

Party of Five

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A Game of Po

a fantasy novel by

Vasileios Kalampakas

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Foreword from the author

I was going to write a couple of stuff about this whole series but then I decided to just let you read the damn thing. I hope you like some of it.

Best wishes for fun times, Vasileios

“The universe, children, is a vast, gloriously beautiful thing that is mostly uncaring. It’s up to us, me, and you, and the common folk as well, to breath a sense of justice into it; a balance between right and wrong. Careful not to overdo it though, cause it could tip over your heads when you least expect it to. Like an oxcart full of manure.”

– Master Sisyphus

Parcifal was standing on the docks, watching the good ship Autania as it gracefully waded through the peaceful waters of Hobb’s Bay; the wind was at her stern, her sails full. She was making good speed.

“I hope the damn thing sinks and they all drown,” said Parcifal with a deep scowl on her proud face. Behind her, the small harbor was settling into its nightly rhythm. Rowdy sailors were looking for the next tavern in line to get drunk and have a brawl, the traders were finishing up their business with shady-looking characters and the fishermen were readying their nets for the break of dawn and their next catch.

Lernea was sitting right beside her on the stony pier, her naked feet dangling in the water. She asked Parcifal with a look of tempered sadness:

“Does that mean we can’t go back?”

“No, we can’t go back Lernea,” replied Parcifal with a sigh and a shook her head. Her piercing hazel eyes were stuck gazing somewhere beyond the rosy-red horizon, fiddling with her cropped red hair.

Lernea nodded with understanding and raised an eyebrow. She noticed Parcifal had an angry, bothersome look about her and knew her timing was off. But she had to ask her anyway:

“Not ever?”

Parcifal turned her head slowly around and stabbed Lernea with a fierce look before answering coldly:

“Not as long as the Jangdrivals are in power and the Unseen Council remains in place, not while the Eleven Pillars stand and the Noble Eagles fly above the Skarlas, no.” Her tone was harsh, unerringly final.

Lernea put a finger on her lip and spent a few moments playing with a lock of her long, brown hair. She then frowned from frustration and asked her sister once more:

“Is that never ever, or really just a long time?”

“You vex me, sister. Never means never,” said Parcifal dryly.

“Well, didn’t master Sisyphus always say, ‘never say never’?” replied Lernea with a hesitant smile creeping up on her lip. Parcifal’s visage turned suddenly sorrowful, like a noble, sleek and gray statue in the palace grounds they would never see again.

“Master Sisyphus is dead, Lernea.”

“That doesn’t mean he was wrong, though. Never is such a final word, you know?” retorted Lernea and stood upright on her toes, with hands on her waist. She faced her sister with a bright smile full of optimism which Parcifal clearly did not share. Her sister’s attitude made Parcifal’s sadness turn into barely suppressed anger at Lernea’s persistence to face their new reality.

“Get it right in that little thick skull of yours, Lernea. We are, never, going, back, to, Nomos. Never!” she shouted, a lone finger rapping at Lernea’s breastplate with a clanging sound after every word. Lernea’s eyes wandered to her chest for a moment, before her face reddened and her breathing became more pronounced. Her nostrils flared up and she turned

her gaze at her sister. She pouted her lips and said icily:

“Don’t do that.”

“Well, I think I’ll just do what I please from now on,” replied Parcifal; her face had the look of a poised hawk.

“I hate it when you do that,” said Lernea in the same vein, shaking her head slowly with mounting irritation.

“I know, that’s why I do it.”

“You’re such a child,” replied Lernea with disdain.

“Says the one who can’t accept defeat!”

Parcifal’s loud tone made a few heads turn and look. Lernea did not even notice they were attracting the attention of the locals, and added her own shouts to the rising din of their heated debate.

“This isn’t about winning or losing, by Skrala! You can’t be that daft!”

“You’re the one that got us into this mess in the first place, remember?” said Parcifal with arms crossed on her chest. Lernea flailed her arms wildly around her while moving about nervously.

“Oh, really now that’s just so typical, trying to put the blame on me like we’re still meddling with the master’s spell-book!”

“Well, I’m not the one who married Therion Jangdrival on a whim and got us exiled!” remarked Parcifal with wide open arms and a mocking smile. Lernea’s reply was filled with overtones of shock and disgust, her face screwed up, her revulsion evident in every word.

“It was him or Gheighran! Have you even seen Gheighran? He’s a walking swamp-thing, not a man!”

Parcifal shook her head and berated her slightly older sister, her face suddenly grim and her voice low-keyed and even.

“Is that how you make decisions about your kingdom, my Queen? Based on looks and appearances? Only if mother were alive..”

She let her voice trail off and ventured a look towards the ocean. The Autania’s sail was barely visible, the light of day growing dimmer with every passing minute. Lernea was looking at her feet, feeling scolded and reprimanded like a child. Yet, when she talked next she had the voice of a proud woman:

“Mother made mistakes as well in her reign.”

“Yes, she did,” said Parcifal nodding and went on to shout, “She gave birth to you!”

“We’re only a minute apart, you stupid-”

Lernea stopped in mid-sentence even as her mouth began to form the word ‘cow’. She had instinctively flung her arm and was grabbing at what seemed to be a child’s arm attached to a hand holding her coinpurse.

“Hey,” she said and turned to look nearly right behind her. There was a short person standing there, all dressed up in dark leather and an impossibly bland, expressionless face.

Parcifal grabbed a silver, teardrop-shaped knife from her waistband and took a step towards her sister’s side where the short person stood frozen, said person pretending he was nothing more than a misplaced piece of furniture. He seemed to be holding his breath.

“A thieving scum, and a bad one at that, eh?”

“Bugger,” said the short person with a whiz. Out of breath, he looked sideways at the bristling knife-point and suddenly sucked on air through his nostrils loudly. His body relaxed and he let the bulging coinpurse drop to the wooden pier with a heavy jingle.

Lerneia made a grimace and turned her head away from the short man.

“I can see why you held that breath of yours. Could even kill a man; one of your stature, at least.”

Parcifal seemed less inclined to comment on the aspiring thief’s lack of mouth hygiene. She looked at him with mixed feelings of curiosity and frustration, brandishing her knife accusingly.

“Barely stepped foot on this land, and here’s our greeting. Couldn’t resist our riches, little man?” asked Percifal, her shiny breastplate protruding from the rest of her body armor straight at the thief’s face.

“Be fair, my fair lady! Wasn’t ogling your, eh, lady parts or anything, your gracefulness. Not that they’re not worth to, well, ogle,” he said with an awkward smile and looked up to Percifal like a man seeking redemption in prayer.

Lerneia punched him in the gut without warning; the short little man doubled over, his face flustered. He looked momentarily surprised and awestruck, rather than simply hurt; he seemed to have some trouble breathing.

“She was talking about our money, our armor, our valuables! Really, to address any woman in such a fashion.”

Parcifal turned and looked at her sister with a bewildered expression, squinting her eyes slightly, her knife still aimed at the thief’s general direction who was trying to stand up again to his full four feet of height.

“It’s all about being a queen proper, isn’t it? He was addressing me, not you!”

Lerneia grinned and straightened her hair before she mused mostly to herself:

“You really can’t get over the fact I am the firstborn, rightful heir to the throne and all that, can you?”

“The fact is, you’re a spoiled brat if I’ve ever se-”

Parcifal left her sentence incomplete as she noticed the coinpurse, as well as the thief, had simply vanished out of sight. She looked at the milling crowd behind them reflexively. In the scarce light of the setting sun she spotted the rather short leather-clad thief, idly walking about with his hands in his pockets.

She ran after him while Lerneia hurriedly put on her boots and followed close behind. With little effort she nudged her way past a couple of bystanders who were idly having a smoke and grabbed the man by his cloak. She lifted him up like a runaway child and handed him over to Lerneia, who grabbed him with both hands from his vest’s collar. The sisters sported positively miffed, if not thunderous, looks. The short little man exploded with furious indignation:

“I do say! What manner of outrage is this now? Bellicose women running rampant in the streets? Is there no law, no order in this cauldron of misery and debauchery? Guards! Guards!”

The sisters looked at the man intently for a moment, examining him like some sort of exotic bug.

“It’s him,” said Parcifal and Lerneia nodded affirmatively and added, “There’s no mistaking that breath.”

The man looked at each of them with a deeply hurt, vastly presumptuous look and raised a hand before speaking. His eyes remained closed haughtily for the better part of his little speech:

“I can dispense with the insult to my dwarven heritage concerning my breath since as a gentleman, I am aware that great allowances should be made for differences of custom and training. I can understand from your appearance you are foreigners, probably fresh off the boat, clearly confused and

utterly misguided as to the identity of my person. Although you are clearly lacking in proper lady-like training and manners, such is my gentleness and strength of character, that I am willing to forgo any and all legal accusations and forthcoming tribulations against your persons, should you deposit me safely and unharmed on the ground so I may go about my business.”

Parcifal turned her head and looked at Lernea with a raised eyebrow. Lernea shot back her sister a familiar look and nodded, before upending the short man who claimed to be a dwarf. She then proceeded to hold him by his legs and shake him vigorously. Other than a couple of bored, curious looks, no-one seemed particularly inclined to question what has happening. In Hobb’s Bay, anything less than a stabbing wasn’t a matter of interest.

A few moments later a rush of metallic clangs was heard as various items fell on the cobbled street.

“Aha!” said Lernea gleefully, while her sister shook her head with an uncertain look on her face. The short little man who claimed to be a dwarf and a gentleman no less was looking at the two ladies sternly, his short grey ponytail swinging as he lay hanging upside down, his hands crossed on his chest like some sort of human-like bat having a difficult time sleeping. His cloak brushed against the items that had fallen from his person; a small metallic disc with a chain, a gold, flat square tin like a cigar holder, and a small, thin stiletto.

Parcifal pouted her lips and made a rolling motion with her hands to Lernea, which went largely unnoticed. Lernea said with a wide grin:

“What say you now, thief?”

She made sure to intone the word *thief* as it meant someone oozing gritty, unhealthy amounts of slime from every

available orifice.

Parcifal bulged her eyes and made frantic motions to Lerneia to put the man down, pointing to the unfamiliar items that had fallen on the ground instead of the expected loot, their property. Lerneia finally took a look on her own and hesitantly put the short man back on his own two feet. He looked at them with a most severe look that implied he could not find the words to begin to describe his feelings.

“I cannot find the words to even begin to describe my feelings,” he said with a face torn from disgust and disdain. “You should be ashamed. I fear, I cannot in right conscience call you ladies,” he said, dusted off his cloak, straightened his vest and pants and walked away briskly without another word.

Parcifal looked at him in mute disbelief, while Lerneia picked up the man’s items from the ground, spending a mere moment to examine them. His small figure had almost disappeared into the mass of people crowding the busy street when she shouted at him:

“Sir! Terribly sorry, but you forgot your articles, sir!”

Parcifal looked at the various stuff the man had left behind and had a moment of clarity; she sprang into action, and started running through the street shouting to her sister:

“That’s because those aren’t his either!”

Lerneia stood motionless for moment, idly holding the stolen goods with both hands in her lap. Her lips formed a soundless circle while her eyes shone with dazzling ferocity. Realizing they had been duped, she dropped everything and ran after her sister and the dwarf - or perhaps a simply very short man - who kept surprising them with his sly ways.

The man shot a glance behind his back and saw the sisters were right on his tail, shoving and brushing people aside as they ran after him. “Fire! Fire! I say, fire!” he shouted amidst

the crowd in an effort to cause a little bit of hysterical panic to make his escape all that easier. That didn't work though; the people around him went about their business, a few casually wondering to themselves whether or not they had heard some kind of voice; those who did hear wondered where it came from. He had to make himself scarce the hard way, and bolted into the nearest building.

“Quick! Into that establishment!” yelled Parcifal to Lernea, her finger pointing to a large sign, illuminated by a nearby lamp post which had just been lit, as night proper fell.

“The Sniggering Pig? That sounds like a piss-hole!”

“What did you expect this far south? Come on, hurry!” replied Parcifal even as they left the stream of people in the street and saw the man who had robbed them of money and pride hustle past the tavern's doorway. Sounds of drunken merriment and folk music blasted away from the relatively large inn.

“By Skarla, of all the places..” said Lernea mostly to herself but followed Parcifal inside reminding herself not to touch anything.

Inside the Sniggering Pig, there was ample candle light from chandeliers on the high ceiling, as well as candles and lamps on each and every table where people had still not passed out. A powerful mix of heavy scents dominated the air; rye, ale and roasted meat. The tables were mostly occupied by rowdy gangs of shady-looking sailors; everyone seemed to be having fun judging by the spillage on the floor, when the music suddenly stopped. The hubbub of laughter and loud conversation filled the emptiness until a rather tall and lanky fellow appeared at the far end of tavern, on what seemed to be the stage where the band of musicians sat. Parcifal's eyes had the chance to search the room for a moment.

There was no sign of the thief.

“Blasted runt of a man,” said Parcifal, this time gripping her sword’s hilt instead of her knife. Lernea corrected her with a face that implied every second in there was making her feel shamefully unclean: “Dwarf. He said he was a dwarf.”

As if on cue, the tall lank man who had appeared on stage cleared his throat loudly and bowed, only to receive a handful of drunken irrelevant yells, most prominently, ‘Show us yer tittays!’. Nevertheless, he smiled courteously and said to the crowd:

“Well, this place is lively, ain’t it? Feels like a band of roaming Dwarves would love to roll by. Hell, it’s not like they’re set in stone or anything,” he said, grinning widely and posing to the crowd which hardly noticed anyone was talking on stage. The performer was facing a tough crowd. He turned to the band of musicians and said in voice right above a whisper:

“Guys.. That was a joke.”

The percussionist realised that was meant for him, nodded, and promptly made a half-hearted drum roll, followed by hitting a small cowbell. The sound was not unlike a couple of coconuts banging together.

“Thank you!” said the performer on stage, clapping his hands in solitude.

Parcifal, equally oblivious to what sounded like a bad comedian noticed something else. She told Lernea:

“Windows just on the front. That door behind the barkeep, that’s locked and barred. He’s got to be somewhere in here. He’s trapped!”

“And us along with him. God, is that man heaving his insides?” asked Lernea with a tremor of disgust in her voice.

“Someone will mop it up later, I’m sure. Just stay right here at the door. I’ll flush him out.”

Lerneia let out a little laugh, more aptly a snigger, and put a hand to her mouth. Parcifal eyed her in puzzlement, her brow furrowed. Lerneia replied with a giggly voice:

“That sounded like a, uhm.. A poop joke. ‘Flush’ him out like the little, uhm, shit he is! Oh, my!”

Parcifal closed her eyes, said nothing and sighed. Then she slowly started wading through the tables, filled with passed-out customers. The comedian was having a go at another joke, while the crowd had mysteriously quietened down. Lots of sets of eyes were now following Parcifal’s slender form as she moved about the tavern.

“Dwarves, eh? What a race,” he said and pretended to run for a moment. “I remember one night, a group of them fellows walks in this very same place. He nods at the bar and shouts, ‘Barkeep! Seven short ones’, to which the barkeep replies, ‘I can see that, but what can I get you?’”

The drum roll came on cue, but the laughter he was expecting was delayed until a man who had been standing on all fours yelled, “Barkeep! Ha ha ha! I gets it! Bar-keep!”

Spontaneously, half the tavern erupted in fits of laughter, while the other half lay motionless except for their eyes, magnetized by Parcifal’s presence. Even if staring at her meant her staring back at them with a look that could shrivel their scrotum and turn their eyes into tiny glass beads. The comedian went on:

“Lovely crowd here tonight, lovely crowd. Say, I can see lots of sailors, again. Nice to have you ashore. Mostly humans, but hey, everyone can smell dwarves have this aversion to water.”

There was no drum roll. The man on stage eyed the band

and waved his hands. Then came a drum roll and the signature cowbell. The crowd though wasn't paying attention; they kept drinking and singing rowdy songs, mostly containing obscene lyrics about unicorns and the priest's daughter. There was a voice of dissent though that rose sharply above the cacophony:

"That's bloody lie!"

It was the thief, all flustered, standing up on his toes to make himself heard. Parcifal turned her head around and saw him, pointing an accusing finger at the man on stage. She drew her sword and shouted above the din of the crowd, cradling the heavy blade threateningly towards the thief:

"By Skarla and Encelados, I'll have my money back or I'll skewer you for the thieving dwarf you are!"

