the ivory sculpture.

"Relax, it's me!" exclaims a familiar voice from the shadows. Tym's well-proportioned figure emerges from the semidarkness of one of the archways. "I see you made it. Where's Max?"

"He disappeared upstairs. I called him, but he didn't hear me. It was almost as if he were in a daze, like he was when the naga had him," you say worriedly.

"Naga! What naga?" Tym exclaims.

You describe the naga's attack while Tym stares reflectively at the ivory statue.

"That means Treg is closer than I thought," he says finally. "Come over here, Licia. I want to show you what I found." You follow the agile thief to one of the blank archways directly behind the ivory idol.

"Look at this crack running all the way around the arch," he says excitedly. You see a thin, almost invisible crack, hardly wide enough to insert a knife blade.

"Stand here," Tym instructs.

Tym strides quickly to the idol and presses firmly on one of the lower arms. You hear a muffled click inside the wall. The young thief walks past you to the archway and pushes at the smooth surface.

The stone wall immediately revolves on a center hinge, revealing a dark opening. Tym motions for you to follow and steps into the darkness beyond the secret door. As soon as you clear the archway, the heavy stone panel swings shut, making the scraping sound you heard in the corridor.

The darkness is thick around you. Your Ring of Protection glows brightly. By its reddish aura, you see a pair of unlit torches on the wall.

Please turn to page 133.

Tym's gentle hands draw you willingly against his wet chest. You press your lips to his, closing your eyes in the magic of your first kiss. Tym's damp, powerful arms wrap around your trembling body, holding you securely with their wonderful strength. The young thief's lips are soft and warm as they move against yours. For a timeless moment, nothing seems to exist but the exciting touch of his hands and mouth.

You are so lost in the surprising tenderness of this powerful man that you do not notice his arms relaxing. Very gently, Tym places his hands firmly on your shoulders and pushes you away. Opening your eyes, you see a puzzled expression on his charming face.

"What is it? What's the matter?" you whisper.

"You're only a girl," he mutters. "Is this the first time you've ever kissed a man? Come on, tell me the truth!"

"Well, what if it is?" you cry, mortified. "Is that a crime? Did I do something wrong?" Tears of embarrassment begin to run down your cheeks.

"No, no!" Tym protests earnestly. "I just thought that you and Max . . . well . . . you know."

"No, I don't know!" you exclaim angrily. "Why don't you tell me what you mean!"

"Oh, come on, Licia! You know what I thought. The way that you and Max have been looking at each other, holding hands in the moonlight, I . . ."

"You thought Max and I were lovers!" you interrupt fiercely. "If that's what you thought, then why did you kiss me? Did you think it would be all right as long as Max and I had already. . ."

"Now wait a minute!" Tym interjects. "I didn't kiss you, you kissed me!"

"Well, I hope you enjoyed it, sir, because it was the last time!" You jump to your feet. He scrambles up, too, laughing.

"Hey, that's no way to talk to somebody you just saved from a hungry python!" he jokes.

"What are you laughing at, you . . . you . . . THIEF?! You're the most conceited, arrogant, selfish man I've ever met!"

Tym smiles mischievously. "I love your face when you're angry. It's really beautiful," he grins. "All red and blotchy . . .!" His sarcasm just adds to your exasperation.

"Of all the nice men in the world I might have chosen for my first kiss, it had to be you! You can bet I won't forget it for a long, long time!"

"Neither will I, Licia," Tym says quickly. "It was the most wonderful kiss I've ever had in my life." The sudden change in Tym's tone of voice and his serious expression stun you. You want to retort but can't think of anything to say.

"Take a good look at yourself, Licia," Tym says. "You're a very beautiful, exciting woman. The way you behave would make anyone think that you've been around a lot of men! You act like a man and fight like a man. Yet you look like a lovely princess. A girl like you doesn't just go on this kind of dangerous mission for fun. That sword of yours is no stranger to battle, just as that armor would be the envy of any fighter. Who are you, Licia? Why are you risking your life this way?"

Tym's questions catch you off guard. His sudden seriousness has confused you. You want with all your heart to have him as a friend. You enjoy this feeling of warmth and excitement. The memory of his lips on

yours adds to your confusion. As you try to decide how to respond to his questions, you remember Nysla's parting words:

"Don't trust anything or anybody on that cursed island. Nothing will be what it seems to be!"

*If you decide to ignore Nysla's warning
and reveal your true identity to Tym,
turn to page 132.*

*If you believe that you cannot trust Tym
and want to keep your secret, turn to page 127.*

The thief steps silently into the damp blackness of the cavern. Suddenly the glare of Tym's torch is magnified. Hundreds of torches light up inside the small entry chamber! The glint of armor surrounds you! Terrified, you draw Avenger and raise the humming blade above your head. Then Tym's coarse laughter echoes in the cavern beyond.

"Haven't you ever seen a mirror before?" he jokes. "Now you have—several hundred of them!"

A quick glance tells you what Tym means. The walls are made of black volcanic glass. They reflect your armor and Tym's torch from many different angles. Everywhere you look, you see Tym's broad grin and your own embarrassed frown as you threaten your own reflection with Avenger's glowing blade.

"If you're through admiring yourself, let's search this place for an entrance to Treg's castle," Tym says, laughing. Before you can reply, a strange splashing sound comes from the far end of the cave.

"Shh!" warns Tym. "Hold the torch and wait here!" The master thief melts easily into the darkness toward the rear. You remain alone in the center of the chamber with the torch and your enchanted sword in your hands. The cavern is deathly quiet for long minutes. You stand motionless, scarcely breathing, and strain to hear Tym's footsteps.

A sudden loud splash is accompanied by Tym's frantic scream. "Help, Licia!" It's got my leg! I'm drowning!"

Racing toward a furious splashing sound, you see a large pool of water at the rear of the cave. Its surface churns and froths in the torchlight. A massive object rolls over and over in the pool. You catch a glimpse of

Tym's leather clothes and sandy hair, almost completely covered by the giant coils of a monstrous python!

The snake's hide is a glistening mixture of brown, gold, and green, rippling with muscles of iron as it tries to crush Tym in its giant coils. The thief's eyes are wildly desperate as his dagger flashes in the light of your torch. The dagger barely scratches the writhing beast's tough scales.

You reach the edge of the pool just as the python rears its smooth, narrow head to bite the helpless thief. The massive jaws part to reveal rows of jagged teeth. In a flash of movement, you leap into the shallow pool and swing Avenger with a mighty slash. The enchanted sword's edge, sharper than any razor, slices through the scaly hide. Your strike is so fast and sure that the python's severed head remains on its sinister neck for an instant before toppling into the churning, bloody water.

The thick coils convulse, loosening their hold on Tym. The thief stumbles and crawls toward the edge of the pool, only to collapse face down in the murky water.

You rush to him, ignoring the convulsions of the dying monster. Grabbing the strap of his knapsack, you pull Tym's body from the water and turn him onto his back. Shoving the pack to one side, you wedge the torch into a crevice and pump quickly on the thief's sturdy body. He coughs and you turn him on his side. Then his chest begins to heave, emptying his lungs of water. Tym's eyes flutter open with a desperate look. He rolls over in alarm. When he sees your face close to his own, he relaxes and grins weakly.

You wipe the water from his forehead with your hand.

"Are you all right?" you ask gently.

"I saw that sword stroke, Licia! You really know how to use a blade. That was a hungry rock python and you spoiled his lunch."

Tym's boyish smile and laughing eyes make your heart beat rapidly.

"You would have given him indigestion, anyway," you retort.

Tym's expression changes slightly. His large, gentle hands reach for your shoulders. He pulls you across his chest toward his face. Tym's strength and warmth, combined with his boyish charm, make you want to kiss him. Yet you know that he will let you go if you ask. His gentle touch, despite his great strength, is comforting and does not threaten you.

But in the back of your mind, there are lingering doubts about Tym. You recall the throbbing of your ring after your fight in Skipton and his hostility toward you. You know that you can decide whether or not to kiss this handsome, rude thief. It is your decision.

If you decide to kiss Tym, turn to page 116.

*If you choose not to kiss the thief,
turn to page 128.*

Something in Tym's confident grin makes you feel safe. Staring first at the rope bridge and then at the curious white boulder, you decide to go with the athletic young thief.

"I think Tym has the right idea, Max," you tell the disappointed scholar. "The bridge is probably a trap. Tym can scout the waterfall first and let us know what's up there. If he finds something, we can follow him; if not, we can do it your way."

Max's dark face flushes with anger beneath his heavy tan and beard. "You're making a big mistake, Licia! I demand that you come with me!"

The scholar's manner angers you, and you shake a gloved finger in his reddening face.

"You can't demand anything from me!" you storm. "We're equal partners here, and my choice is to follow Tym's plan. You can do whatever you want to do, although it would be foolish to separate in the shadow of Treg's citadel. But if that's what you want, then go ahead!"

Max's dark lips curl in an angry sneer. "I'm not a fool!" he exclaims. "And you'll regret your words, both of you. I wouldn't go through that waterfall with you two for all of Treg's wealth!" The enraged scholar turns away and splashes across the shallow river toward the mysterious boulder.

"Come on, Licia," Tym calls. "He'll cool off and follow us. We'll leave the rope dangling for him. He's just jealous."

"Jealous?" you cry. "Why should he be jealous?"

"Hey, haven't you paid any attention to the way he stares whenever you and I are together? He can barely keep his eyes inside his skull everytime I say anything

to you. It's so bad I sometimes think twice before turning my back on him! Are you blind? Or just naive?"

The thief's words hit you like a slap. Max's strange behavior suddenly becomes more meaningful. The scholar's curious mood changes have worried you. The sudden shifts from gentle touches and loving words to outbursts of temper might be explained as jealousy! The thought that such an exciting, handsome man could be so attracted to you that he would be jealous is a completely new experience. In a way, you are flattered by the notion, but you also feel uncomfortable that Max is so possessive. *Tym's right, you think. I am naive about men!*

"So you're beginning to understand," says Tym. "Good! Maybe we can forget about romance for a while and get on with our business." Without waiting for you to reply, he heads for the shallow stream.

Watching the sturdily built young thief leaping gracefully from rock to rock over the sparkling water, you wonder if Tym could ever be jealous. The boyish thief's casual attitude toward you is sometimes friendly, but it also seems conceited and gruff. *He has no sensitivity at all, you say to yourself. He wouldn't understand romantic feelings for anyone because he's too much in love with himself!*

You turn to see where Max is on the cliff, but he has disappeared! The strange white boulder is the only contrast against the black wall. *I guess he really did find a cave or something by that rock, you think, just before splashing across the river to join Tym.*

When you reach the other side, Tym is already examining the sheer wall of glassy stone for footholds. Its moist surface is like a smooth ebony mirror reflect-

ing Tym's face with its look of intense concentration. An occasional "ah" or "umm" is all you hear him say. Finally he steps backward and looks slowly up the black wall.

"Watch me," Tym grins.

He takes off his leather boots and puts them in his pack. Barefoot, he flattens himself against the sheer face of the cliff and reaches up as high as he can with one hand. In seconds, his practiced fingers have lodged themselves in some invisible crevice. With amazing strength, the athletic young thief pulls himself up with one hand until his bare toes can grasp the fissure. Tym moves quickly and smoothly up the cliff. You stare in fascination at his husky body climbing the wall.

The agile thief clammers onto the ledge by the waterfall and inches along it toward the cascading white water. It looks like he vanishes into the falling torrent, but when he reappears less than a minute later, his clothes and hair are dry.

"There's a cave up here!" he yells. "A big one! Get ready to tie this line around your waist!"

Tym removes a short metal spike and hammer from his pack. With only a few powerful taps, he knocks the spike into the rock of the ledge where he is standing. Quickly and deftly, he ties the slender cord to the spike and drops it to your waiting hands.