Suddenly the crowd stopped everything they had been doing; the singing ceased to be. The band on the other hand, much to the comedian's dismay, started to play a suspenseful tune. The sound of whistling pipes was dominant.

"Every other night, no-one reads the sign," said the comedian mostly to himself. He did try to get everyone's attention though:

"Excuse me now, I'm sure there's been some kind of misunderstanding. The lady here is certainly new around these parts. I mean, she's still got most of her belongings on her and a full set of teeth. If you could just ignore her breaking The Rule, I could tell you about this time when an elf, a human and a dwarf were on the same boat, and-"

The comedian was interrupted by an almost overbearing yell from the crowd:

"Balls!" they said in one voice and everyone was suddenly holding something that could kill, maim, or hurt like hell, most prominently forks, knives and the odd cutlass and

pistol. Parcifal stood in the midst of them all, perhaps fifty or sixty men the lot of them, half of them still conscious. She gave Lerneia a look of determined despair and grasped her sword with both hands, ready for what seemed to be a sudden, uneven fight to the death. Lerneia nodded to her sister without a word and loaded her bow with an arrow. In one fluid motion, she was already aiming at the thief's head from a very comfortable distance; she couldn't miss.

The thief looked at her, grinned, bowed slightly and yelled:

“Jambalaya everyone! I'm buying!”

The crowd erupted in sudden cheers and howls, while someone yelled ‘Balls!’ right before slumping down on the floor. The comedian got off the stage disheartened and headed for the bar. The band picked up a serene ballad that no-one really cared for. The barkeep smiled congenially to the comedian and told him: “More peppers this time, Ned,” to which Ned replied faintly, “I know, father.”

Parcifal and Lerneia were standing amidst the merry crowd with their weapons at the ready, but it was evident in the way their faces were screwed up that they felt relieved, confused and mildly insulted at the same time. Parcifal would not leave the thief from her sight; he approached her with both hands in the air, making sure his palms were open. He was smiling thinly, looking at Encelados with a keen, respectful eye.

Lerneia lowered her bow and strung it behind her back. She walked over to her sister, being very careful not to tread on someone or someone's heaved insides, spilled beer and other assorted spots of trouble that could be found on the Sniggering Pig's floor in abundance.

“I guess we're even now, eh?” said the thief, still careful enough to put some sensible space between him and Encela-

dos.

“Even? You steal our money and you have the audacity to mock us? By Skrala, this is unheard of,” said Parcifal in a voice of pure disbelief.

“Well, I’m not the stubborn, hot-headed, beautiful though foreign lady. I certainly wouldn’t have heard anything of the sort if I were you,” replied the thief with a kind smile. Lernea stood by her sister’s side and pondered for a moment before she said with a calm voice:

“I think there’s a reason for all this, sister. I’m sure this dwarf, or whatever he is, will at least explain himself before returning our money.”

“There, a civil person. With all this tension, I haven’t introduced myself properly. My name is Winceham Higgins-bottom Abbermouth the Third. At your service,” said the small man with a slight bow and a smile, before showing the sisters to a recently emptied table. Parcifal looked at the man as he had insulted everything holy by Skrala and couldn’t help but yell in anger:

“What, we’re having drinks with the runt now?”

Lernea sighed, took a deep breath and gently took her sister by one arm, walking her towards the table. She told her:

“Now sister, this calls for some diplomacy. We might as well solve this quandary in a civilized manner. Things might not be exactly as they appear. Mr. Abbermouth seems like a.. Solvent type of person.”

Parcifal couldn’t believe her ears, but followed along as if in some kind of a trance. Winceham led the way and drew their chairs charmingly. As they sat down he made a motion with a hand to the bar, always smiling. Parcifal said as if still in a dream:

“I thought his breath stank!” exclaimed Parcifal in

protest.

“Well, it’s obvious that this is neither party’s priority. Mr. Abbermouth here will make sure we’re properly compensated for all the trouble he’s caused us,” said Lerneia stressing her last few words. Winceham grinned and laid back on his chair before he said:

“The way things turned out, you gals should be actually thankful. These folks live on rotten clams and maggoty bread most of the time; they’d rip you apart and feed you to the sharks right round the Mangled Horn if they didn’t get some of Ned’s jambalaya. Perhaps they’d have their way with you first as well.”

Parciful laughed in shocked disbelief and shouted at Winceham, “Thankful? For being robbed and humiliated by a dwarf?”

“Technically, a hauffin, but I’m sure you don’t meet with our kind where you’re from.”

“A what? How would you know where we come from?” asked Parciful, raising an eyebrow, her voice edgy.

“My lady Teletha, you and your sister are of nobility,” he said and pointed at the family crest on their breastplates before adding, “Nomos nobility doesn’t hold much weight around these parts, but nobility still.”

“Is that how your kind treats nobility then?” asked Parciful folding her arms upon the table. At that moment, Ned, the comedian who was also the cook and the barkeeper’s son arrived with three kegs of ale and a large pot of steaming jambalaya.

“Compliments of Mr. Abbermouth, miladies,” said Ned and with a firm lip bowed slightly to the sisters before leaving quietly.

“Now that’s a gentleman, Mr. Abbermouth. How about

you?” asked Lerneia and Parcifal added after wiping some foam off her mouth and settling her keg hard down on the table with a thud and a spill.

“Yeah, where’s our money run?”

“In all those pots of jambalaya, I’m afraid. The Rule, you see.”

“What bloody rule says you go off with our money and then spend it on buying dinner to a drunken sailor?” asked Parcifal with mounting anger, while Lerneia tugged at her sleeve, pointing to a tiny wooden plaque on the wall right behind her, next to a broken light lamp.

“‘The Rule - First to draw a weapon, first to buy everyone a meal or face their wrath.’ Pretty obvious place to put up a sign with a pretty arbitrary rule, I might add,” said Lerneia and puckered her lips in a very unladylike manner. Parcifal added after another swig of ale:

“You knew that, didn’t you? You saw us get off the boat, saw we smelled money and went for our coin. Then you slicked your way out with our money and then came running down here, knowing we’d be in a fix when we eventually drew a sword.”

Winceham nodded along, sipping at his beer and seemingly savouring every drop.

“Then why not let us face everyone’s wrath and make your way out with the money?”

“Because, I’m a visionary. I’m an opportunist and when I see an opportunity I grab it by the horns.”

“You mean you’re a thief.”

“A thief.. What exactly constitutes a thief, tell me, dear Parcifal?”

“How do you know which one’s which?”

“Oh, that’s easy. Queen Lernea is still wearing her marital ring,” said Winceham and pointed to Lernea’s finger.

“News travels fast,” said Lernea with an awkward look on her face and added: “So you’ve heard about we’re not the reigning Nomos family anymore?”

“Oh, I see. Well, it’s been a pleasure. Miladies,” said Winceham and tried to get up and vanish expertly. Lernea’s hand though was already at the scruff of his neck and wouldn’t let go.

“Sit down, Mr. Abbermouth. We demand compensation. Financially, as well as morally,” said Lernea strictly.

“Right. As I said, the money’s turned into jambalaya for everyone.”

“A coinpurse full of gold? That should be enough to buy this place!” exclaimed Parcifal with disbelief.

“That was gold? I thought I’d seen that kind of colour before, but I wasn’t sure,” said Winceham, feigning surprise.

“Still mocking us? Listen, scum, I think your misconceptions about women of nobility are about to be shattered in a very painful way,” said Parcifal, finished her ale and brandished Encelados once more. Winceham smiled as broadly as possible without his mouth falling apart and tried the way of appeasement:

“I never said I conceived ill of you, milady. I urge you to reconsider,”

Then suddenly, the door to the Sniggering Pig Inn swung with an eerie creaking noise, unusually louder than the din of the laughing, merry sailors. A large bulky man dressed in a scaly leather vest, matching boots and cornered hat walked inside. He had a heavy-looking, jagged cutlass in hand and a blind, glazed eye. The music stopped abruptly.

“Alright, you scallywags. Off to the hammocks!” he

yelled and spat a vile green lump of slime on the floor. Beside him stood a tall, ape-like creature dressed mostly in rugs and cloth, all muscle and hair. It carried a blunderbuss as tall as a man and grinned widely, its mouth filled with golden teeth. Like a silent church bell had rung, everyone, even the band, promptly picked up their hats and passed-out companions and left in a hurry, though the last man was mindful to enough to close the door behind him. Winceham reached out and touched the sisters' hands awkwardly; he had a desperate look on his face.

"Please, miladies. Don't do anything rash. I'll explain, I promise."

Lernea and Parcifal exchanged troubled looks. They shot glances at the man who had practically ordered everyone to leave with a less than keen eye, and then saw the worry on Winceham's face. There was fearful anxiety written there; the sisters shared their opinion with a simple nod. Ned appeared from behind the bar, holding the sisters' coinpurse, still looking full and heavy. His father, the barkeep, looked at the bossy man with a well-measured hateful gaze.

"Where's Hobb's money, Sturgees?" asked the leather-clad man coldly.

"That's Larkin now. I've got the money," said the barkeep, while Ned's eyes seemed to shine, fury seeping in them.

"Ain't that a surprise, eh, Mr. Brumbles?" said the man and slapped the hairy ape-man across the chest. The ape-man replied eagerly, always grinning. The gold in his mouth sparkled while his voice felt like sand on paper.

"Mos' def, Cap'n."

"Righty ho, then. Go on, Mr. Brumbles; go on, count the money. Remember now, after ten, that's.."

"Too late fo' sho' leave, Cap'n."

The man sighed and looked at the ceiling for a moment, as if praying, before answering:

“Eleven, Mr. Brumbles. After ten, that’s eleven and then twelve and so on,” he said to the ape-man while he smiled at the sisters and made his way towards them, making sure to wave his cutlass in a pompous, visibly threatening way.

“Well, it’s so hard to get good help these days, wouldn’t you ladies agree? I’m sure you have similar problems.”

Winceham rolled his eyes wildly trying to signal the sisters. His efforts went largely unnoticed since they had both turned to face what appeared to be nothing more than a glorified debt collector dressed in leather with a talking simian in tow. The ape-man took the coinpurse from Ned and started counting the money. Ned fidgeted behind the bar. He looked like he found it increasingly difficult to keep his temper. His father looked at him in the eye, shook his head and bit his lip.

“Indeed sir, if I may so lightly abuse the word, we do share the same problem,” said Lernea while Parcifal reached for the handle of her sword under the table.

“Really now, how so? Is Winceham over here giving you trouble? He’s a fine lad and all but he’s got his priorities mixed up, wouldn’t you say Wince ol’ mate?”

“Take the money, Culliper. Just take the money,” said Winceham, his rather soft voice carrying a note of hate for the first time.

“Much obliged, Wincy,” said Culliper, smiled broadly, briefly tipped his hat with his cutlass in a parting salute and made to leave. He took a step and stopped when he heard the sound of metal grinding on metal. Parcifal had drawn her sword and was pointing it at Culliper’s back. He slowly turned around and saw Lernea had also nocked an arrow, ready to draw at the blink of an eye.

“That’s our money, sirrah,” said Lernea, the word ‘sirrah’ filled with as much disdain as possible.

Culliper turned his head towards Ned and said with a curled smile:

“Are these people, ah, comedian friends of yours, Ned lad? ’Cause I’ve seen your act and it’s a bloat of shit, really.”

Mr. Brumbles stopped though generally not very bright had stopped counting. He drew his blunderbuss and faced the sisters, cocking his gun.

Ned replied through gritted teeth:

“My act is not shit.”

“What smells that bad then, eh?”

“That would be him,” said Lernea who let an arrow fly right between Mr. Brumbles eyes before he had a chance to even swerve the gun their way. A gunshot rang clear though; Culliper was holding a pistol with smoldering smoke trailing off its barrel. Ned’s father was down on the floor with a dull thud barely a moment later. Parcifal sprang at Culliper with all the might of her sword, but he parried expertly with his cutlass as he turned to leave. Lernea was reloading her bow even as Ned cried in outrage, “You murderous bastard! I’ll see you dead!”

Wincham simply sat in his chair, his face buried in his palms, mumbling to himself:

“Why nobody, ever, listens to the small folk?”

Culliper jumped up on a nearby table and rushed towards a window. Lernea’s arrow caught him on the shoulder. He cried in agony even as Ned was rushing right behind him. Parcifal saw the barrel of a pistol aiming blindly towards Ned, even as Culliper made ready to jump through the window; she did not hesitate and grabbed Ned by his waist as he run. She brought him down right when a bullet flew over his head

and turned part of the wooden bar into a bunch of smoldering splinters.

Culliper crashed through the window and onto the street. He landed on one side, rolled, and quickly got back on his feet. He glanced at them and then ran away cursing even as one of Lernea's arrows grazed his back.

"Quickly!" cried Lernea and rushed towards the door, an arrow already nocked in her bow. She shot a look over her shoulder and realised that no-one was following her.

"Why are you just standing there?" she asked, even though no-one was technically standing. Parcifal was on her knees, nurturing a hurt jaw. She had a bloody lip and she was staring at Ned like a wounded tiger. Ned was lying with his back against the bar, a stream of tears trailing his cheeks, his face flustered. Winceham was sitting on the same chair as before, his face planted smugly in the palms of his hands in complete silence.

"What are you people doing?" said Lernea with a sigh. Her air of authority was badly placed and timed: "Come on, he's getting away!"

Parcifal got up on her feet lazily. She picked up Encelados and sheathed her sword, staring at Ned with a hurt look.

"He punched me in the face," she said and felt her jaw with a hand before she went on: "and that's after I saved his life."

Ned was wholly ignoring her, his face a mask of stone cold grief. His tears had just begun to dry out.

Lernea suddenly looked deeply disappointed, almost heartbroken, as she held an arrow in one hand and her bow in the other, her shoulders sagged. She shook her head, put the arrow in her quiver and the bow across her back before she pointed a finger at Parcifal and said with a numb voice to

no-one in particular:

“It’s her fault, you know.”

“Oh, by Skrala, grow up,” came Parcifal’s terse reply, scowling.

“She could’ve cut him down with that first strike, if she was any good with that sword.”

“To the deeps with you!” cried Ned and stood up, his body’s slight tremble carried along in his voice.

The sisters both turned to look at him with an even gaze. They met his blood-ridden eyes and with a glance saw his father’s lifeless body on the floor to his right. They stooped their heads low and crossed their arms on their chests before they told him humbly in unison:

“Let Svarna guide your father to the Eternal Light and Skarla’s heavenly abode.”

Ned looked at them with menace, a sudden viciousness in the young man’s otherwise gentle, homely face. His voice was calm, but it somehow managed to sound brazen, harsh and vibrant:

“My father has no need for keen wails and haughty words. He’s dead and dead men have no need of anything other than a grave.”

The sisters remained silent, neither one venturing to speak her mind. Winceham broke the silence when he rubbed his face with both hands along with a loud snorting noise, as if he had forced himself to awaken from a deep slumber. He caused everyone, even Ned, to turn their heads his way.

“Now you’ve done it, you really have. The definition of knee-deep in shite; you’re it. And this time, I’ll have to keep running,” he said with a scowl, his eyes set in a vacant stare beyond the walls of the inn.

“You involved us in this against our will, half-man,” said Parcifal with a cold, accusing tone.

“Halfuin,” replied Winceham and went on after he tried to sip from an empty cup. “You could’ve just bought the act. And then, again, you could have just let Culliper take the damn money.”

“Our money,” added Lernea in a half-hearted manner.

“It still is just money,” said Winceham with a sneer, before he went on. “It would have kept Vern alive and this place going for some time,” he said and waved a hand around. He picked up a small satchel from the floor and told them: “We’ve tarried too long. By midnight, Hobb’s men will be scouring the Bay. I suggest you make yourselves scarce as well and keep a low profile.”

He nodded at the two sisters and said with a dry voice: “Dump the gear as well, you two,” before he turned to Ned and said with a weary look and a bleak voice, “I’m sorry, Ned. There is no perfect plan.”

To which Ned replied with a deep, rumbling hatred in his voice:

“I’ll kill his men. And then I’ll kill him, with my bare hands. I want to see him beg for his life before I squeeze his last breath out of his lungs.”