"Go on! Tie it around your waist!" Tym shouts, and he watches while you knot the thin line several times. "Now, hold onto it with both hands!" he yells.

The cord is so slender you doubt if it will support your full weight. To your surprise, you start to rise lightly and smoothly. The cord molds itself to your body so that it does not cut into your waist. You

are even more astonished to see that Tym is not pulling the rope! It lifts you effortlessly into the air. When you reach the ledge, the magical rope deposits you gently on the narrow path. As soon as your feet touch the ledge, the cord unties itself from your waist and coils around the metal spike.

Tym laughs at your astonished face. "Master thieves often have very special equipment," he explains. "This enchanted cord was a present from an old friend—an elven thief who also dabbled a bit in magic. Let's check this cave for a way into the tower," he adds. "It seems that Max has already found an entrance, so we won't need to leave him the rope."

The thief's large hand is surprisingly gentle as he grasps your wrist. You inch along the narrow ledge, which disappears behind the raging waterfall. You



can see a large dark opening as you squeeze between the cascading water and smooth black wall.

At the mouth of the cave, the ledge widens, becoming a level stone floor, pockmarked with small pools of water from the spray. Only a few steps from the entrance, the cave is pitch black. Tym sits on the damp stones, and pulls on his soft leather boots. He then finds a tinderbox and a small torch in his pack and lights it easily.

Please turn to page 119.

"I can't tell you what you want to know, Tym. I'm sorry. I've never met anyone like you, and I want you to be my friend. Perhaps when all of this is over, I will share my secrets with you. But right now, I'm involved in something much more important than my own immediate happiness. Please try to understand."

Tym's warm brown eyes study yours for a long moment. His face slowly softens, and you are astonished to see tears forming in the masculine eyes. His gentle hand touches your cheek tenderly, as a warm smile appears on his rugged face.

"I'll wait as long as you like, Licia. In the meantime, you've got the most devoted friend anyone ever had. There are some things you don't know about me either. When the time comes, we'll have a lot to tell each other."

He squeezes your hand reassuringly. "Now let's see if we can find a way out of this cavern into the tower." Tym turns away from you as he starts to examine the wall of the dark cave by the python's pool.

You are filled with an emotion you have never experienced before as you begin to feel a loving concern for the gentle man. In the back of your mind, you wonder what things he has to tell you, whether they are important. But your new sense of caring is so joyful that this small uncertainty is forgotten.

Please turn to page 130.

The nearness of Tym's warm lips and his gentle hands make you feel uncomfortable and comfortable at the same time. You know that you want to feel his lips caress yours. You want to stay this close to him for a long time, but your frightening experiences on Pitlic Isle are too fresh in your memory. Too many doubts have been raised about Tym. You push him away, gently but firmly.

The young thief's boyish smile fades. He relaxes his hold on your arms and lets you get to your feet. When you reach out your hand to help Tym up, he ignores it, looking at you with a puzzled expression.

"I can't figure you out!" He scowls. "You've been flirting with me since Skipton. You wanted me to kiss you! What kind of game are you playing, Licia?"

"Flirting? Why you conceited, arrogant . . . THIEF! I was friendly the only way I know how!" Tears of frustration stream down your cheeks, and your shoulders shake with rage. "I wasn't flirting! And I've never even kissed a man before . . ." you sob.

Tym's frown becomes an embarrassed, pained expression. "Hey, hey! I'm sorry, Licia. I really am. If you'll help me get my foot out of my mouth, maybe it'll start working better."

The boyish charm is back. The thief's lips curve into a sheepish smile of apology.

"Get up from the floor, Tym!" You wipe your tears away. "Quit acting as if that python hurt you. I'm surprised it thought you were tender enough to eat in the first place!" Once more you hold out your hand.

Tym accepts your help this time and rises to his feet. He puts his hands on your shoulders very tenderly and looks directly into your eyes.

"Before we go on, I want you to understand why I reacted the way I did. You're an extremely beautiful woman, Licia. You act like a fighter, yet you look like a lovely princess! What man wouldn't want to kiss you? I've never wanted a permanent attachment with a woman, because they're usually too . . . girlish. But you're an exciting, adventurous person, not just a beautiful woman! When you didn't want to kiss me, I thought you were teasing."

Tym's compliments help you understand some things about yourself. In a few words, the young thief has pinpointed the reason you could not be happy as a simple farm girl and wife. You want to be a person, and not just a woman!

"You're the first person who has ever understood me, Tym. I've never had time for a romantic relationship. I don't know what's involved. But when I do, I want it to be with someone as exciting and as strong, and especially as understanding, as you."

Tym's gentle hands pull you close for a moment, then push you away so that he can see your face.

"Just who are you, Licia? Why are you here? Where did you learn the things you know?"

Tym's barrage of questions catch you off-guard. His sudden change in manner confuses you . . . you need to trust someone, but you remember Nysla's words of warning.

*If you decide to reveal your identity to Tym,
turn to page 132.*

*If you still do not want to tell Tym
about yourself, turn to page 127.*

While Tym searches the darkest corners of the cavern, you light another torch and examine the opposite wall. You become so involved in your search that you soon lose track of time. Suddenly a loud scraping noise startles you. It came from the corner where Tym was searching, but his torch is no longer visible!

"Tym!" you whisper. "Where are you? Are you all right?"

You wait in the stillness but hear nothing. Thinking that he may be in trouble, you run to the place where you left him, only to find that he has vanished! You examine the cavern wall carefully, but there is no evidence of a struggle.

Moving toward the back of the cave, your light suddenly reveals a strange etching in the glassy black rock. It seems to be an archway carved in the solid wall, but there is no opening. The inside surface of the arch is smooth. You press your palms firmly against the rock. It moves! You are startled to see that the stone is actually a panel that swings inward on a pivot.

You find yourself in a round arena, walled with six false archways chiseled from the black volcanic rock. The only opening is an entrance to a dark corridor to your right. Lighted torches are arranged in pairs outside each of the archways.

In the center of the circular alcove is a large ivory statue of a strange creature with six arms and two grotesque heads. A pair of ritual lamps causes soft shadows to flicker over the two ugly faces. The dancing shadows seem to make the monster wave its many arms. The position of the lamps projects long shadowy replicas of the six-armed creature on each of the archways. The sight chills your blood.

"Licia!"

The hoarse whisper frightens you, and you start to pull the enchanted sword from its hilt. Then Tym's voice comes from behind the statue. "I was just coming back for you. Walk over here and see what I've found!"

You cross the room to the young thief. Tym takes your hand and leads you to one of the blank archways behind the statue.

"Now, stand here while I unlock the panel," he instructs.

Tym strides quickly to the idol and presses firmly on one of the lower arms. You hear a muffled click inside the wall. The thief quickly pushes on the smooth surface. Just as you discovered in the cavern, the archway opens, revealing a dark recess through the secret doorway. Tym motions for you to follow and steps into the darkness. As soon as you clear the archway, the heavy stone panel swings shut, making the scraping sound you heard before.

The darkness is thick around you. The Ring of Protection glows brightly. In its reddish aura, you see a pair of unlit torches on the wall.

Please turn to page 133.

Tym's understanding and his gentleness convince you you can trust him. "I want you for my friend . . ." you begin, but Tym stops you with a gentle finger on your lips.

His warm brown eyes study yours for a long moment. His face slowly softens, and you understand why you trust him when you see tears forming in his masculine eyes.

"No, Licia, I won't let you tell me," he replies softly. "We have many dangers to face before either of us is finished here in Treg's tower. Your trust in me might hurt you. There are so many things we must learn about each other, Licia, but there'll be a better time for us. You have my solemn word! As for friendship, you already have it, and it will never be destroyed."

His hand squeezes yours reassuringly. "Come on and help me find a way into the tower," Tym says with a cheerful smile.

As you watch him examine the walls of the cavern by the python pool, you are filled with an emotion you have never experienced. For the first time in your life, you have met someone who loves you. You may be falling in love as well. In the back of your mind, you wonder what things you have to 'learn' about Tym, but your new sense of caring is so joyful that this small uncertainty is forgotten.

Please turn to page 130.

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Tym's hands fumble in his pack for a tinderbox to light one of the two torches by the secret panel. As a spark finally flares into a flame, the glint of gold, silver, and gems dazzles your eyes. You have found the sorcerer's treasure room!

The chamber is crowded with chests, urns, and boxes overflowing with the booty of Treg's evil past. Chests are crammed with gold and silver coins, some spilling to the dusty floor. Weapons with jeweled hilts and golden sculptures lie in untidy heaps.

"We've found it, Licia! Treg's hidden treasure chamber!" exclaims Tym. "It looks as if everything he's ever stolen is piled in here!" The thief begins examining each of the containers, pausing often to identify some particular piece of jewelry.

"The Moonstar of Parnesh—stolen from the Archbishop's private collection twenty years ago! And here is the golden scepter of Prince Liam!" he exclaims. "Liam lost the kingdom when Treg stole the scepter and put his evil brother on the throne. Imagine what will happen when Liam recovers it!"

While Tym studies each of the valuable pieces, you are busy looking for something in particular—the treasure stolen from your family. You can remember a few of the most beautiful items from your childhood. One of these was a golden cobra, reared to strike, its hood flared and ruby eyes shining. You and Garlind played with it, one chasing the other in pretended terror, until Hildric would catch you and laughingly scold you both.

"Licia, look at this!" Tym's excited whisper interrupts the pleasant memory. He stands near the back wall of the secret cubicle, holding a curious object. It is

a large crystal key, meticulously carved from a beautiful, clear, and translucent gemstone.

"What is it?" you ask, crossing the room to examine the strange object.

"The Diamond Key of Croesus!" he whispers breathlessly. "I've heard of it, but only in legends. It is supposed to unlock the hidden treasure chambers of King Croesus, the richest monarch of the ancient world! This key is worth more gold than you see in this entire room!"

Tym is too enchanted with the key to notice that your eyes have shifted from his hands to his feet. On the dusty floor is a golden cobra with its hooded head raised as if to strike the thief's leg! It seems to guard a small chest of silver coins.

When Tym moves, you approach the open chest. Quickly you notice something strange—the thin layer of dust covering everything else in the chamber is missing from the silver coins!

You thrust your hands casually into the chest, as if you enjoy the feel of the silver. Tym looks up and smiles at you.

Your probing fingers touch something soft at the bottom of the small chest. While Tym's back is turned, you extract a little leather-bound notebook from beneath the coins. Your heart skips a beat when you recognize your family crest embossed upon the cracked leather cover. It is Hildric's deed-book! With this book, your father can reclaim all his property stolen by Treg with forged deeds.

As you thumb through the yellowed pages, a thin sheet of paper falls to the dusty floor beside the golden coils of the cobra. In the dim torchlight, you recog-

nize Garlind's bold handwriting! Glancing furtively at Tym's leather-clad back, you stuff the deed-book into your breastplate and stoop to retrieve the message from your brother. It is a page from Garlind's journal—proof that your brother found the deed-book and placed it in the chest!



You read the hastily scrawled note. It is the last entry in Garlind's diary. He is describing his discovery of some unknown partner's treachery:

I should have known that Treg would disguise himself as a thief! My "friend," the thief from Skipton, knows the role so well! My resistance is almost gone. His sorcery is stronger than I imagined. I must hide Father's documents before Treg manages to steal my mind.

"What are you reading?" Tym's murmur breaks into your confused thoughts as you finish reading Garlind's message. The thief's curious eyes stare at the paper in your hands. Your brother's mention of the "thief from Skipton" is etched in your brain. Your mind races, remembering the throbbing ring, Tym's hostility, his interest in your weapons and armor, the magical rope, Max's suspicions of the young thief. It all seems to add up to the frightening conclusion that Tym and Garlind's thief are one and the same—Treg!