He had a feral look about him; a keen, proud gaze. It was as if he had been Ned’s long lost twin, a battle-hardened warrior who sought revenge. In truth, he was still little more than the meek, aspiring bard son of Vern Larkin, doubling as the inn’s cook. And Winceham told him so, trying not to sound unkind:

“Lad, you’ve a fiery heart, I’ll give you that. But it’s in the wrong place. Saving your life is more important than having revenge.”

Parcifal interjected with a nod of approval:

“At least he is a man, red blood coursing through his veins. Willing to spill other men’s blood, no less,” she said with a slight grin and added, “and quite a punch. Better than his jokes.”

Winceham’s face frowned and turned to look at Parcifal with an impossible stare of disbelief.

“I beg your pardon, milady, but surely, you’re sorely mistaken.”

Lernea approached the rest and came to stand by her sister’s side with a regal smile painted on her face, her hands on her hips. She pointed a finger at Winceham as if he was some kind of lowly subject of hers:

“You, halfuin, you are the one who is sorely mistaken. You have a less than pure heart.”

Winceham sighed and stared at the empty cup for a while. He then told Lernea:

“You figured all that out by yourself? And I thought, Nomos was full of stupid inbreds.”

Lernea went wide-eyed in shocked surprise. Before she had time to retort, Parcifal had her sword drawn, poised in front of Winceham’s chest, ready to pierce his heart.

“Forswear that insult! Unsay it or Encelados be your last woe!” shouted Parcifal with a blistering voice. Winceham, seeing the steely tip of Encelados flash brightly in the candlelight, spoke faster than perhaps ever, in one breath:

“You do have a penchant for the dramatic, don’t you? I was only making an effort to be sarcastic. Since it seems to be an idea foreign to you, I’m particularly sorry I ever said such a thing so as to raise your deadly ire. I therefore renounce my comment, recant the implication of an insult, renege my former statement and repudiate my previous statement regarding

your noble persons.”

Parcifal sheathed her sword and calmness returned to her face, while Lernea found the clarity of mind to reply properly:

“No need to mock us with fancy words, sir,” she said, and forced a thin smile on her mouth. She went on:

“We know enough about sarcasm to not use it in serious matters. We’ve been trained in languages and the arts, as well as the ways of the sword, bow and armor. Such is the way of Nomos; we are not simpletons, mind you. We are warrior-maidens of the Mountain Garden, not simple women who would rather spent their days serving a lowly, unworthy husband as their master. We demand respect and earn it our way; we obey the laws but listen to our hearts first. We serve Skrala, until Svarna guides us to the Eternal Light. Do you understand, Mr. Abbermouth?”

Lernea managed to awe everyone into stilled silence, including her sister. Winceham managed to nod, yet enchanted by Lernea’s presence. The silence was broken by Ned, who took Lernea by the arm suddenly and spoke from heart, the words rushing freely out his mouth:

“You’ve spoken true milady; even a fool would feel that. I know this then; that you and your sister are noble women, with brave, courageous hearts. I’ll only ask this once and in return I pledge myself into your service until my last breath escapes me. Help me avenge my father’s death, miladies.”

Lernea looked at Ned with a surprised half-smile; it seemed he was being utterly serious and fully aware of what such an oath entailed. Parcifal saw her sister’s face brighten up. She placed her hand gently on Ned’s shoulder and told him heartily:

“There’s no need for that Ned. We are free women and our people, are free people; we do not offer them a life of

servitude, but one worth fighting for. Worth dying for. We are honored that you ask this of us; we shall avenge your father's demise, or fall by your side. By Skrala sworn."

Ned's face was overcome by a hard, edgy smile that crept up on his lips. He nodded solemnly and offered his arm to Parcifal which she grasped firmly. Parcifal looked at her sister with a set of proud eyes and said with a hint of admiration:

"Spoken true, sister."

She looked at Ned brightly and told him, "By Skrala sworn, your father will be avenged."

Winceham on the other hand was half-way towards the doorway of the Sniggering Pig when he turned around and said with a scoff:

"Do you even hear yourselves? I can understand Ned is upset and has little grasp of reality right now, but you? You ought to know better. But I forget; you just got off the boat today. Goodnight to you, Godspeed, by Skrala or whomever you fancy, whom you're bound to meet soon, I'd wager."

Ned looked at the halfuin with piercing eyes and told him even as Winceham's hand was on the door's handle:

"I've known you for a thief Winceham, but not for a coward. You made a promise to my father and to me. That promise cannot be met now; do not make me invoke the Nadragatea, Wince. I ask this as a friend. I ask this because I know it to be true in your heart as well."

"Don't do this, Ned. Don't make me do this," said Winceham, shaking his head with eyes held firmly shut.

"Avenge my father's death, Wince. It wasn't always Hobb's Bay, Winceham. You should remember better than I do," replied Ned softly.

"I remember and I know, Ned. It just can't be done. We'll be throwing away our lives for nothing!" shouted Winceham

angrily.

“No life given freely, pure of heart and with honorable intention, is thrown away for nothing. There is always a place by Skrala’s side for those that seek a righteous death,” said Parcifal in earnest, while Lerneia nodded thoroughly and added with conviction: “By Skrala sworn!”

Winceham looked suddenly tense. His usually tolerant and cool manner was chipping off his flustered face. He afforded the two sisters a sharp stare and told them with a tone of rightful indignation:

“You two pig-headed noblewads! You just won’t give up! You won’t give up those damned coins and now you won’t give up a certain death!”

“I think it’s plain old fear you feel. It is normal, not to say expected of a thief. We feel it as well, mind you, but it is only useful to keep one alive in battle, not to keep one from joining it.”

“You think you’re so brave and righteous, don’t you? Well, you’ll be dead before that body’s cold!”

“My father has a name, Winceham.”

“I’ve turned bags of shite into gold with Vern before you were even conceived in the glimmer of his eye! Don’t play the part of the insulted fool, it ill suits you! Mind you, I have pride myself and I can muster my anger and hate when needs be done, but I have a good mind to stay alive as well. And what you’ve been trying to convince yourselves into doing and dragging me along, is plain and utter bonkers, that’s what it is. Not to mention time is already swiftly running against us.”

“Is that your professional opinion, sirrah?” said Parcifal with a grin.

“He really is afraid,” Lerneia added with a curious smile,

as if discovering something new.

“I invoke the Nadragatea, Winceham Higginsbottom Abbermouth the Third, Never-been-caught-with-my-hand-in-the-cookie-jar, witnessed by two of neither party!” said Ned in an officious, loud voice.

Winceham closed his eyes and dropped his satchel on the floor. He remained motionless for a moment, before he went down on his knees and looked at Ned with a sad face. His voice had a surrendered quality.

“Blasted. You knew my full name, eh? I was hoping Vern had never really guessed.”

“You gave away little business cards with that written on them,” said Ned with a puzzled frown.

“It was supposed to be misdirection! Hiding in plain sight and all that.”

“Well, I wish I didn’t need to, but now you’re bonded by oath,” Ned told Winceham flatly.

“Yes, well, if there’s one thing I’m good at is finding the silver lining, which in this case is we’ll all be dead or dead-ish pretty soon.”

“You seem so certain, so profoundly unequivocal. Are you a fortune teller as well? Do you tread the lines of fate like a dancer on a rope? Can you foretell what lies in store for us?” asked Lernea.

“No, but I know Hobb. He’s a monster with the means and a purpose. He’ll be on to us like a vice, probably literally as well,” replied the halfuin.

“You’re acting like the man has a personal army,” said Parcifal in disbelief.

“He does,” replied Winceham curtly.

“That only changes our way of approach. We cannot confront him openly. We’ll have to employ cunning,” added Par-

cifal eagerly.

“And stealth,” said Lernea followed by a nod of her head and a twirl in her lip.

“Listen. You’re not listening. You’re hearing words but your mind seems to discard them as mere sounds. Julius Hobb has been granted complete authority of the peninsula. He is the ruler of these lands, in practice, effect, and under Imperial law.”

“Nomos is not subject to an imperial tithe. We do not hold such law as binding,” interjected Lernea.

“Will you please let me finish? I’m trying to make a point,” said Winceham, holding back a verbal eruption with some difficulty. He went on promptly as soon as Lernea nodded matter-of-factly:

“He does as he pleases and that is due to two things; money and power. Money keeps his henchmen, guards and foot soldiers happy to work and even die occasionally for him, as do the crews on his ships roaming the seas for loot and plunder. That same money, the money he keeps making by bleeding everyone just short of dry, just like he did to Vern and the Sniggering Pig. That money bought him an Imperial Consulate and soon if word has it right, a place as Princeps of the Court. Meaning that he goes untouched by any sort of Imperial force of justice. If there’s still such a thing.”

“Meaning that this Hobb you speak of, has the wealth and power that begets it to aspire to an even higher place of authority. Yet he seems to act as a common thug, an extortionist. A deceiver, a man with no scruples. Dangerous, powerful and ambitious,” said Lernea.

“Remind you of anyone now, sister?” asked Parcifal with a barb in her voice.

“Now’s not the time to bicker about the Jangdrivals, Par-

cifal. Please.”

“I’m only saying that this analysis of yours would have served better in the past.”

“You’ve run into him before, then?” asked Ned expectantly.

“No. Just someone who they share a lot of common traits with,” said Parcifal.

“Care to share what happened when you ran into that man?” asked Winceham.

“We lost the throne and were exiled from Nomos,” answered Lernea tersely. Winceham smiled with irony and said:

“See? And that was probably them being very gracious. Hobb isn’t gracious. At all.”

“But we’re alive. We can still fight. And we won’t be alone,” Lernea told them, and Winceham retorted:

“No, you’ll have a retired thief and a bard who can’t sing and tells bad jokes to take care of your backs.”

“Retired?” asked Parcifal in disbelief, while Ned exclaimed:

“It’s always a tough crowd!”

“A bard who can’t sing?” Lernea asked Ned, cocking her head sideways.

“I can sing! I’m just more of a comedy performer! Why does everyone say that?”

“No, I’m asking if he is retired,” said Parcifal, pointing to Winceham, her eyebrows raised in suspicion.

“Why do you think you caught me red-handed both times? My joints have been killing me,” said the Hauflin with a slightly embarrassed look. Lernea’s words had a hint of arrogance about them:

“Small matter; we weren’t counting on you as our first line of defense. Or of anything, for that matter.”

“I see. You ask for my help, nay, demand it by Nadragate,” said Winceham eying Ned with a look of disappointment before returning his gaze to Lernea and adding: “And then when you learn I’m retired, I’m suddenly worthless. Great management skills for a queen,” said Winceham, looking irreparably emotionally hurt.

“She didn’t see the Jangdrivals coming either. She wouldn’t listen,” added Parcifal with a nod, only to receive a frown from Winceham and the protests of her scowling sister:

“It’s more complicated than that Parcifal!”

Ned intervened:

“Stop this, please. Stop this badmouthing. It leads nowhere. If we are going to do this, we need to stick together; we need to support each other, trust each other. We need to believe in each other. Or else, no matter who stands against us, it will be an easy fight for them if we fight amongst ourselves.”

Everyone took a moment in silence. Parcifal and Lernea looked at each other briefly, reassuringly. Winceham nodded to himself and pouted his lips before speaking:

“We need a plan. A damn good plan preferably of the genius kind with implausibly good luck to boot. But first, we need to leave this place,” he said and picked up his satchel, looking sideways through the window for any sign of Hobb’s men. Parcifal and Lernea nodded and checked their gear smartly, while Ned shook his head and curtly said:

“No. First we need to bury my father.”

“Ned, lad. Look, we’ve already spent all this time talking. Hobb’s men could be right around the corner.”

Ned stared at Winceham unyieldingly for a few moments, until they all looked at each other and simply walked over to

the body of Ned's father and helped him carry the body of Vern Larkin out back.

Winceham was on the lookout, while Ned, Parcifal and even Lernea, much to her sister's surprise, began to dig in a hurry.

It was midnight on a moonless bay.

“Are you sure this is the right way?” asked Parcifal who had taken point alongside Ned, Encelados firmly clasped on her back along with her shield, Erymanthos. Tiny slithers of starlight bounced off her glistening armor; the Holy Mountain engraved on Erymanthos shone fiery red. This far south in the world, the light of the starry sky was good enough for walking without hitting a tree.

“Father and I used to hunt boar around these parts. We’d find traces of the Woodkin here and there; tripped animal traps and hand-picked herbs,” replied Ned with certainty, his eyes wading through the darkness of the night warily.

Ned struck the others as a fairly common young man; not too short, not taller than Parcifal. He carried an old hunting crossbow strung along the belt at his waist. With his pitch black hair and light cloth garments, he gave the impression of some sort of romantic fool.

That image was enhanced by the small leather drum he carried around on his back; no-one had deemed a drum particularly able to deal damage when the need arose.

“How can you be sure it was elves?” asked Winceham slightly out of breath as he tried to keep pace with the rest, his satchel bobbing wildly. Ned’s reply was taciturn at best:

“I am.”

A somewhat uneasy silence followed. Lerneia gracefully trod through the thick, lush brush as if this southern, exotic forest was her natural habitat. At length she too felt the need to ask Ned:

“These elves you speak of, what makes you so certain they’ll want to help?”

Ned paused in his stride, turned around and looked at Lerneia with a grin that shone unnervingly even though the light of the stars was barely enough to see.

“Nothing!” he said loudly, his voice echoing faintly as it bounced off the surrounding hills. He resumed walking alongside Parcifal, his eyes glancing at everyone with obvious aggravation; apparently, he wasn’t in the mood for questions. The others exchanged doubtful looks, but knew that for the time being, questions would serve no purpose other than driving Ned slightly mad.

They had been slowly climbing Silkcrest Hill, no more than an hour’s reach from Hobb’s Bay to the west. The minute after they had finished burying Ned’s father, they had heard a rather rowdy crowd on the street, asking for them to come out and be hanged for the murders they had committed. Hobb seemed fairly adept at putting the blame on people and rousing the masses into an angry mob; Ned, Winceham and the Teletha sisters were wanted for murder, jaywalking and unlawful pillaging to boot. Without the need to talk it over, they fled Hobb’s bay through obscure alleys and deserted back streets onto the nearby woods.

Ned had come up with what was now effectively their grand plan, which wasn’t much as everyone had commented, but it was their best shot. Not to mention, as Winceham had put it, their only and perhaps their last one as well.

They’d seek out the secretive Woodkin elves that some said dwelt deep in the jungle where death lurked in many forms: quicksand, and poisoned plants made the jungle perilous to cross, while snakes, rockatoos, crocodiles and venom spiders tried to literally lived on reckless travelers.

Winceham made a gesture with his hands, stopped and bent over his knees; his face was a grimace, his lungs burning from the effort.

“Can’t feel me legs. We need to take a break,” he said in between deep, pained breaths.

“We can’t stop now, not until we’ve found them,” said Ned with a sense of urgency. He sounded annoyed, but there was tiredness in his tone as well. The sisters nodded and Parcifal unsheathed Encelados; she promptly buried it into the ground with ease. Lernea sat down on the ground and unclasped a bright, silver canteen from her belt. She brought it to her lips and drank, before offering it to Winceham who gladly downed a mouthful himself.

“What are you doing?” asked Ned in utter disbelief, even though it was plainly obvious they were taking a break.

“You can’t march all through the night without some rest, Ned. Not us, not you, and certainly not half-man there,” said Parcifal and pointed to Winceham with a scoff.

“Halfuin. Do I need to spell it out to you?”, Winceham retorted huffing and puffing copiously. He shot Parcifal a weary look and sat down himself with a growl of exertion. He shook his head and said somewhat bitterly:

“I should’ve ran when I had the chance.”

“You wouldn’t have gone that far now, would you?” said Lernea, her words not unkind but rather playful judging by the thin smile on her face. Her look became suddenly worried though when she noticed Ned had already wandered off westwards, without so much as a word, like a stubborn child would. Lernea gave Parcifal a stern look which her sister waved away. Parcifal shrugged, resting with her hands around Encelados hilt, the blade’s tip firmly dug in the ground.

“He’s strong-willed, I’ll give him that,” she said as she looked at Ned’s figure growing smaller in the growing distance.