"Answer me, Licia! What is it? What's the matter?" Tym's concerned voice cuts like a knife through your ugly thoughts. You recall the growing friendliness, his gentle warmth, the boyish smile, and his great courage. Tym has become much more than just a business partner to you. You have grown to like him and his brash manner and to rely on his quiet strength—and straightforward honesty.

You are torn between your suspicions and the pleasant feelings you have whenever Tym is near. You must act quickly. If Tym is Treg in disguise, you should attack immediately, while surprise is on your side. But what if he is not the sorcerer?

If you want to confront Tym with the paper from Garlind's diary, turn to page 141.

If you are certain that Tym is Treg in disguise and want to attack him, turn to page 137.

But if you would rather try to find Max before making your decision, turn to page 144.

Garlind's description of the unknown thief's treachery has filled your mind with doubts about Tym. All of the friendly words, his warmth and understanding, even the boyish charm which attracted you so completely, everything about him was a lie! In your troubled mind, the image of Treg from your nightmare is projected to the young thief.

The ugly bald head with its hollow eyes and rotten teeth replace Tym's laughing face. The evil sorcerer, dressed in Tym's clothes, is right before you in the treasure room, surrounded by the stolen booty of his criminal past. Your father's face with the sightless eyes floats before you. "Kill him!" Hildric commands.

In a violent rage, you rush toward the monstrous apparition and swing the enchanted blade only once. The leather-clad body collapses to the floor. You stand over the fallen man, your sword ready to end any trickery. Suddenly, the horrible features begin to fade. Tym's youthful face returns—the victim of your hatred.

The last clear thought you have is of Tym's gentle strength and of the love that is now lost forever. Soon, Treg's evil power will enslave you for the rest of your tormented life.

THE END

Tym's relaxed stance and sincere expression are too real to be part of a disguise, no matter how clever.

"Help me, Tym," you sob. "Please help me!"

The thief pulls you close. One of his hands presses your cheek to his leather shirt while the other strokes your back.

"We'll find your brother and get out of here with your father's documents, Licia," he whispers. "Let's try to find Max first so that he can help us. We must move quickly before Treg realizes we've found his treasure. Just in case we have to make a fast exit, I'm taking the diamond key and the scepter with me now. You should do the same thing—take whatever you want."

"I already have the most important things," you tell Tym, patting your breastplate where Hildric's deed-book is hidden. "The deed-book and this cobra." You stuff the golden serpent into your knapsack.

"Here, have a present for yourself." Tym smiles and hands you the large yellow sapphire he called the Moonstar. "The Archbishop has been dead for years, without leaving any heirs. I don't think anyone but Treg will object to the Moonstar's new owner."

"How about the scepter?" you ask. "Won't Prince Liam object to its new owner?"

"Not at all," Tym responds lightly, "especially since his nephew is returning it to him. Liam will be crowned king as soon as the scepter is in his hands. The Royal Guard will obey the man who wields the sacred emblem of office."

"You said 'nephew'?"

"My mother is Princess Lara," Tym replies softly. "And Liam has no children."

"But that makes you—"

"Next in line to the throne? Yes, but only if we manage to smuggle the scepter back to my Uncle Liam," says Tym. "I'd also like to stop Treg for good."

"Is Tym your real name?" you ask.

The thief-prince smiles warmly. "It's a childhood nickname, short for 'Tymon,'" he explains. "Oh, Licia, I've wanted to tell you for so long, but I was worried about Max. He can worm his way into your confidence more quickly than you realize. Besides, the less you knew about me, the less danger you were in. Treg will stop at nothing to prevent Liam from getting this scepter."

"'King Tymon'! I like that." You smile. "I bet you'll be a good king."

"Some people would say that any good thief would make a fine king," he responds. "I rather like the sound of 'Queen Licia'—how about you?"

It takes a moment for the meaning of Tym's words to hit you. The charming young thief grins at you with a twinkle in his eye, waiting for your response.

"If that's a m-marriage proposal," you stammer, "I'll give you my answer after we're off this island."

"All right," Tym agrees with a husky laugh. He draws you close to his muscular chest and smiles at your upturned face. Tym's lips touch yours. The riches of Treg's treasure room fade from your mind as you lose yourself in the magic of Tym's embrace.

A scraping sound jerks you both out of your rapturous moment. A tall warrior in full battle gear steps through the archway as the stone wall closes behind him. Fierce blue eyes glare in the torchlight. With a shield in one hand and a cruel battle-axe in the other, the warrior crouches and begins to stalk you.

"Garlind!" you scream. "It's me! It's Licia!"

Your brother's stern expression never changes. His glassy, trance-like stare tells you that he is being controlled by Treg's evil powers.

Tym pushes you to one side and draws his shortsword.

"Don't, Tym!" you cry. "You're no match for him, especially without a shield!"

"Don't worry, Licia. But I must wound him slightly to break the spell that binds him to Treg."

The thief leaps forward. In a blur of motion, he is behind Garlind and swings the shortsword against your brother's leg, which is protected by a chain-mail legging. Tym's sword bites into the metal but is unable to penetrate its tightly woven links. Garlind's dulled reflexes cause him to turn too slowly to meet Tym's charge. The thief's sword descends. Garlind manages to raise his shield to ward off the blow.

"Run, Licia!" Tym shouts. "I'll hold him off until you can find Max and bring him here to help. He must be in the tower."

Your Ring of Protection throbs and burns your finger. You glance at its pulsing glow and wonder what evil force is being directed toward you. You hesitate to leave your brother alone with Tym, afraid of a fight to the death between the brother you love and the man who is becoming so important to you.

If you decide to stay and try to help Tym handle your brother, turn to page 147.

If you want to do as Tym suggests and find Max, run to the tower and turn to page 144.

"This shred of paper is the last page of my brother's diary," you say coldly. "I found it in this chest, where he hid it three years ago, before he disappeared. Read it yourself, thief!"

You thrust the message toward Tym, keeping your hand on Avenger's tingling hilt. The young thief looks at your steady hand, then at your challenging stare, before reaching for the paper. He reads it silently, his expression never changing.

"Well, thief?" you demand. "What do you think of my brother's last message?" Tym stares at your face as if he does not understand what you mean. A strange, puzzled look clouds his features.

"I think your brother was a brave man," he replies, "and I wonder if he found your father's documents."

"That's not what I'm asking you!" you exclaim hotly.

"I know what you're asking," Tym says softly and sadly. "If you think I'm Treg, why don't you kill me?"

"Because I want to hear your explanation first," you answer.

"But I don't have anything to explain, Licia! I'm a thief, a good one, too. There are some things about me I can't reveal, not just yet, anyway, but they have nothing to do with you or your brother. I have never even seen Treg, but I know of his evil skills. He can assume any disguise he chooses, so long as his victim has fear in his—or her—heart. He also can use hatred, Licia, turning it back upon you."

Tym's eyes soften as he looks at you with great tenderness.

"You are a wonderful, courageous woman," he continues, "who has spent too much of her life hating an

evil man. With so much hatred in your heart, it's hard for love and trust to grow. If you will let me love you, we might discover a way to end Treg's malicious tyranny. But first, you'll have to trust me, Licia."

Tym's sincere voice and warm, loving expression make you want to rush into his strong arms and stay there until all of Treg's sorcery has ended. But you know that this is impossible. Your mission depends upon Tym. If he *is* Treg in disguise, trusting him will mean the end of all hope for your father to regain his lands and his sight. But if Tym is not the sorcerer, you must have his help to defeat the powerful enemy.

If you choose to trust Tym, turn to page 138.

*If you decide that you cannot trust Tym,
turn to page 143.*

The thief's words sound sincere, but you are too frightened to drop your guard.

"I can't trust anything or anyone except myself, Tym," you say, willing him to understand.

Tym points his finger at the treasures. "This wealth was stolen from people just like your family, Licia, including mine. I want to settle a few things with Treg as much as you do. Trust me and let me help you."

The thief takes a sudden step toward you. In a reflex of fright, you draw your father's sword from its scabbard and point it at Tym.

"Don't come any closer, Tym!" You stoop quickly to grab the golden cobra from the dusty floor. "This cobra was a toy of mine when I was a small child. Garlind left it by this chest to show me where the deed-book was hidden. I have it now, and that's all I need to give my father back his stolen lands. I won't let anything stop me! I want to trust you, Tym, but I can't!"

Before Tym can react, you throw yourself against the hidden panel. The stone opens easily. You race past the ivory statue into the corridor.

Just as you reach the staircase, the sound of heavy footsteps below you warns that someone is coming up the stairs. You dart up the winding steps far enough to hide in the darkness above the lighted alcove.

Within seconds, you see a tall, armored figure in the torchlight on the landing of the alcove. It's Garlind! Your brother moves as if he were sleepwalking. Without glancing in your direction, he enters the alcove beyond your view. You hear the massive stone slab swing open and know that Garlind is now in the treasure chamber with Tym—or Treg!

You need help. You must try to find Max!

Bounding up the stairs, you pass heavy wooden doors spaced along the spiraling stone stairwell. All of them are closed and locked.

"Max! Max!" you call. "Can you hear me? Where are you?"

The sound of a scraping door makes you stop and turn. One of the large doors you have passed opens slowly on creaking hinges. Your hand slips to Avenger's tingling hilt. Then you see Max's slender form in the doorway.

The scholar's features are totally relaxed, as if he were asleep. The dark, flashing eyes are glassy. *Treg is taking him over*, you think quickly. *I've got to keep him moving and distract him so that he can resist the sorcerer's spell.*

Max's eyes seem to brighten for a moment, then become even more clouded than before.

"Snap out of it, Max!" you shout, slapping his bearded cheek with your armored hand.

"Licia!" he mutters. "Where am I?"

"Inside Treg's castle! Tym and I have found the secret treasure room. He's there now. I need you to help me save my brother, Max! Let's go!"

"Brother? What brother?"

"My brother, Garlind. Treg has enslaved him with some kind of evil spell. I found a message from him in the treasure chamber. He wrote that he was tricked by a thief from Skipton, who was really Treg in disguise! Max, do you think it might be Tym?"

Your flood of excited words and questions confuse the dazed young man.

"Now wait a minute! Your brother is here? And you think that Tym might be Treg?" Max's voice

becomes excited, and his dark eyes flash. "Why didn't you tell me all of this sooner?"

"Because you weren't around! But there's no time to talk. We've got to get back to the treasure room before something terrible happens!"

Without waiting for Max to reply, you turn and race down the steps toward the alcove. Avenger is in your hand when you reach the bottom step. Its green aura reflects off the glossy black walls of the corridor. The sound of Max's running feet behind you is comforting as you reach the alcove and see the ivory statue of the six-armed monster. Max arrives just in time to watch you pull the polished arm, unlocking the hidden door.

"Be ready, Max. I can hear them," you whisper. From behind the stone panel, you hear a muffled sound of clashing metal. You press your armored body against the wall. It swings open on the center hinge, and you run into the room. Max manages to follow you into the treasure chamber before the thick stone wall swings back into place.

The torchlight flickers on the gleaming metal and jewels. For a long moment, you stand in the archway, paralyzed with fear and shock. Garlind is on his back, unconscious. His shield and axe lie several feet away on the floor. His leather-clad opponent stands over him, a shortsword pointing at your brother's bare throat.

But instead of Tym's freckled, boyish face, Garlind's victor has a bald head, sunken eyes, and hollow cheeks. The cadaverous face reflects pure evil as it grins, baring the brown and yellow stumps of rotten teeth.

The loathsome creature, dressed in Tym's leather

clothes, has not seen you enter the secret chamber. You could strike the unarmored figure from behind and save your brother's life. Your Ring of Protection is painfully hot, and it has grown so bright that a reddish aura blankets your shining body.

Max's voice whispers in your ear. "You were right, Licia! Tym is Treg! Kill him before he sees us!"

Max's words force you to shake the pleasant memories of Tym's laughing face from your mind. The thought that you have ever touched that horrible creature makes you shudder.