“Well, he’s bound to get lost or do something stupid. Or both. You should talk some sense into him,” said Lernea with a worried frown.

“Aren’t you supposed to be the diplomat in the family?” said Parcifal with a raised eyebrow and a mocking smile.

“By Skrala, sister! You can be so pigheaded!” replied Lerneia and swiftly set after Ned on her own.

Winceham stretched. Some faint popping and crackling sounds were heard; he let out a sigh and fiddled with his satchel. After a while he was holding a small leather pouch and a small, delicate pipe in his hands. Those items seemed to instantly attract Parcifal’s attention.

“What’s that?” she asked bluntly, cocking her head sideways as if trying to peek.

“What does it look like to you?” said Winceham without affording her even a glance, too busy filling his pipe.

“Some sort of pipe, perhaps?” inquired Parcifal with carefully measured uncertainty.

“I’m surprised someone imparted with such a high level of intelligence would be so levelheaded as to ask men of lesser caliber like my person such paltry questions for the mere sake of conversation,” said Winceham and lit his pipe, drawing in the smoke deeply. A smile of pure joy formed on his face and he laid himself flat on the ground, little wisps of smoke twirling intensely wherever starlight poured through as they wafted upwards around his head.

Parcifal turned her head around to venture a look towards her sister and Ned. Her eyes searched for them intently but she could barely make their shadows further up the hill, shrouded by the tall grass. They seemed to have stopped and they were probably talking by the way she saw her sister flailing her hands about her. She then asked Winceham with a rather peculiar voice, as if she was concerned someone might overhear them:

“Could I . . . Could I have a whiff of that?”

Winceham sat upright slowly and opened his eyes languidly; they were red-shot, covered in a slightly glazed sheen. He looked all-too serene and calm, his face adorned with a lopsided smile that verged on drooling. He simply passed Parcifal the pipe and nodded as if his head weighed a ton, his eyes half-open as if about to yawn and fall asleep to never wake up again.

Parcifal leaned toward Winceham and took the proffered pipe in one hand. She took a drag and held it before closing her eyes, her lip curling in a slight grin. She then blew out the smoke in the shape of small circles, before handing back the pipe. She straightened her back and stood watchful as ever Encelados always clasped in her hands, her gaze and indeed her whole face standing out in the night, prouder and brighter than before. It was a stark contrast to the way Winceham looked, which resembled someone who had just woken up from a really rough night that involved all sorts of debauchery and a lynch mob.

“Thanks,” she said and added: “I’d appreciate the discretion.”

“Hey.. What?” asked Winceham as he looked back and forth between Parcifal and the pipe with an expression of amazed wonder as if something miraculously extraordinary had happened right in front of his eyes.

And then he thought he saw a pair of trembling flames behind a nearby bush. He blinked and saw the flames flicker wildly, before vanishing swiftly with a harrowing speed.

“What in all blazes? I must be having a bad trip,” said Winceham mostly to himself and put out his pipe. Parcifal overheard him and commented:

“It’s not that rough of a trail. When my sister and I had to go through the trails of Jordenfall though.. That was rough,

I'll tell you that. Sheer cliffs, hundreds of feet high, slippery ice every step of the way and bone-deep cold that made your teeth hurt just by breathing." Her face was cringing but her voice carried a bitter sweetness. It was the voice of someone who reminisced better times. Winceham eyed her with a worried look, his brow furrowed.

"Are you sure you're okay? Not feeling lightheaded, sleepy, giggly, silly, weird in many different ways?" he asked her with genuine interest. She took a moment to think, shook her head and replied earnestly:

"No.. Couldn't be better. Top notch."

Winceham was looking at her puzzled beyond understanding when his eyes bulged up with sudden terror. He saw the trembling flames from before, trailing orange light in their wake. They were attached to the head of furry white bunny where its eye sockets should be; the hopped about, not further than a few feet away.

Winceham's jaw dropped and he looked at his pipe before staring at the bunny mesmerized. The bunny paused as if it knew, stared back at Winceham and smiled unnervingly before hopping out of view and into a burrowing hole.

"Did you see that?" he exclaimed as he got up on his feet and poked Parcifal in the arm repeatedly. She was instantly energized; she drew Encelados out of the ground and swung it around her wrist expertly, poised to strike unerringly.

"Enemies? Where? I see no-one! Are they using trickery or magic?" she cried and swung her sword randomly through the air.

"The bunny! Didn't you see the bunny with the flaming eyes?" asked Winceham with an unsteady voice and pulled out a stiletto from his belt. The blade was dull, thin and long like a spike. It had been quite some time since it had been last

used.

“A bunny?” asked Parcifal with sudden coldness in her voice as she lowered Encelados and frowned, pouting her lips.

“A rabbit, a hare, a tiny white fluffy thing that hops around all the time! Didn’t you see it?”

“Are you feeling ill?” she asked and looked at Winceham sideways.

“Could be, could be. But you’re feeling fine, right?” he asked with expectation, twirling the stiletto in his hand nervously.

“Invincible, really,” said Parcifal with a grin.

“Great, that’s great. I’m not having a bad trip, it’s just that something actually weird is going on,” said Winceham and sighed. He collected his thoughts for a moment before trying to convince Parcifal that a strange rabbit with flaming eyes was in the vicinity. He felt that stressing the flaming eyes bit was essential since normal rabbits when mixed with fire can’t hop, at least not when roasting on a spit.

“Parcifal, look. It might seem strange but there’s a bunny with its eyes on fire hopping around us. I think it saw us. We must be very careful, stay still and keep our voices down. I can’t stress enough that it’s eyes are on fire and it’s not dead yet,” said Winceham as he scanned the area around them inch by inch, expecting to catch a glimpse of the strange rabbit. Parcifal eyed the man with a sudden sorrow and shook her head, feeling sorry for him.

“Poor Mr. Abbermouth, I hadn’t realised you’ve turned senile until now,” she said regretfully, her voice genuinely sad.

“I’m not senile! And I’m not that old! Is it that hard to believe I saw a bunny with flaming eyes?”

Then as if out of nowhere a robed, hooded and masked

man sprang from a nearby bush behind Parcifal and leaned respectfully towards her ear. The man waved his hands and fingers in an elaborate gesture and whispered to her in a thin, gentle voice:

“There is no bunny.”

Winceham was stunned into silence. He was thinking that perhaps he should point out that there was a strange man right behind Parcifal whispering to her ear, but decided to wait until she acknowledged that herself, just to make sure he wasn't imagining things.

“Who are you?” asked Parcifal as she turned around to face the stranger with Encelados readied in her hand. She appeared calm, yet mindful of the stranger who seemed to be unarmed.

No answer came. Instead the man simply stood there, frozen like a statue, his hands clasped together as if in prayer. His eyes remained closed and he hardly seemed to breathe.

“Will you not answer me, stranger?” Parcifal demanded of him.

“Maybe he's right, maybe there is no bunny,” muttered Winceham when he suddenly saw the same white bunny as before break through the ground from behind Parcifal. It stood there with its eyes locked directly onto Winceham's gaze. Its nose twitched and Winceham saw the flames flash wildly for a moment, right before an intense feeling of chillness crept up his spine and made the hairs on his head stand. Then he saw the rabbit grin at him mischievously, dig back in and disappear from sight.

Winceham was pointing to the ground in stunned silence, with eyes wide open and his arm trembling when Parcifal said to the silent stranger:

“I am Parcifal Teletha, scion of Phedra Teletha and He-

lios of the Teletha family of Nomos, princess successor and adjutant to the Throne, in exile. Now that my lineage is made known, speak of yours or insult and anger me at your peril.”

Her tone was noble yet carried determined menace. It was easy for someone to see she meant every word by her thunderous stare. The man opened his right eye, peeked at her momentarily, and then closed it and simply stood there just like before, as if choosing to ignore her.

“The bunny. It was right behind you Parcifal, I swear.” said Winceham.

Parcifal turned and shot Winceham an angry look. She added with exasperation:

“I don’t care about your delusions! What manner of person is this man who refuses to talk, as if I’m not even here?” she said pointing at the man with Encelados’ tip. Winceham had no other option but try to sound convincing yelling at the top of his lungs:

“I’m not delusional! It dug its way up right behind you barely a moment before!”

“Oh, grow up!” said Parcifal dejectedly. Winceham couldn’t help but explode:

“I’m a hundred and thirty two years old, this is as grown as I’ll ever be!”

And then they heard Lernea’s voice in commanding, boisterous tones:

“By Skrala, stay your loud mouths!”

Winceham and Parcifal turned and looked at Lernea with red, flustered faces from all the shouting and yelling. She threw them a scolding stare but what caught her eye was the strange man and the fact he was looking straight at her. She was confused for a moment. When she stared back at him with all the nobility she could muster under the circum-

stances, she asked him:

“Pray you, stranger, state your name and business lest we consider you unkind towards our persons.”

The silent figure was shocked into motion, taking a sudden step away from everyone else, his arms extended in a purely defensive gesture.

“You can see me? Impossible!” he said to Lernea, stressing the last word as if the absurdness contained was certain.

Lernea and Parcifal exchanged a quick look. Parcifal nodded affirmatively while Lernea replied with an indifferent shrug. Winceham said then visibly irritated:

“They can see you alright! It’s that monster of a rabbit they think I’m making up!”

“I beg your pardon! Bo is not a monster!” said the robed man insulted, instantly letting go off his prohibitions concerning the fact he was completely visible to everyone involved. He took off his mask and hood as well, revealing long fair and silver dreadlocks of hair, and a pair of pointy ears that stood effortlessly upright. He protested:

“Bo is very kind and completely harmless. Not a monster at all. I demand you take that back!” said the stranger with the flair of someone who isn’t really used to demanding things of people.

“It’s eyes spout flames!” shouted Winceham, being extravagantly descriptive, making weird hand gestures and bulging his eyes to make his point.

“That’s just a condition!” cried the stranger with a surprised look of feeling suddenly outmatched and unfairly accused.

“Is it now?” exclaimed Winceham flailing his hands about him, laughing in spite of himself in disbelief.

“You haven’t answered us, stranger,” demanded Parcifal, a hint of aggression in her tone.

“Yes, who are you? And how come your hair is that fair and weird-looking at the same time?” added Lernea with an inquiring furrow of her brow.

“Shut up!”

Ned’s roaring shout attracted everyone’s stare. He cleared his throat and said with an inspiring voice, the voice of a true leader:

“The clock’s ticking. Stop mucking about with nonsense. The people we’re going up against are extremely dangerous. Our lives are in mortal peril. Always keep that in mind.”

Everyone remained silent; Parcifal smiled thinly and nodded, while Lernea added:

“Ned’s right. I for one, agree.”

Winceham suggested mildly:

“What about the rabbit?”

“Bo? He’s always around, I wouldn’t worry about him. Say, what brings you around these parts?” said the stranger with the pointy ears and strange hair with an awkward smile.

“You’re Woodkin, aren’t you?” asked Ned. The stranger gasped; he was once more shocked into silence for a moment before managing to stutter slightly:

“How... How do you know that?” he said with a tremor in his voice.

Winceham cut in abruptly:

“The pointy ears, the fair, weird hair. The silly hood and mask. That’s just like you people.”

The stranger shot an off-beat glance at Winceham and managed to sound actually hurt:

“What do you mean, ‘you people’?”

“We even know the bunny by name, but not yours. My patience is spent!” said Parcifal and raised Encelados threateningly. Ned lowered her arm and said:

“Calm down now. What is your name, woodkin?”

The woodkin looked at the sword’s blade respectfully and then addressed Ned with a slight bow:

“My name is Hanultheofodor Tryphtwifidyr.”

Ned seemed to cringe at the thought of uttering the name fully, so he simply offered his hand and smile thinly but reassuringly. The woodkin obliged him somewhat awkwardly after noticing that everyone had their eyes fixed on him. As he shook hands with Ned, Lernea told him:

“Take us to your leader!”

It would have sounded commanding and perhaps a little intimidating, if Parcifal hadn’t been petting the white bunny with the flaming eyes with giggly excitement.

* * *

They passed a series of crests and low hills shrouded in ever-thickening bush and tall, wide-trunked trees. The savanna forest had indeed turned into a jungle proper, full of mangroves and palm trees, thick grub and lush flower plants blocking their way. ‘Theo’, which was how everyone called Hanultheofodor for practical purposes, knew the terrain well enough to avoid the thicker parts, but occasionally he had to use his machete to cut a path through. The air smelled of sweet but deadly flowers and acrid sweat as the wetness of the place became bothersome.

Their progress was just as slow as before; Parcifal had dubbed it half-man pace and Winceham had insisted on at least calling it a halfuin pace for the sake of proper inter-species etiquette. He had quietened down soon afterward though when he became acutely aware that being so short and therefore close to the jungle floor bed was disadvantageous at best; the realisation came after he had stepped on a snake thicker than his arm and longer than imagination allowed for.

The snake had been easily dealt with a chop from Parcifal’s blade. She made Winceham owe her one and even placed a bet that he’d owe her more further down the road.

With the woodkin village still out of view, Parcifal and Theo were leading the way. Encelados was drawn in her hand should anything try and surprise them; she had more than balked at the idea of using her blade as a grass-cutter. Even Lerneia admonished she had only once seen her sister so frightfully indignant.

They walked silently, taking care not to step on something that could bite back, each one lost in their own thoughts, for their own reasons. At length, Theo asked Parcifal:

“So none of them followed you?”

“None that we could see, no.”

“Which reminds me, I have to ask: How is it that your sister could see me?”

Parcifal found the question nonsensical at best, but her blinking stare failed to convey that feeling to Theo. He waited for an answer, smiling affably, while the only thing Parcifal could conjure in words was:

“Is that a question? You want to know how it is that my sister could see you?”

“Of course! Counter-spelling an illusionist’s Ethereal Trance is a remarkable feat for someone not versed in the art of Choujou,” said Theo and Parcifal raised an eyebrow. She suspected Theo, their informal but helpful impromptu guide, had thought he could turn invisible for some weird reason that might or might not include an unreasonable amount of dreamhops or fuddlegrass, just like the kind Winceham had shared with her.

“You are the illusionist you are referring to, I’d wager?”

“Indeed. Are you familiar with the Choujou school of magic?”

“Not really, no,” replied Parcifal with a weary voice.

“Ah, its tradition goes back thousands of years. The ever-grazing mist of time has long ago obscured its deepest secrets, but my people have preserved its legacy and the source of its real power,” he said as he cut a thick, rich cluster of foliage with a few chops of his machete.

Parcifal was suddenly intrigued at the mention of the words “secrets”, “power” and “my people”. The thought came to her that perhaps Ned had been right to convince them to seek the Woodkin.

That was, if of course the rest of Theo’s kin had a firm grasp of this witchcraft he talked about. Because it was her informed opinion that the young woodkin elf was a bit light-

headed, to put it mildly. She had no idea what to make of his peculiar animal companion though, other than stew.

Bo hopped in and out of the ground, the flames in his eyes lighting up the path ahead with a warm orange light. The bunny would at times pause, raise itself on its hind legs and shoot the party a glance before burrowing in the ground, only to appear a couple of minutes later down the path as suddenly as it had disappeared. But it never strayed away from Theo for too long; that did not escape Winceham's attention.

"See it? There; and there it is again. It just keeps doing that," said Winceham to Ned with a raspy, aggravated voice.

"It's just a bunny, Winceham. Leave it be. There are far worse things that may roam about."

"It keeps staring at me at the oddest of times, Ned. I swear."

Ned shook his head and looked at Winceham sideways while he said: "It's just your imagination, Winceham. It's been a long, difficult night and it's only a couple of hours until dawn breaks. Your eyes are playing tricks, that's all."

"What about its eyes, Ned? Hm? What about those flaming eyes?" asked Winceham with a worried expression.

"Like he said, it's some condition or other. I've heard of stranger things; of wild beasts that will turn you into stone, and lurking horrors that can drain your soul with a single touch of theirs. A rabbit with flaming eyes doesn't sound all that dangerous."

"Those were the drunken tales of rabid sailors, Ned! While this.. This abomination is right there, watching me," said Winceham with a half-crazed look on his face.

"I recall yourself as well sharing such morbid tales of fascinating creatures in the past. Could this be just another fantasy of yours?" asked Ned with a gentle smile.

Winceham made a gesture of acceptance with both hands and replied:

“Now, I may have from time to time exaggerated concerning some of my former adventures, especially when women and riches were mentioned, but it was merely in order to put some polish in the boring details. This though. . . This rabbit. It has its eye on me, I tell you.”

Ned stopped and took Winceham by the shoulder. His face became grim, his voice unusually stern and cold:

“I’ve invoked Nadragatea on you, Winceham. This is one tale you’ll have to follow to the end, you know that. Don’t just pretend; your life depends on that as well.”

Winceham looked instantly and genuinely hurt; his eyes searched Ned’s face for signs of the young lad who had grown into as much as a friend as his father. He saw little of the boy he remembered; instead, he was looking at a strong-willed man, indeed more than the boy’s father had ever been.

“You’re right laddie, I’m full of it. Well, sometimes. I’m just saying, I don’t like that bunny one bit, that’s all,” said Winceham, sounding apologetic.

Ned nodded with an understanding look. He motioned them to move on again even as Lernea caught up from behind, where she had been scouting from the last hilltop they had climbed down from.

“Nothing, for as far as I could see. No-one is on our trail. If someone’s out this far to get us, they’re probably lost someplace or coming at us from a totally different direction. No torches or lamps, or light of any kind,” said Lernea, a little short on breath.

“You don’t know what to expect from Hobb. It does make sense though; they sent a mob after us, but we weren’t there. As long as we’re out of the picture, Hobb will have the Snig-

gering Pig to himself anyway. As far as he's concerned, we've turned tail and ran, never to show our faces again," Ned told Lernea, who in turn asked:

"What about the ape-man? Won't that man, Culliper, seek revenge for his comrade?"

"Culliper?" cut in Winceham with a snorting laughter full of disbelief and added:

"That sea-maggot is a slave-driver, pure and simple. The only thing he cares about is his hide and his loot. For the right coin, Culliper could be working for anyone. Though I hear those ape-men are hard to come by, I wouldn't worry about Culliper. Not until we meet him on our own terms."

Ned nodded in agreement. He had a bitter, austere look carved across his face when he said:

"You leave Culliper to me when the time comes."

"When the time comes, Ned," repeated Winceham with rare somberness. Lernea was about to ask something when she saw her sister only a few dozen yards up ahead signal a message with her hands. Parcifal had stooped low, her gaze wandering, searching for something in the night. Lernea nocked an arrow when she saw Encelados' suddenly glow faintly; the glow became stronger with every passing moment. She signaled back at Parcifal who acknowledged with a simple nod. She had to reign in Theo's mouth with her free hand. It seemed to her that the woodkin had a very vague idea of danger, as something that could only affect other people.

A faint hope of Winceham being mistaken in his assumption that something was amiss sprung up inside him. He felt he had to ask in a low voice:

"The sword's glowing? Is that normal?"

She simply shook her head and without turning her head replied:

“Something evil lurks nearby.”

Ned fed a bolt in his crossbow and readied it in his hand, even as Winceham drew his stiletto and headed off amidst the thick brush.

“Where are you going?” asked Ned with urgency.

“I’ll scout around. Need to make myself sparse if I am to strike from the shadows, lad.”

“It’s a moonless night, there’s shadows everywhere,” said Ned sounding confused.

“Exactly,” said Winceham and nodded to Lernea who afforded him a thin grin. Within a few moment, he had melted away into the shadows that abounded, as if he’d never really been there.

“How did he do that?” whispered Lernea to Ned.

“He’s a thief,” said Ned as they warily made their way closer to Parcifal and Theo.

“Retired,” she hissed and Ned simply shrugged.

“Makes for a weak alibi in some lands,” he replied and Lernea shook her head. As they approached Parcifal, they saw her hand-signaling furiously; her face was almost obscured in the shadow of a nearby tree but they could see her face was taut with bone-breaking intensity. The hand signals were confused, hasty; Lernea couldn’t make out what her sister was trying to tell her in silence. She shook her head and waved her to repeat, while Ned was right beside her, aiming his crossbow at a thick patch of utter blackness that seemed most inviting for something that could be lurking out of sight.

He then noticed the bunny; it was looking straight at him, the flames from his eyes having died down to a pair of crackling embers. The bunny curled its tiny lips into an impossible grin just for Ned alone to see and hurriedly burrowed inside the ground in an instant.

Parcifal seemed to sigh even as Encelados began to glow fiercely, casting harrowing shadows of Parcifal and Theo around the thick brush. Parcifal repeated her message but to no avail; Lernea shook her head again.

“What is she trying to say?” asked Ned.

“It’s either large flying beast lurking on the treetops or mythical magical beast wandering up ahead, I can’t tell.”

Ned swallowed hard at that piece of information; he couldn’t understand what the difference really was, so he simply asked, his voice trembling slightly, hinting of mounting tension:

“How is one, better news than the other?”

“It’s really important to know which one’s which. I claim flying kills first, while Parcifal claims the land-dwellers,” she said matter-of-factly as she signaled her sister they were about to sprint within whispering distance.

“Oh, isn’t that wonderful? What happens if it’s a sea creature, or something that lives underground?” he asked ironically, surprised at the nonchalance of Lernea, as well as his own reaction.

“Coin toss,” she said as the irony was lost on her. She nearly dragged Ned alongside her as they ran, stooping low, to cover the distance between Parcifal and them. Their feet shuffled over the thick boggy ground with a squishy noise. When they were within earshot, Parcifal turned around and whispered to her sister:

“I said, it’s a bleeding flying lizard!”

To which Theo managed to answered promptly when he finally pushed Parcifal’s hand aside. Completely heedless of the need to remain as silent as possible, he made sure to stand up in order to deliver his point more acutely:

“That’s utterly absurd! It’s not a lizard, that’s a dragonkin

pure and simple. It is a fairly easy mistake to make though, since-”

Theo was cut mid-sentence as a loud screeching noise like a sad, horrific growl was quickly followed by the figure of a muscular, nine-foot tall lizard-like creature swooping down from the treetops towards them. A set of unnervingly sharp-looking claws the size of short curvy blades extended from its feet.

“Get down you muttering fool!” said Lerneia and thrust herself on Theo, bringing him down even as Ned shot his crossbow reflexively. Ned’s shot missed wildly, unlike Parcifal. Timing her thrust, Encelados met with the creature’s belly as it tried to leap upwards again, to hide in the lush canopy or have another go at them at its leisure. That was no longer possible, as Parcifal’s blade brought it down after a couple of yards thrashing, wailing its high-pitched death throes in anguish, blood gushing freely from a lengthy wound, the creature’s ghastly innards freely exposed.

Parcifal quickly walked over to the dying creature and stood above it as it lay there, dying meekly. Theo exclaimed:

“Jah be with us! That dragonkin-”

Lerneia could not resist the urge; she slapped him hard across the face and told him as he stood in frozen disbelief:

“That’s for being an idiot. You can thank me for saving your life later.”

Theo tried to force his mouth to make audible sounds form into a semblance of speech, while Parcifal held Encelados shoulder high and said ceremoniously:

“Unto the abyssal chasm I comment thee, beast.”

She swung Encelados down sharply and the creature’s head came off its neck clean, like a slice of fruit. The pool of blood around its lifeless body was already beginning to

clog, while the cut below the head was almost clean dry. Parsifal looked at her sister with a mischievous look, underlined by a gleeful grin:

“That’s one more for me, sister.” Lerneia bit back a reproachful answer:

“You had no right for first kill! That’s bad etiquette and certainly counts as cheating!”

Theo swallowed hard and managed to regain a measure of composure. He laid himself down near the creature, muttering mostly to himself:

“The dragonkin..”

The sisters exchanged terms and conditions loudly, fighting over first kill rights and standing scores, while Ned noticed something peculiar and said to no-one in particular:

“If that thing was evil, and that sword of yours detects evil in all its forms, why is it still glowing brighter than ever?”

Theo chimed in morosely:

“Because that dragonkin was Vulsek, my flying steed. He wasn’t evil, just scared.”

The sisters heard that and paused to wonder even as Parsifal shot a look at Encelados. It was indeed glowing with dazzling ferocity. They exchanged knowing worried looks when suddenly Winceham burst forth from a patch of tall grass running with all the speed his stature and years allowed. He shouted something indelible to the others without turning around to look, and lost himself through another thick bush behind the crest of a ravine.

“What did he say? Something about a rat and a tip?” asked Ned as he fumbled with his crossbow, trying to reload it in a hurry, shooting worried glances at the wild grass in the meantime.

The bunny then popped up in front of him from under-

ground, and started running around in circles, the flames from its eyes whirling in a blinding fashion.

“Bo looks excited about something. Maybe Mr. Abbermouth was excited about something as well,” said Theo and then suddenly a trio of bipedal mushrooms holding iron spears and using their tops as shields came out of the thick grass running awkwardly, exchanging long-winded moaning sounds and pointing at Theo and the rest aggressively, if one were to judge by the way the spears faced towards the group.

“I’m not sure Wincham has a thing for mushrooms,” shouted Lernea and let the string of her bow sing sharply.

“I’d say he’s more into greens, I assure you,” said Parcifal with a shake of her head and rushed the warrior-mushrooms head on, whirling Encelados with wild abandon. Ned was looking at the scene in front of him as if it were only a dream; he had a sudden epiphany then and told Theo who was waving his hands about him in a ridiculously complicated manner in what seemed to be preparation for a spell:

“Did you hear the joke about the fungus?”

“No, what joke?”

“I could tell you now, but it might need time to grow on you,” said Ned and grinned while Theo stood pondering as his hands filled with a shiny, blue ball of crackling energy. Ned let a bolt fly straight through the mouth of a raging mushroom-warrior which plucked half its head off and brought it down with a flop. Lernea was reloading her bow after her first arrow got stuck on a mushroom cap, and Parcifal poised Encelados for yet another slash at the wild mushroom-man directly in front of her, expertly avoiding its thrusts and hacking it to death; it was a matter of few strokes.

Theo suddenly shook with hearty laughter as the joke struck home, and at the same time hurtled a ball of light-

ning at a mushroom charging Lernea, its spurious gait almost laughable. The mushroom promptly exploded into a cloud of charred dust with fleshy bits of what used to form its torso flying around. The smell of burning fungi permeated the air. Parcifal made sure Encelados wasn't glowing any more before saying triumphantly:

"Such is the way Encelados pierces through the shadow of evil!"

Lernea sounded demoralized, distraught even:

"That's not fair! Even Ned killed one!"

Ned ignored the comment on his abilities as a marksman and walked over the body of his kill, looking for his bolt.

Theo sounded deliriously giggly, barely able to make sense when he said:

"See, I get that! Fungi grow, and so will the joke, which is to say, already said! Great stuff, great stuff Ned!"

Ned smiled thinly but pretty soon the smile vanished when Bo the Bunny reemerged in front of him and afforded him an uncannily wide smile. Ned had another flash of mind and asked everyone:

"Where is Winceham?"

Only the bunny knew that Winceham was still running through brush and wood, over bog and marsh, muttering incoherently:

"Bad trip, it's a bad trip's what it is, bad trip, that's all it is.."

* * *

Parcifal had apologized to Theo, but he still looked downcast and moody; he kept Bo the Bunny by his side always. Curiously enough, the usually rampant bunny obliged him. It was as if the animal could sense Theo's loss and sympathized; which wasn't the weirdest thing considering it was a bunny with flames writhing out of its eyes.

Lernea and Ned had found Winceham inside a pool of slimy bog water, drenched in muck. They had a hard time convincing him that the mushroom warriors were real enough to end up dead. Winceham had told them he'd definitely quit when all this debacle was over; he felt had to clarify that he didn't mean that he'd quit the group. After exchanging a few puzzled looks, they were back on the trail that led to Theo's village.

The crack of dawn was upon them; they were tired and hungry, but they pressed on when Theo told them they were almost there. Through a clearing up ahead, they could suddenly see thick plumes of smoke rise up into the sky behind the last crest they had to pass in order to reach the village. Theo smiled brightly for the first time since his steed had been slain:

"Oh! They must be preparing a feast! That's never happened before!"

The others exchanged knowing looks; that smoke was of an entirely different scale. Clouds of smoke that size usually meant that in the very unlikely event of a feast, something had gone terribly wrong. They hadn't the heart to tell Theo; he'd soon find out. Ned almost growled, his anger starting to boil his blood once more:

"Hobb. Hobb must've done this. Damn his name and soul."

Winceham, who had mostly dried up by then, sighed and

added:

“This changes things for the worse,” while the sisters looked at the smoke with heavy, sombre frowns.

“If this really is Hobb’s doing, it’s no longer a matter of debt, pride, or revenge. This is the work of evil; it must be cleansed,” said Parcifal and Lernea agreed with a nod.

“By Skrala, we swear,” she said and carried onwards, beside Theo, his reality distorted by his naive, though well-mannered demeanor. Lernea looked at him with pity; his eyes met hers and his smile made her avert her gaze.

“What’s wrong?” Theo asked her and stopped as they had began to slowly climb the last hill. The others passed them by in silence on their way to the top.

“I was reminded of my home, suddenly,” said Lernea and found a reassuring core of truth to her words. An icy feeling of loneliness crept up on her; the terrible image of Nomos burning in her mind made her shudder.

“Are you cold, or maybe sick?” asked Theo disarmingly. He looked genuinely worried. Lernea held a tear with some effort and told him while she gently pushed him up the slope:

“I’m sorry. That’s all, Theo.”

She shook her head and smiled thinly, as they walked the last few feet to the top in silence. The others were already there, casting long, nimble shadows on the foliage. The sun had barely lifted itself above the lush green carpet of treetops, yet a warm light embraced their faces.

“About Vulsek? It was an accident,” he said without conviction. He was still trying to come to grips with that. When they reached the top, what was left of the village below was painfully in plain sight, fires still consuming small tree-houses, sheds and trees alike. Theo’s jaw dropped in an instant, with Bo always by his side, the flames in his eyes dy-

ing down suddenly. Lerne touched Theo's hand gently and told him in an almost broken voice:

"I'm sorry about your village."

Words failed him. He sank to his knees and fell on the ground, as if the last iota of strength had left him. Winceham awkwardly put a hand around his shoulder and said nothing. Ned looked with mounting anger at the burning village, his eyes wandering aimlessly as if trying to comprehend something illogical; the crackle of fire reached them with ominous clarity. Trees had burned down to a crispy cinder, leaving nothing but ashes and smoldering stumps behind them. Wooden tree-bridges laid in ruins, half-eaten by the flames, the houses at the top of the trees burning away like huge candles, burning flakes wafting in the air like a fiery snowfall.

The sun came up, its first rays lost in the glow of the fires. It was an unruly sight, but no-one looked away; each one of them was lost in their own thoughts. Theo finally broke down in tears, and a tender sob took over him. Bo turned his head to Theo and wrinkled his nose; his whiskers twitched and his eyes lit up with a subdued flame before he ran down the hill, stopped and turned to look straight at Ned. He hopped a couple of times before running down the hillside, towards the village.

"He wants us to follow him. Could he have smelled something?" said Ned and set out after the bunny. Parcifal shrugged a little and followed close by, while Winceham told Theo with a gentle voice down to a whisper:

"We'll get him laddie."

Theo managed to stem the tears and said flatly, his eyes lost somewhere beyond the burning trees: "It doesn't really matter now, does it?"

"No evil deed goes unpunished, Theo," said Lerne and

nodded as she helped him to his feet. Winceham shot her a troubled look and said:

“That’s not how the saying goes, lass.”

To which she replied sternly:

“I do not live my life by rote, halfuin.”

Theo staggered at first, then wiped his eyes with his robe, stifling another sob as they slowly walked downhill. The fire was still slowly consuming everything it touched, but it had mostly died down where it had met the rather soggy, dense forest around the grove where the village had once stood. What was left of it, was burning slowly like candle wax.

The bunny was standing on a well at the village’s entrance. It was hopping and bouncing around like driven suddenly mad.

“Bo’s found someone!” cried Theo and ran to the well. Parcifal was looking at the edge of the village warily; she could not escape a feeling of danger. Winceham hunched low and put his senses to good use, while Lernea asked Ned:

“Could Hobb have done this? Burned down a whole village? Why would he do that?”

“I’m not sure. It doesn’t really make sense. And there’s another thing,” said Ned with a puzzled, worried frown. Lernea looked around and said knowingly:

“There are no bodies. There’s no smell of charred flesh either.”