The evil face looming over your helpless brother fills you with hatred. Only a vague memory of something your father said before you left prevents you from attacking the ancient sorcerer. Hildric warned you about letting hatred control your actions. You have always faced an opponent fairly, face-to-face, and feel strange about striking even this monster without warning. Yet you know that Treg is no ordinary enemy and could probably destroy you in a fair fight.

"Quickly, Licia! Don't try to face him—you'll only lose!" Max whispers.

Your arms and legs tremble with fury as you recall Tym's warmth and loving words, his gentle strength and smiling face. *All lies!* you scream inside your brain. You must act or it will be too late.

*If you want to attack from the rear,
before he can see you, turn to page 153.*

*If you decide to warn him and face him,
turn to page 148.*

You can't leave Tym and Garlind! You must try to stop their fight. Rushing to them, you use your shield to push Tym away from your brother. Then you point Avenger's glowing blade at Garlind's dulled eyes.

"Listen to me, Lindy! This is Licia! And this sword is Father's Avenger! When I touch your face with it, you will remember me, and you will fight against Treg's control of your mind!"

Garlind's expression starts to quiver. You know that something inside of him has started to resist Treg's power already. You press the flat blade of the enchanted sword against your brother's cheek. His eyes close, and his entire body begins to shake.

"Who am I, Lindy? Tell me my name!" you shout. Garlind's mouth opens to speak, but he only moans.

"It's Licia! Your sister! I'm your sister!"

Garlind's whole body suddenly grows rigid. Avenger's greenish glow brightens. Garlind's body jerks twice and then relaxes. Your brother slips into unconsciousness, but his breathing is soft and regular.

"You did it, Licia!" Tym exclaims, coming to embrace you. "You've broken the spell!" Your new friend's arms wrap around your exhausted body, holding you tightly and securely.

Please turn to page 150.

The loathsome creature about to kill your brother has already cost your father his estate and his sight. The thought enrages you, and you want to slash at the evil sorcerer until his reign of terror is ended.

Only the combination of your father's wisdom and the Ring of Protection gives you the strength to control your fury. The night you left the cottage, Hildric warned you that "a fighter who enters battle in hatred has already lost." The comforting warmth of your magic ring reminds you of your mission and insulates you from Treg's evil presence.

"Treg!" you shout, brandishing Avenger's humming blade. "Fight someone more challenging—or are you afraid of a girl?"

The sorcerer's face looks up from Garlind's unconscious body and stares at you, startled.

"Licia! What's wrong with you?" he demands. But the familiar husky voice is Tym's!

The red aura of your magical ring becomes even brighter, causing you to see the leather-clad figure through a crimson haze. The aura works like a filter, screening out distorting evil illusions. Through the red haze, the sorcerer's horrible features fade, leaving only Tym's pleasant boyish face at its core.

Immediately, you realize that you were about to attack your partner because of an illusion created by Treg!

Rushing to Tym's side, you discover that your view of the young thief is now normal and clear. Tym wraps his arms around you, whispering words of comfort.

"It's all right. We're together now," he says.

Please turn to page 150.

Treg's hideous sneer tells you that his word cannot be trusted. He plans to use Tym's feelings for you to make the thief give up the scepter of Liam. No matter what the risk may be to you or your family, you will never allow Tym to let the kingdom remain in the hands of the evil sorcerer.

With a terrible war cry, you leap toward the ugly illusionist. Avenger's humming edge aims for the sorcerer's withered neck.

Treg's hand waves in front of your enchanted sword, sending a strange yellow barrier to block the blade. The sorcerer's movement allows Tym an opportunity to strike.

Please turn to page 157.

"What a touching pair of thieves!" The chilling, cracked voice comes from the archway.

You tear yourself from Tym's warm embrace and twist around to face the sinister speaker. Just inside the secret doorway, Max's thin figure stands, draped in the scarlet cloak. But, instead of Max's beautiful features, you are staring into the dark, corpse-like sockets of Treg's cadaverous face!

Once more, your ring's protective aura flares and spreads over your eyes, but this time the evil features do not fade! The cruel hairless head, with its gaunt and deathly face, juts like a rotten fruit on an ancient, withered stalk from the scholar's spotless silk shirt. The scarlet plush cap is perched obscenely on the ghostly white scalp. The evil sorcerer grins maliciously, displaying the ugly blackened stumps of his decayed teeth.

"Ah! I see that your ring has finally allowed you to penetrate my disguise, Licia," Treg croaks. "'Max' was a successful illusion for you, wasn't it, my dear? I mean you did enjoy some of his romantic qualities?"

"Monster!" you whisper, leaping forward with a vicious swing of Avenger's humming blade. Just as the razor edge is about to hit Treg's motionless body, the sorcerer simply vanishes.

"It's useless, Licia," the thief mutters. "His sorcery is too powerful to allow such a simple attack."

"Listen to your friend, Licia," Treg advises, returning to view. "He knows much more about these things than you do. Prince Tymon here is a student of many things, aren't you, 'Tym?' In case he hasn't told you yet, our 'thief' is the only heir to Liam's throne, Licia. Liam cannot rule without the sacred scepter which his

nephew now carries in his pack. Ask him if he will sacrifice the scepter of Liam for you and your father!"

"What do you mean?" you demand.

"You may go and take that little book with you. I give you your property, your brother, and your father's sight, Licia."

At this instant, Garlind begins to moan and to regain consciousness. He sits up, staring at the curious scene in the treasure chamber. "Is that really you, Licia?" he asks in disbelief.

"Just rest, Lindy," you urge. "We're about to leave this place."

"Not before your friend gives me the scepter, daughter of Hildric!" Treg demands. "If he refuses, or if you attack me, I shall be forced to take more drastic action. So, you see, Licia, it's all in the hands of your friend, our princely thief!"

Tym steps closer to you and whispers. "It sounds to me as if Treg is afraid of the scepter. This may be our chance to stop his evil forever. If you're willing to try, we can fight him together! You have your father's magic sword and I have the scepter."