Winceham turned around and told them, rubbing his fingers full of dirt:

“That’s because they took everyone. At least two dozen strong, deep tracks all over the place. Heavy armor probably. There are no traces of a fight; there’s a strange, faint smell of iron though.”

“But I don’t see blood, nor arrows or weapons. It’s like they took everyone by surprise.”

“Not everyone,” said Theo as he helped an elder-looking woodkin climb out of the well. His plain robes were smudged and stained with soot, his face was dark. Grizzly long dreadlocks adorned his head, where a wooden circlet sat. The Elder smiled copiously as he sat down on the ground, obviously exhausted.

“Fingammon! Jah be with you! Where are the others?”

Parcifal shot the woodkin a suspicious look, her eyes going back and forth between the elder and Theo.

“Why is he different than you?” she asked, clutching Encelados’ hilt nervously.

“How do you mean?” asked Theo with a furrowed brow as he helped Fingammon to his flask of water. The Elder waved the flask away and looked at Parcifal in the eyes. His voice had a strange, gravely quality. It was hoarse and he talked in a drawn out, strangely exotic way:

“Be calm now, woman. It be Hanul who’s different. We be de woodkin, our skin dark from de sun.”

She looked at the dark-skinned elder woodkin as if measuring him for a moment. She then seemed content, and relaxed a bit. Still, she kept a wary look for anything out of the ordinary, whatever her definition of ordinary was for a burning village.

“Where is everyone? What happened?” asked Theo with an urgent, choked voice. Lernea also looked at the elder with a curious gaze. She asked him:

“How come you’re not dead or missing like the others?”

Wincham was still searching for tracks, when Ned placed a hand on Lernea and asked the elder kindly:

“May Jah show everyone the path, woodkin. My friends are tired and worrisome. We mean no harm.”

Fingammon the elder looked at Ned and nodded slowly. He spoke then, the strain on his voice bearing witness to his ordeal:

“They came... They came in a ship,” he said and looked at Theo with a longing to be believed. The others didn’t speak but Parcifal scoffed, and Ned folded his arms on his chest apprehensively. Lernea was now staring at the woodkin with a frown.

“‘Tis true, I know it be crazy, but ’tis true like dem fires. They came in a ship that flew, like da wind could carry it. An octopus drawn on da sail der was, blood red ’n black,” said Fingammon wild-eyed, his hand miming the way the wind blows.

Parcifal spoke her mind:

“The old man has gone mad. For all we know, he was mad to begin with.”

“Fingammon is our mojo priest! The wisest of us all!” cried Theo with outrage, while the bunny’s eyes writhed suddenly with flames.

“We need to know what really happened,” said Lernea looking at Parcifal sideways and asked the old woodkin: “Who came in that ship?”

“It be dem beaucannoneers,” replied Fingammon hoarsely. Ned nodded and said:

“Buccaneers. The red octopus; that would make it one of Hobb’s ship. It was Hobb’s men.”

He stared angrily at the sky. The woodkin spoke then:

“Not men, no,” insisted Fingammon with a wild-eyed gleam on his eyes. “Metal devils, not monsters of flesh. Tall as houses they be, shooting fire through their hands, eyes

gleaming red like blood diamonds,” he said with an awed, humble voice and a hand that wove shapes in the air, trying to paint them a life-like picture. Parcifal shook her head and sheathed Encelados. She put her hands on her waist:

“Delusions. Devils shooting fire? Ships flying? Tales for the children.”

Wincham looked at her from where he was sitting crouched a few feet away. He didn’t share her opinion:

“There are strange things in this world. Things that one rarely meets when leading a sheltered life like yours, princess.” Parcifal took that comment as an insult and replied accordingly:

“My sister and I are scions bred to rule, halfuin. We wield sword and shield and bow, better than any of you. We’ve not been spared of tragedy, nor hurt or ruin. Our lives weren’t sheltered; they were stolen from us,” she said bitterly and looked at Lerneia hoping she would share the same feelings. Instead, her sister motioned with her hand for Parcifal to calm down.

“Mr. Abbermouth is simply suggesting there are things that might have been kept from us, or things that were better left unsaid. Even things yet unknown in our realm. Things rarely witnessed by men,” she said gravely, and Ned added, breaking his thoughtful silence:

“Golems.”

Wincham ran his tongue across his lips and nodded silently, while Ned explained:

“Magical... things. Not beasts, not born, or bred, or grown; something built with the cunning use of magic.”

“Have you seen these things before? Or a ship that flies, for that matter?” asked Parcifal, pure disbelief in her voice. Ned replied in earnest:

“I wouldn’t know anything about a flying ship, but I’ve read books on the subject.”

Parcifal scoffed and laughed with irony. “Books? What good is a piece of paper any man can fill with lies?”

Her sister shot her a look of accusation.

“Careful sister. Master would be quick to anger, calling a scholar like him a liar. Besides, I think I remember him mentioning similar things,” to which Parcifal replied mockingly:

“Of course you remember!”

“I was paying attention, unlike yourself,” retorted Lernea and nodded to Ned, while Parcifal scowled her face and turned her back to her sister rather childishly.

“It’s not lies. There are ways to make them if one is versed well in magic, engineering and other arts. Almost anything inert can be given life to obey one’s wishes, but not a soul,” said Ned. Winceham added:

“The lad speaks the truth. Devious things, but their masters are the ones that control them, the ones that bid them do good or evil. I’m guessing evil, this one,” he said in a somewhat detached manner before he continued: “If they’re made of iron, that would explain the strong scent I picked up. About the flying ship though, I wouldn’t know. I’ve only sailed with those that float on water. I wouldn’t put it past the realm of reality though. It’s a really flexible thing, reality,” he said and he squinted, bringing to mind the mushroom-warriors.

Theo looked angry, even insulted at how everyone refused to believe the elder woodkin. He was about to say something when Fingammon spoke:

“Dem golems took everyone, but dey be lookin’ for sometin’ dey don’t have. I knows.”

“Is that why you were hiding in that well?” asked Ned. Fingammon closed his eyes, nodded and replied:

“Dat be why, yes. Dis be da reason, me thinks,” he said and showed them an amulet he had been wearing around his neck. A large crystal sat inside an elegant gold girder. The crystal shone with iridescent colours and the girder was covered in a form of writing none had ever witnessed before, beautifully flowing and masterfully thin. Theo couldn’t help staring at it with a sudden rush of curiosity; he looked inexplicably drawn to it, somehow.

“What is that?” asked Winceham with a thin grin on his face, mentally calculating its market price. Ned knew that look; he shot the halfuin a disapproving glare and asked Fingammon:

“What makes you think someone would go into all that trouble for a fancy amulet?”

Lerneia answered that before the woodkin had a chance to:

“Because it’s magic,” she said and looked at the elder who nodded silently. Theo couldn’t help but ask Fingammon:

“But what does it do? I’ve never seen you use it.”

“Dat be because I can’t, Hanul.”

“Of course you can, you’re the elder priest. You taught me Choujou yourself. Surely there’s -”

The elder cut Theo short and raised a finger to his mouth, bid him to silence. He then talked to him as if they were alone:

“Boy, you have grown. Years have passed since we found you, a wee baby in da woods.”

Theo’s eyes narrowed, his voice became shallow:

“You mean.. I’m adopted? My parents weren’t eaten by trollsharks?”

Parcifal turned around and saw Theo’s expression of puzzled shock. She had to bury her face in her palm silently.

The others looked at each other awkwardly, but no-one said a word.

“Da tribe raised you like we would a woodkin. But dis amulet, and dat bunny of yours,” he said wild-eyed before adding with a sharp whisper, “I found them in dem woods by your side, twenty long years before.”

“What are you saying?”

“I can’t know why dis came to be, I only know de bunny protected you fiercely. Singed my hair badly, too. And da amulet, I cannae dare guess. But we were afraid to hand it down to ya.”

“Why?” asked Theo with a terrible frown, his voice demanding yet mellow.

“Because o’ da juju you be wieldin’,” replied the priest, real fear riding his voice. Theo couldn’t, or perhaps wouldn’t understand:

“You have the Choujou as well, Fingammon.”

“Dose be no mo’ than tricks, Hanul. Youse’d be four, no mo’, and dere be flames and sparks, even sno’ toyin’ ’round you. And every mon be scared of ya. We taught ya da choujou, da tricks we played on you to keep ya from doin’ any real harm. It be a dangerous gift dat amulet - I can feels it in ma bones. I be a little wisa, and kept it. I knew it be wrong, but we was scared, mon,” said the priest and everyone saw the truth of his words in his burdened voice.

“If that’s true, and that amulet is that dangerous or powerful as you think it is, won’t they be coming again for it?” asked Lernea.

“They made sure to burn down everything though,” Ned added.

“Dey searched everytin’ first. Den dey put chains in me people, and flew away like dey came. I couldn’t see dem,

but me could hear. I heard a man's voice say dey be back, to search wit da hound, 'e said. But de other voice I heard, dat was no man's voice," said the Elder and shook his head from side to side ominously.

"Well, any suggestions?" asked Lernea.

Parcifal broke her silence:

"We need to rest. We can't press any longer today. Svarna knows, I'm starving. Just ate my last sweetbread," she said and placed a hand on her belly.

"We need a place overlooking the village. A hill won't do either; too exposed," offered Ned.

"I know a place. The Lake," said Theo with some reluctance in his voice. Lernea shook her head.

"A lake? Won't do any good, too open."

Theo replied: "It's not a lake, it's a cave really."

"Why do you call it the Lake then?" asked Parcifal with a scoff.

"Because dere be a lake underground," said Fingammon. Winceham stretched his legs and worked his joints. He asked expectantly:

"It's not very far, is it?"

"No, right at that hill's base," said Theo and pointed to a hill stepped in morning shadow.

"Alright then. Let Winceham have first shift, then me and then you sister. Ned and Theo, you're last," said Lernea as she nodded to Theo to help the old woodkin to his feet. Theo did not seem to question her one bit. As the woodkin stood upright, he told Lernea with a fatherly voice:

"You be strong, but dey be stronger dan you. Dey be many. You can't fight dem, if dat be in your mind. Run, woman, I say, and you be running far away."

Lernea shook her head before she replied flatly:

“I’m tired of running, woodkin.”

Those words brought a grin on Ned’s face, while Winceham rolled his eyes and mumbled something about his feet killing him. They all set out towards the Lake, leaving the village’s ruins to smolder under an overcast sky.

“What will we be on the lookout for?” Parcifal asked her sister.

“A flying ship,” said Lernea.

“You don’t really believe that story, do you?” her sister asked in a hushed voice as Theo led the way, Fingammon wearily trudging along by his side.

And then Bo popped up from beneath the ground, right in front of her feet. He looked at her with eyes glowing hot as embers, before grinning widely directly at her and burrowing itself down again. A moment later it popped up right behind Theo, and followed him close by, happily hopping around him playfully, the flames around his eyes twirling like a torch at night.

Parcifal answered her own question before Lernea could answer:

“Never mind that. I guess a flying ship’s not that weird,” she said and fell in line, Ned and Winceham close behind them.

Clouds were gathering. It was a hazy morning.

Ned was on watch, sitting at a ledge at the mouth of the cave. He hadn't really slept all that well; the physical exertion made his muscles ache but his troubled mind couldn't rest, and so he fidgeted nervously, never really getting a proper rest. Dark thoughts wrestled in his mind, and the need for revenge made his stomach churn and his heart thump mightily in his chest. He looked at the cloudy sky from the lip of the cave, his fingers gently caressing his drum, his sole possession in the world now and the last thing he loved.

Theo couldn't sleep either; the realisation that almost his whole life he had been lied to, even if it seemed to be in everyone's best interest, was impossible to fathom. A lot of things were impossible for Theo to fathom actually, but this one in particular stung him like bees from hell. To top it off, there was no-one of his people to talk to about other than the elder, who having fully explained to him how he came to find him one day in the wounds, he fell asleep, the years on his back and the exhaustion from the ordeal with Hobb's raid having exerted their toll on the aged woodkin.

Theo kept to himself, never uttering a word. He sat with his legs crossed, his eyes unable to part with the vista of his village burned to the ground. Little clouds of smoke still gathered above it, but the fires had been extinguished by that time, after having eating almost everything, leaving little for the eye to see that at one time, people had lived there. All that remained, was old Fingammon, sleeping in the cave deeply.

Ned watched Theo absentmindedly, himself lost in thought. He had a sudden realisation then: if it wasn't for the ears and the bunny, it felt to him that he was watching himself. They had both lost their homes, and Theo had never met his parents; in a way, that was worse than what Ned was going through. At least he had some memories. But Theo,

thought Ned, all he had to cry for was a bunny with a condition and an amulet that had only caused him disaster.

“It’s not easy, is it?” said Ned, speaking from the heart. Theo did not look at him, but simply remained silent, gazing outwards into the sky. Ned walked over him, and sat himself down on the bedrock beside Theo.

“My father was murdered last night,” he said. The words spurred something in Theo. He looked thoughtful when he said softly:

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

Ned nodded and spent a moment or so watching Theo in silence. The bunny was with him always it seemed. Just holding Bo seemed to be more than important to Theo. The flames on Bo’s eyes were a mere prickle of light at that time; he looked content, nibbling a thick wide leaf. It kept looking at Theo as if he knew things were hard for him. Ned thought it wasn’t impossible for a flame-eyed rabbit to know such things. It didn’t take an expert in magical beasts to realise it when Bo looked at them funny. This was one such time. Theo noticed the look Bo shot Ned, ears pointed eagerly upright, the prickles of light in its eyes brightening up.

“Calm down Bo. He’s not bad. The bad men are out there,” said Theo with a grittiness that his youthful, woodkin appearance belied. Ned spoke to him earnestly:

“I don’t know what you’re feeling right now. That would be a lie. But you haven’t slept, and I couldn’t do that either. I don’t know if it’s normal. But I’m not feeling tired. Sure, the legs hurt a bit, and my stomach’s growling, but that’s not the real pain.”

Ned let his words trail off awkwardly, remembering what had happened just the night before. He suppressed a tear and feeling somewhat embarrassed, looked the other way. They

sat in relative silence for a few moments, interrupted by the far-away chirping of birds and Winceham's occasional saw-like snore. Theo broke the silence then:

“What was your father like?”

Ned's face contorted with a pained frown while he tried to find the words. He tried to put on a slightly sly smile and said:

“When mother died, I was only eight. I remember I knew that she wasn't just somewhere far away or simply sick.”

“You were a bright boy then. I was told my parents were eaten by trollsharks. Which, it turns out, simply do not exist. I should've made the connection when I saw sharks in the sea. Everyone knows trolls live under bridges. How could've they met and mated then, right?”

Ned's brow furrowed but not unkindly; it was simply the fact that Theo couldn't fail to surprise him every turn of the way. Being around him made everything normal acquire an interesting flair.

“Right. Well, it wasn't that I was that bright, mind you; it's just that we burned her body. The plague, they said. I couldn't speak to her before she passed, for fear I'd catch what she had,” said Ned and looked at his feet for a while before adding, “I think her last words I remember were ‘Go on, Ned. Be a good boy and help you father’”.

Theo had an understanding look in his bright, green eyes. He pouted his lips slightly and said:

“That sounds.. Well, awful. At least, I never knew my real parents. I knew there was something funny about the skin color of everyone else, but I just thought I'd pick it up while growing. I never thought I was... Found,” he said as he swallowed hard and let his voice trail off, his head lowered moodily. A smile crept up on Ned's face. Theo's naivety was

bordering on stupidity as Parcifal would have it, but in his mind, Ned saw a child in a man's body, and that somehow reminded him of himself once more. Strangely, he felt that didn't bother him at all.

"Well, we'll get your people back. With your help. And theirs," he said and pointed to the inside of the cave. He looked at Theo with a gleaming eye and went on: "And I'll avenge my father, and I'll be able to lay his soul to rest."

"Do you think it will be that simple? The golems, the men at his disposal. The magic..." said Theo and looked at Bo momentarily with a frown. The bunny smiled back uncannily for only Theo to see. Ned replied truthfully:

"No, not really. But this is what I have to do. I need this, or else I feel I'll drive myself mad with hate and guilt."

Theo spoke, his words carrying a touch of bitter sweetness:

"I have no-one else to care for than my people, well, except Bo. Even though they're not really my people, I feel I need this as well. Fate, it seems, has brought us together."

"I don't believe much in that sort of thing. It's thinking about fate that keeps people from fighting back. Accepting one's fate, that's the worse that can happen," said Ned and shook his head. Theo looked at him with a wide, gentle smile, accented by the way its edges led to his long, pointy ears:

"I may not have learned much, but I learned that fate is just what binds people together. It's neither a boon, nor a bane; it just is, because we just exist."

Ned raised an eyebrow and seemed to give the notion some thought; he somehow felt lighter alongside the woodkin, as if he could lift his spirits.

"If you put it like that, I have no regrets of a fate alongside you, Theo. You're a good man," he said and nodded with a

smile brimming with camaraderie.

“Nah, I’m still a woodkin boy,” said Theo dismissively and added, “I still need to learn my way around magic.”

Ned furrowed his brow and said loudly:

“But back there, when the mushroom-men attacked, you were fantastic!”

“Really? I kind of never did that before, actually,” replied Theo with a sheepish grin that hinted at guilty mischief. Ned was taking Theo’s word as not too literal, thinking the woodkin was simply being modest.

“What do you mean? Your hand flew sparks and everything. Well, you almost missed, but that’s just takes practice I guess.”

Theo smiled broadly and sprang up on his feet. He felt a bit proud, and a bit taller suddenly.

“Now that you mention that, it brought to mind that joke of yours. It was hilarious!” he said and couldn’t help giggle just a bit at the thought. Ned looked excited, and that carried on to the volume of his voice when he almost shouted:

“Really?!” Theo nodded in silent affirmation and Bo raised his head alarmingly. Ned went on:

“Well, I’ve been having a hard time getting people to like those. It’s a long way to the top, if you wanna be a bard these days.”

Theo asked him:

“You’re a bard? What kind of instrument do you play?”

“Oh, I play the drum,” said Ned and shot his red birchwood drum a glance, before adding:

“I know it’s a little hard to play most omens, prophecies and tales with just a beating drum, but I believe it has great potential. Maybe if more bards got together and everyone played a different instrument, I could be, you know, support-

ing their music with beating the drum. And then we could tour, get the crowd rolling. It could be amazing,” said Ned with childish excitement overrunning his voice.

“I don’t want to put you off, but that sounds all wrong. I mean, who would want to see the same bards over and over again? And everyone singing at the same time? Think of the cacophony. Come to think of it, how do you play notes on that thing? I don’t see any keys, strings or pipes,” said Theo without thinking about it at all. His disarmingly blunt honesty fired Ned up.

“It doesn’t have notes! It does have tone values though! And it needs tuning as well! And for your information, people would love to hear the same songs and tales over and over! I know I do! Gods, everyone’s an expert now!” shouted Ned with a sudden pang of mild anger. The bunny’s eyes produced a burst of flames as Bo turned and looked at him with a twitchy nose. Theo simply spoke his mind:

“I’m just saying, it would be better to stick to the jokes for now. Just until you get that team of bards going.”

Ned thought about that for a while. “A team of bards? It’s not a race, or a game. It’s art; it will be a band of bards. Like, sticking together, but also having room to be free. Experimenting,” his words accompanied by wild, excited hand gestures, his voice once again lost in excitement.

“I see. Will it involve jokes? I think it should involve jokes,” said Theo and Ned replied in a ponderous voice:

“Maybe, maybe. We’ll see, when all this is over. Maybe we could try it together.”

Theo shook his head with a frown. “I don’t think that would work. I mean, I’m terribly bad at that sort of thing. I once sang in a feast, and the coconut milk went sour for a week. Plus, people tell me I have a really bad sense of

humor,” replied Theo and Ned realised with a scowl that Theo liking his jokes wasn’t necessarily a good thing.

“Oh, well. That sounds... Well, we’ll think of something.”

And then they heard a loud sound like a squawk echo from the inside of the cave. Bo’s eyes flared up when the sound turned into a growl. They exchanged worried looks and were almost ready to do something stupid when they heard Winceham’s voice tied up in a long-winded snarl:

“I’ll tell what I’ve been thinking.. I’ve been thinking, when this is over and I’m dead, I’m going to haunt you with screeching banshee howls. How can any man get some decent sleep with all of that noise you’re making!”

“Oh, it’s you,” said Ned and relaxed, while Theo tried to apologize:

“We were just talking, Mr. Winceham.”

Winceham shot Theo half a look and said while squinting at the overcast sky:

“Mr. Abbermouth. Or Winceham. Can’t be both. Apology accepted. It would do you good to take an example from this laddie, Ned,” he said and stretched with a yawn.

“More advice, Wince? It doesn’t always work, I’m afraid,” Ned said and didn’t bother to look at the halfuin. Winceham realised Ned was probably still blaming mostly him for what happened at the Sniggering Pig. He’d try and talk it out of him, if he didn’t know Ned all too well. He simply changed the subject:

“Any sign of them yet? Where’s the bleedin’ sun when you need it? What time is it?” he asked and his eyes froze when he saw the bunny turn his head around at an impossible angle, grin at him and hold up a flaming hourglass with his hind legs, writhing with molten fire. It showed the day was well into the afternoon.

“I’d say afternoon,” said Theo, looking at the clouds as if he could make out the sun behind them. No-one but Winceham had noticed Bo’s antics, or if they had, they didn’t look surprised. Winceham thought as much and asked flatly:

“You didn’t see that, did you?”

“See what?” said Ned and searched at the sky beyond, for signs of the flying ship or anything equally disturbing that spelled bad news.

“Never mind, it could be because I’m starving,” replied Winceham and spent a moment to himself before asking both of them:

“Doesn’t all this waiting get to you?”

Suddenly, a shadow seemed to toy with the clouds at a distance. “There! It’s coming out of the clouds! See its bow?” cried Ned and pointed to a hazy part of the clouds where the shape of a small ship began to take form. Theo stared for a moment and nodded fervently:

“I see it too! And that red blot! The red octopus on the sail! It’s them!”

Winceham said mostly to himself with a scoff:

“As if there’s a boatload of ships flying in the clouds. ‘Course it’s them!”

“Wake the others, Wince!” said Ned and picked up his crossbow and drum.

“So, we’re sticking to the plan?” asked Theo. Ned replied without taking his eyes off the ship:

“Of course!”

“Are you sure this will work?” asked Theo and his expression was a mix of indecision, worry and excitement.

“Of course it’ll work! Have faith, Theo,” said Ned and squeezed Theo’s arm reassuringly. He then turned around and saw Winceham filling his pipe without a care in the world,

watching as the flying ship's silhouette became clear in the horizon.

"She's a beaut though," said Winceham and lit his pipe. Ned asked with surprise:

"What are you still doing here?"

"You didn't say please," replied Winceham and Ned walked past him and into the cave, ignoring him with a scowling face.

"Don't expect me to," he said as his figure disappeared into the darkness of the cave, Bo hopping alongside him and lighting his path with his flaming eyes.

"You'll be thanking me later!" said Winceham with a grin as he let out a small cloud of smoke through his nostrils.

"Bo! Get back here! Bo, don't get in the water now!" yelled Theo.

Winceham held his pipe in one hand and asked with a sideways look:

"Is your rabbit allergic to water like yourself?"

"No, it's just because of the monsters in the water," replied Theo as if it those monsters were common knowledge.

"There are monsters in the Lake?" asked Winceham with a sudden terrible realisation urging him to start running towards the depths of the cave.

"Aren't there monsters in every lake?" said Theo with an almost appallingly naive smile.

"You thick barkskin! Hurry!" Winceham called after him.

"Why? The bad guys are the other way! That wasn't the plan!" he said even as he ran along. Winceham's shouts echoed faintly from a place where shadow had replaced light utterly:

"The sisters, you idiot! They're bathing in the Lake!"

* * *

Parcifal was fidgeting uncomfortably inside their make-shift, make-believe suit. Lernea exhibited magnanimous self-control, but the deadly hawk-like furrow on her face gave away her true feelings. Parcifal simply spoke them aloud instead of holding them within:

“This is ridiculous! Why are we supposed to be the freak of the show?”

Ned was busy searching for the men who had disembarked from the flying ship. He had seen a couple of them, along with an ape-man, and what must’ve been the Hound Fingammon had heard mention of. Still, as they waded through the bush, approaching Hobb’s search party with care, he once more explained to the noble princess why she and her sister, the Queen by right, were wearing a large bear-skin covering up their gear, pretending to be a two-headed freak:

“It’s the gear. It’s the only way to cover up your gear. I’ll be playing the drum and singing, while Theo will be in charge of the pyrotechnics for the show.”

“By pyrotechnics, you mean flames and whatnot, right?” asked Theo anxiously. Ned nodded reassuringly. Lernea talked with an impossibly sticky voice reminiscent of what dying in a tar pit would sound like:

“What about the halfuin?”

“No other place to stick him, sorry. He could have been the jester but there’s nothing at hand for a jester suit; also, he couldn’t dance for the life of him. So, you’re the two-headed, six-legged freak,” said Ned.

“I get better ideas when nature calls,” said Parcifal as she tried to walk in step with the others occupying the same skin, meeting with stumbling success. Winceham’s voice came muffled from under the bearskin, and in direct opposition to the sisters on either side of him, sounded positively delighted

with Ned's idea about diversionary tactics:

"I can't see a bloody thing in front of me, but I know where to put me hands if I should happen to fall, laddies!", said the halfuin with a rowdy, knowing laughter. Lernea protested:

"That was a sexual innuendo if I've ever heard one! Shameful, Mr. Abbermouth! Recant at once, once more!"

Parcifal's idea of a protest was more physical. "Do that, and I'll make sure you and your hands part ways none too soon," she said with a cold voice and a vicious gaze that searched the clearing ahead for an opportunity to slash something to its death.

"Keep it quiet! Act like it, alright?"

Theo nodded his agreement. He flexed his fingers and kept a wary eye, while Bo burrowed and dug up himself by his side, vigilant flames flaring up from his perky beady eyes from time to time.

"I've already seen the act's preview back in the Lake!" said Winceham and started giggling like some sort of gibbering old fool. Parcifal exchanged a look with her sister and put her boot down hard on Winceham's right foot, while Lernea caught his left arm and dragged him along while he hopped on one foot.

"Ow! No need to get upset!" he said with some real pain echoing in his voice.

"We're not upset. Your feet are too small to notice, that's all," said Parcifal with a blank face and Lernea added as she too, fidgeted inside her suit:

"That was for fooling us out of the water, you perverted thief."

"That was a misunderstanding! His eloquence, the-woodkin-not-from-around-these-parts, Hanulthetryftidor

whats-his-name, had me thinking there were monsters in there,” said Winceham and even behind the bearskin, his muffled voice made it easy enough to picture him stabbing Theo with an aggravated look.

“Hanultheofodor, though Hanul or Theo will do just fine,” replied Theo as he turned to look at the sisters with an overeager smile before adding:

“I’m sorry, but by monsters in that context, I was referring to the water spiders. Bo hates water-spiders for some reason, but they’re fairly harmless unless you’re a bug, which is what they eat. Mostly.”

“Well you’re not complaining about Ned! He was there as well!” said Winceham before stumbling over a thick root and grumbling an incoherent curse.

“Ned disciplined himself like a true gentleman and averted his gaze while you kept grinning from ear to ear.”

“Right, so I’m to blame for being a hot-blooded halfuin while this lad is still a-”

Ned was about to interrupt Winceham’s rant with some mild verbal violence when Theo froze in his stride and whispered:

“It’s them; behind those trees. At the edge of the village, near the well. See? The man-apes, Hobb’s men, and that thing...”

“The Hound,” he said with a feeling of awe and mounting anger as his eyes could not peel away from the three-headed canine, abnormally large, its skin sleek-black like the darkest of nights. A hundred feet or so behind the pirate search party, the silhouette of the ship bobbed lazily in the air, nearly the same height as the treetops. “Alright,” said Ned with conviction. “It’s show-time. Act natural.”

“We’re supposed to be a freak of nature. What’s natural

about that?" said Parcifal dismissively while Lerneia tried to fit her bow snugly under the taught bearskin that covered all three of them like an over-sized coat.

"Try to clap along the sound of my beat. When I stop the drumming and singing, have a go at them," said Ned and started off with a drum roll, his red drum strapped in place in front of him, his tinglewood sticks a gift from his father. His voice echoed merrily as he sung at the top of his lungs, alongside the perky beat of his drum:

And it's all for me grog, me jolly, jolly grog
All for me beer and tobacco
Well, I spent all me tin on the lassies drinking
gin
Across the southern ocean I must wander

Hobb's men heard them before they could see them. One of the Hound's head's sniffed the air vigorously, while another turned and looked sideways at Ned and the others as they tried to dance about to the tune, the sisters and Wincham having a real problem standing upright while their dance looked more like a drunken balancing act.

The ape-men grinned broadly at the spectacle, while the buccaneers had the uneasy expression of someone meeting an odd, crazy-looking person on his doorstep asking to use the facilities.

Ned kept at the song as they got closer at a walking pace, and Theo performed a sort of light show, sprinkling shiny dust in the air. Even Bo added his flaming eyes to the performance, hopping eagerly.

Where are me boots, me noggin, noggin
boots

they're all gone for beer and tobacco
For the heels they are worn out and the toes
are kicked about
And the soles are looking for better weather
And it's all for me grog, me jolly, jolly grog
All for me beer and tobacco
Well I spent all me tin on the lassies drinking
gin
Across the southern ocean I must wander

Ned exchanged looks sideways with Theo. The ape-men where clapping their hands and jiggling their heads in tune with the beat of Ned's drum, while the buccaneer men pointed a couple of fingers and shot some ugly stares at the two-headed freak. They were in fact arguing whether or not the six-legged weirdo was supposed to be the dancing lead, seeing that the drummer and the clown were busy with their own act. Perhaps not surprisingly, the Hound had its six eyes all set on Bo; the beast looked tense, its lean muscles taut on edge. They were now no more than ten yards away, and Ned was banging away a joyous beat, his voice like hearty laughter through the air:

Where is me shirt me noggin, noggin shirt
It's all gone for beer and tobacco
For the collar is all worn and the sleeves they
are all torn
And the tail is looking for better weather
And it's all for me grog, me jolly, jolly grog
All for me beer and tobacco
Well I spent all me tin on the lassies drinking
gin
Across the southern ocean I must wander

The two-headed freak, the sisters and Winceham in disguise really, tried to clap its hands together on tune but rarely managed to do so. It rather seemed to punch its belly vigorously, both heads smiling brightly as it did so. Winceham's muffled agony at the hands of the sisters was obfuscated by Ned's singing and drum act, while Theo's cantrips had even attracted the gaze of the wary buccaneers who were tapping their boots in tune as well. The ape-men had put down their blunderbusses and were dancing, arm-in-arm, in a rather hairy, unpleasing sight. The Hound though kept trained at Bo who was happily doing somersaults in the air; a flaming rainbow of orange light trailed his eyes. Ned and the rest entered into a circle around the group of Hobb's men, and into the final verse:

I'm sick in the head and I haven't gone to bed
Since I first came ashore from me slumber
For I spent all me dough on the lassies don't
you know
Far across the southern ocean I must wander
And it's all for me grog, me jolly, jolly grog
All for me beer and tobacco
Well I spent all me tin on the lassies drinking
gin
Across the southern ocean I must wander

Ned' voice trailed off and he ventured a somewhat nervous look at Theo. The ape-men staggered as the banging of the drum stopped, and one of the buccaneers asked showing a set of teeth that looked like a puzzle badly missing most of its pieces:

"Oy, what yer' doin' 'roun 'ere now, then? Off ye go, 'less you be wantin' a taste o' me steel."

“And hot lead, aye. Don’t forget about hot lead now, Mr. Jessums,” added the other one and spat at the ground for no reason at all.

“Are we on yet?” came Winceham’s muffled cry from within the belly of the two-headed freak and one of the ape-men was instantly overjoyed:

“It’s one of ’em velonitrocultists!”

“It’s ventrilo-quilts, you dumb ape!” said the other one and Ned shouted:

“We’re on!”