"But what happens if we fail, Tym?" you ask softly. "If we do as he says and give him the scepter, we can leave with our lives and my father will be cured of his blindness. We can even reclaim our lands!"

"Don't believe him, Licia! He'll never let us go if he gets the scepter!"

"You're wrong, thief!" shouts the sorcerer. "I have no further need of Lord Hildric's property. You may even keep the baubles you have stolen—the Diamond Key and the Moonstar! Never think you can hide such things from me in my own house! You see, Licia? Your

friend is unwilling to sacrifice the throne for you. He's as greedy as I am."

"He's lying, Licia! I'll let you decide," Tym says softly. "I love you, and I want you to be happy. If you want to risk believing this evil monster, I'll give him the scepter. But if you decide to fight him, I think we can win."

Tym's willingness to give Treg the scepter in order to let you leave is the most touching thing anyone has ever done for you. You realize that Tym's words of love are true, and that he is forfeiting a kingdom for you.

You must trust Treg to keep his word about your father's blindness. If you try to attack him, as Tym suggests, you may lose everything . . . or you might end Treg's evil sorcery forever.

"I'm growing impatient!" Treg growls. "Either give me the scepter or prepare to die!"

*If you want to ask Tym to give Treg
the scepter, turn to page 155.*

*If you think you can risk another attack on Treg,
turn to page 149.*

Your fury grows until you cannot control it. The image of the loathsome sorcerer in the body of someone you love is overwhelming. *This is the evil creature who blinded my father, stole his lands, and will kill my brother unless I stop him!* you think.

In a burst of rage, you leap across the small room and thrust the enchanted sword with all your strength. Avenger's glowing blade strikes the sorcerer's back just above the belt. Treg twists toward you, and you see his expression of disbelief and horrified surprise.

As the leather-clad figure slips to the dusty floor, you slide your father's sword into its scabbard and stoop to see if Garlind is hurt. The familiar blue eyes flutter open and stare wildly at you.

"Garlind!" you cry. "It's Licia! Treg is dead!"

The young warrior's face shows no sign of recognition. The Ring of Protection is still hot and throbbing when you press your palm to Garlind's forehead to see if he is feverish. Your brother's hands suddenly lock around your wrists. He pushes himself to his feet, still holding you tightly.

"Let me go, Garlind! You're hurting me! I'm your sister, Licia!" you cry, but your brother pays no attention to your pleas.

"Max, help me! Garlind is still dazed and he . . ."

As you turn your head toward the scholar, your throat is suddenly paralyzed with fear. Instead of Max's beautiful eyes, you stare into the dark, corpse-like sockets of Treg's cadaverous face! The evil, hairless head, with its gaunt and deathly features, juts from the scholar's silk shirt. The plush scarlet cap is perched obscenely on the ghostly white scalp. The evil sorcerer grins at you triumphantly.

"Welcome to my household, daughter of Hildric!" he croaks in a cracked, ancient voice. "It will be so nice for Garlind to have another member of his family here."

In a flash, all of the pieces of the puzzle fall into place. The ring's warning in Skipton had not been about Tym but about Max! His handsome face was always too perfect, too flawless. The fear of the people in Skipton Then you remember.

"TYM!" you scream. With a muffled cry, you jerk your head away from Treg's ugly face and look at the body on the floor. Tym's lifeless face stares at the ceiling!

"As you can see, Licia, our friend the thief was not as fortunate as you and your brother. I suppose I should thank you for halting the burglary of my treasure chamber." The sinister voice pauses and then commands, "Look at me!"

You turn your head unwillingly toward the cruel sorcerer. As you watch in horrified amazement, Treg's features begin to fade and shift into Tym's bright, laughing smile.

"As you can see, my dear, I can be whatever you want me to be," Treg says in Tym's husky voice. "In time you will learn to enjoy living here with me."

Just as you sink into the blackness of despair and shock, you hear the sorcerer's cruel laughter echoing in the tiny treasure chamber.

THE END.

The power of Treg is stronger than you have ever imagined. You doubt that any force on earth could stop the evil sorcerer unless he permitted it.

"No, Tym," you say reluctantly, "I don't want to fight him any more. He has agreed to restore my father's sight and his lands. That's all my brother and I came here to do. Give him the scepter and let's leave this cursed island before he changes his mind."

Tym frowns. "If that's what you really want, Licia, I'll do it. But I warn you, don't trust him!"

The thief removes the scepter of Liam from his knapsack and holds the glowing rod with both hands. The boyish face is transformed by the magical scepter. He stares hypnotically and walks toward Treg, who smiles smugly.

"Thank you, Prince Tymon, for this key to your throne," says the sorcerer with his hand extended to receive the scepter. Tym stops a few feet away from Treg. "Now, don't do anything foolish," Treg warns. "Remember your beloved's wishes!" Tym looks at you sadly.

Please turn to page 156.



Suddenly the thief's face is transformed with inner strength. With a triumphant cry, he hurls the golden mace at Treg's evil head. It strikes him just above his left ear, making a dull thumping noise. The illusionist staggers. Tym leaps forward, grabs the scepter from the floor, and swings it as hard as he can against the cadaverous skull.

A bright flash of blue-white lightning blinds you. When you are able to see, Tym is standing over what is left of Treg's corpse. The bundle of dry bones dressed in Max's dapper clothes has fallen among the great treasure accumulated over the centuries by Treg's supernatural evil. The shining scepter of Liam in Tym's hand reminds you that your new friend is a royal heir. His boyish charm contradicts his regal and heroic figure as he stands astride the vanquished sorcerer.

Garlind, bewildered at all that has happened, half-heartedly rummages through the fabulous treasure that surrounds him.

Tym's smile reassures you that the risk you took to regain your family's lands, your father's sight, and the throne of Liam was worth everything. You wrap your arms around the heir to the kingdom, and you know that real love is no illusion.

THE END

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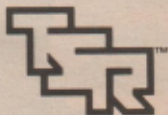
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