The sisters shed the bearskin in one fluid motion, revealing their armor and weapons underneath with Winceham in the middle, holding a rather pointy dagger in one hand and sporting a wild-eyed grin. Theo side-stepped Ned and passed him the crossbow he kept tucked under his robes. Hobb’s men were fiddling with the flintlocks on their guns, gnarled looks of surprise on their weather-torn faces; their dropped jaws denoted dental hygiene was probably a pirate’s worst fear. One of the ape-men had time enough to ask their pirate handlers:

“Is this part o’ the troupe’s act?”

Before the brighter of the two had the chance to explain, Ned’s bolt had buried itself in his head. The other ape-man looked at Ned with a cocked eyebrow and complained even as his hand reached for the cutlass at his cloth belt:

“That’s not entertaining, at all.”

“How’s this then!” shouted Winceham and with a jolt and a rolling tumble right beside the pirates, reached under the large ape as he was about to have a go at Ned and Theo. Winceham gave the ape-man a quick stab in one leg; blood spurted and the large brute growled in pain as his animal self took over. The pirates were only a pace away from the sisters; free of the constraining bearskin, they truly seemed to

dance to an inner beat. The pirates' blunderbusses let off their leaden shots from point-blank range with a thundering boom and a plume of smoke and sparks.

The sisters were nowhere to be seen.

"Oy, these 'basses work bettah when loaded with sumetin', eh?" said Mr. Jessums and jogged the other pirate's shoulder with an elbow. When he gave him a look though, he became morbidly aware that the man's head had been chopped off clean. A few feet away stood Parcifal wielding Encelados in her hand, grinning at the pirate broadly. A few feet behind him, Lernea showed off her skills with the bow.

"One is easy, two is old, three is flashy and four is bold!" she cried and let loose a fistful of arrows headed for the ape-man from a distance a blind man would rarely miss. Sadly though, they zipped by harmlessly and the growling ape charged at Theo with his cutlass swinging down from way up high.

"Do something Theo!" cried Ned as he struggled to reload his crossbow, his drum getting in the way. It was all happening in fractions of a moment; Theo laid there helpless, his hands unable to produce anything other than a trembling motion. His senses had nothing good in stock for him.

Lernea was trying to nock another arrow, and Parcifal was exchanging blows with the remaining pirate. He could hear Winceham cursing as he rushed behind the ape once more, but he was far too slow. And Bo..

Where is Bo?

The thought flashed in Theo's mind as he lay there practically paralyzed. His vision then filled with the image of a white fluffy rabbit smiling at him in an uncanny human fashion; Bo leapt in the air, swung his head around, and shot a

pair of small fireballs at the charging ape, who was instantly engulfed in flames. His body came down crashing, writhing in flames, while Theo saw the Hound hurtle past him, ignoring him completely as it was after Bo at a running pace that its size belied. Its three heads shot cones of fire, lightning and acid as it ran after Bo, charring the ground, making plant life in its path fizz away into goo.

Theo shouted “Bo!” with pained affection and worry and ran after the hound heedless of the danger. Winceham stuck his dagger into the charred remains of the ape-man with a wild cheer, while Encelados’ clangs came to an end when Parcifal expertly nicked his cutlass away from him and brought her blade against his bare neck. “Yield!” she cried. The pirate glimpsed at Encelados, licked his lips anxiously and said nodding:

“Oy, boyo, I’ll do that,” he said and raised his arms slowly.

“By Skrala, Temisra guide my arrow!” said Lerneia and her bow shuddered as an arrow flew away. It struck the Hound at one of its necks, and caused it to give pause to the chase. The head where the arrow had struck soon fell limp as it died - the other two ventured to pierce the very clouds with their howls and growls. The hound turned about and charged straight at Lerneia. Running past a bewildered Theo, the Hound swerved around one of Ned’s bolts and shot him a glancing shot of deadly acid breath. Fortunately his drum got in the way, and promptly began to melt away.

“Blasted grog-scum of a mutton-whore!” shouted Ned and Winceham commented looking at Lerneia sideways:

“Acted like a gentleman, did he? Ya got the beast’s attention, at any rate lass!”

“Sister! Like the boar hunt!” cried Lerneia to Parcifal as she nocked a second arrow in her bow. The Hound was

closing in damnably fast; a shot of acid went wide of its mark, while a bolt of lightning knocked Winceham off his feet and threw him down with a thud that didn't match the halfuin's size. Ned was reloading his crossbow, while Theo was still running after Bo, nearly lost behind some trees.

As the hound's heads growled ferociously and prepared to leap at Lernea, only a few yards separated them. It was Parcifal who slid on her knees suddenly in front of the hound, hunched behind the family shield, Erymanthos. The Hound clashed on the shield with all its might and a terrible raucous; Parcifal was knocked away wildly, while the Hound bucked and leapt on the air without any control, rolling haplessly. As it fell down on the earth only a few feet away from Lernea, it was still trying to stand on its feet when two arrows struck true right between its heads.

Without so much as a squeak, it passed away. It's death cry was replaced by a cannon shot like thunderclap flaring hot as it flew right above everyone's heads; the red-hot cannonball cut down a swath of trees with a pompous thud and a loud mass of creaking noises. Winceham mumbled obscenities between deep moaning sounds while Ned caught a man reloading a cannon from the corner of his eye. He turned around and looked; it was Culliper. Ned overflowed with rage suddenly:

"Murderer!" he screamed and instead of reloading his crossbow, simply ran for the ship and the rope ladder still hanging below.

"Is it just a flesh wound? Tell me it's just a flesh wound!" yelled Winceham as he awkwardly checked for missing parts to no effect. Lernea afforded him a cursory look.

"It's a burnt shoulder. Keep an eye on this one!" she said and pointed to the scruffy looking pirate.

She put her bow away and started running after Ned,

while Parcifal was still getting back up from the ground.

“Take Erymanthos sister!” she yelled. Lernea nodded and picked up the shield as she went.

The cannon on the prow of the ship was manned by Culliper alone. With the element of surprise gone, he yelled menacingly:

“Ya land-ridden scallywags, I know yer faces! Should’ve killed you when I had the chance, good and proper! But it’s never too late!”

He then fired both his pistols, one aimed at Ned and the other at Lernea. Ned was running with the speed and grace of the wind; Culliper simply was too slow to aim and the bullet meant for Ned zipped past him, blowing chunks of wet-wood out of a nearby tree. But the other bullet struck Lernea true with an ominous metal clang, and felled her to the ground.

“How’s that for starters, eh?” he yelled with a broad, mad-dened grin which promptly vanished when he saw Lernea get up with a stagger and raise her battered, hole-torn shield and run towards the ship once more, her hair ruffled up.

“Pesky little foreign critters! You’ll be hanging from the main mast naught to soon!” yelled Culliper with a fist and started reloading his pistols mumbling curses under his breath with a jittery voice. The smell of something burning drew his attention and then noticed the intensity of the smell. Combined with a burning sensation, it made him realise his hat was on fire.

He threw it on the deck panicked, and stomped on it repeatedly. He then realised a bunny with flaming eyes was grinning at him, perched on top of a barrel of highly flammable grog.

“Now lookit here, a bunny with flaming eyes. One of a kind, eh? Just stand still,” he said as he licked his lips and

calmly aimed at Bo.

Culliper cocked the flintlock but before he could pull the trigger, a fist connected sharply with his face and sent his head spinning and him staggering like a pirate with coin to spend. Before he had time to recover, another punch sent him sprawling on the deck. It was Ned, trembling with hate as the man who killed his father laid helpless before him, his pistols lying about far corners of the deck. He looked at him with a viciousness that marred his benign face:

“I’ll put you down like the animal you are,” he said with a voice quavering from hate.

“No, Ned, wait! Don’t!” said Lernea as she climbed onto the deck. She still held Erymanthos, its upper lip torn and a large sunken hole prominent near the Nomos crest of the Holy Mountain.

Culliper looked at them with surprise and stubbornness mixed in equal parts. For a passing moment, Culliper thought about upstaging everyone with a feat of nimbleness and pick up his pistols, shooting the meddling pests dead. But his pragmatism and his basic cowardice overcame him. Laying on his back he begged for his life:

“No, please! Listen to her... Ned! If I heard her right, that is.”

Ned picked up a loaded pistol nonetheless and aimed it squarely at Culliper. He then told Lernea with pain in his voice, the pistol in his hand trembling with frail determination:

“Tell me a really good reason not to pull this trigger, Queen of Nomos. I’d expect you’d understand. Or would you have me adhere to the sanctity of life, even the life of a maggot, like this one? Will this scar me for life? I’m already scarred, Lernea. Nothing good will come of this, you might

say. I care for naught. It's him, and Hobb. This one pulled the trigger; Hobb was the one who sucked my father's life out of him. So tell me, good Queen, one good reason not to."

"Bloody well do tell him! You won't believe how hard it is to get brains off this deck," urged Culliper, his awkward smile revealing lots of golden teeth.

Lernea looked long and hard at Ned; her stare had a calming effect. She sighed and said carefully:

"He's the only one that knows how to fly this ship!"

Culliper looked at the ship's mast and sail sideways before slapping his palm across his forehead:

"Of course!" he cried and with a curt nod to Lernea yelled, "I was coming to that!"

Ned let his shoulders sag, breathed deeply and pistol-whipped Culliper into unconsciousness.

* * *

“Manners, Parcifal. Mind your manners. We’re in company, you know,” said Lerneia and shifted slightly as she sat on the ship’s deck, mindful of the way the others, and especially Winceham, stared at her sister.

Her efforts to reprimand Parcifal were for naught; she still munched away blissfully even after everyone had filled their bellies thoroughly. She had gathered a small cornucopia in front of her, including a leg of smoked ham, a head of almost-gone-bad cheese and all sorts of sweetbreads and sour pancakes, along with a bulging fruit-basket and an amphora of sweet red wine. The ship’s galley had been recently stocked to the brim, as if in preparation for a long journey.

“It’s like a maw,” said Winceham with an equal amount of disgust and wonder. Theo looked puzzled.

“What is?”, asked the Woodkin.

“Her mouth, it reminds me of a maw. Look at her go at that ham like a shark,” replied Winceham. Ned shot him a grinning look:

“You should’ve seen how you dug in that salami and pork pie. I honestly thought you stopped breathing at some point.” Winceham counterpointed, waving a finger as he spoke:

“That’s an entirely different situation, being wounded and all. I need more than the regular amount of nourishment to nurse myself back into good health, that’s all.”

Ned sighed. He knew Winceham tended to be overprotective, mostly of himself:

“It’s just a slight burn, Wince. All you have to do is make sure you sleep on the other side, and you’ll be fine.”

“Halfuin skin is very sensitive; it could be months before I’m fit for action once more,” said Winceham, keeping a hand over his bandage at all times.

“Right. Do keep an eye though when the tower is in sight.

We can't trust him," said Ned nodding at Culliper at the helm, and walked away towards the ship's bow.

Winceham nodded and his gaze returned to the horizon. There was still nothing in sight that resembled Hobb's Keep or Chuck's Point, the northern cape's ridge where the keep stood. Below the ship, which was an otherwise unassuming, common pirate sloop that could nonetheless literally fly, a hazy tapestry of green passed them by in tranquility. To port, one could barely make out Hobb's Bay in the distance, while to starboard a sea of rolling jungle hills seemed to go on forever. And behind them, somewhere beyond the haze and the fog stood the remains of the woodkin village, where Fingammon prayed to Jah, waiting for his peoples' safe return.

Theo kept a wary eye on Culliper who remained unequivocally silent, nursing the aching back of his head from time, shooting murderous stares at everyone once in a while. Everyone except Bo who stood watch high upon the mast. The bunny, for some reason known only to the two of them, made Culliper cringe and look away with a morose, even shameful expression.

Parcifal made it common knowledge that she felt full with a loud burp, followed by a goggle-eyed sharp inhale of air and the following statement:

"By Skrala, that felt better than a banquet at the palace."

Lernea told her sister with a scowl:

"You eat like there's no tomorrow."

"What if there is none, sister?" she said as she pondered at the fruit-basket until she picked an apple that seemed to be maggot-free.

"Well, even if there is no tomorrow there is no point in living your last moments like an animal," said Lernea. Parcifal

replied with a relaxed smile.

“Oh, come on. This isn’t the palace grounds, sister. You can freely enjoy yourself.”

“Are you?” asked Lernea, and Parcifal replied without even pausing to blink:

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“Well of course you should. I’m the one who has to bear our shame, first and foremost,” said Lernea, repressing a bitter smile.

“What kind of shame would that be?” asked Theo, who had left Culliper in the care of Bo. That roughly meant that Bo slept soundly while Culliper stood on the helm, rigid like stone, yet fretful like a virgin on her wedding night.

Lernea felt the woodkin was perhaps intruding, his question a bit too straightforward. Parcifal did not seem to share in that thought and said with a playful grin, her brow raised:

“My sister was Queen of Nomos for a day, when her dear new husband, King Jangdrival exiled her along with the surviving members of the family,” explained Parcifal and when Theo nodded with an uncertain frown she added with a smile full of irony: “That would be me.”

“There will be a better time for such talk, sister,” said Lernea with an awkward, parsimonious expression. Parcifal shrugged indifferently.

“Now’s a good a time as any. Who knows, there might not be a tomorrow,” she said and Theo asked with urgency:

“Why? Have you heard of any rumors?” It was evident in his voice that the thought of time stopping and perhaps the world ending unsettled him. Parcifal laughed, perceiving Theo was humoring her, while in fact, he was actually a bit worried the world could end.

“Hah! For some, tomorrow will never come. Especially

those that meet us with the wrong intentions!” she said as she drank a mouthful of wine from the amphora. She wiped her mouth and offered everyone a smile that bristled with noble pride and healthy ambition.

“This isn’t a game, Parcifal. I’ve told you that so many times, and you still treat life and death like a game of dice, heedless of what lies ahead.”

“It is what I make of life, sister. Think of what Master Sisyphus used to say: ‘You cannot escape your own mortality; but your name can’.”

“‘..And both are vain.’ You always remember the half that suits you. Is that what you’re trying to do? Go down in history?” asked Lernea and stood up to face her sister with a good measure of disdain.

“What else can any mortal aspire to but become the stuff of legends?” exclaimed Parcifal with a gleeful voice, caring little about her sister’s disapproving look.

Lernea’s retort came slyly, her eyes squinting at her sister:

“Perhaps, like the legend of the pig princess?”

Parcifal threw away her half-eaten apple and protested, flailing an irate finger squarely at her sister’s face:

“Hey! You know full well the exertions of wielding shield and sword are demanding on the body!”

“Chuck’s point fore!” shouted Ned, giving pause to the sisters’ quarrel. Everyone turned their heads to have a look-see while the neck of the ridge kept growing taller. Even Mr. Jessums moved his dead-like stare a bit, still strapped down on the strange-looking contraption on the lower part of the deck that resembled a chair. Arguably, it was a most sinister chair that according to Culliper, sucked the life force of its occupant in order for the ship to fly. Wincham had called the premise ‘a hay bag full of excrement’ but his own personal

experience of sitting on it caused him to squirm away at the sight of it the moment they managed to pull him off.

“There!” cried Winceham as he saw the base of the keep rise through a multi-layered fog. At the very tip of the cape, it was a huge oblong stone and brick construct, it’s wide walls situated to cover with their cannon and balistae both Hobb’s bay, as well as the ocean side. It rose formidably above the clouds. Ned waved everyone close and they huddled together in a rough circle:

“Alright, we’re almost there. We’ll land on top of the tower where there’s supposed to be an anchorage,” said Ned eying Culliper morbidly and went on: “Then Winceham and I will sneak down to the dungeons, release Theo’s people and arm them with anything we can muster. Theo will keep an eye on the ship and him. Then we load everyone up and sail away.”

Theo reiterated the steps with his fingers, albeit with some difficulty. Bo nudged him in the foot with his twitching nose, and Theo tucked him away promptly in his robes.

“And we are supposed to locate Hobb for you to kill?” asked Parcifal with a furrow on her brow. She had misunderstood the plan.

“Not exactly. You’ll be acting as a diversion so we can get by unchallenged,” said Ned, while Parcifal insisted:

“Do we, or do we not, find and kill that evildoer?”

Lernea stood silent by her side, while eying Ned with a calm yet demanding stare. He was indecisive for a moment; he sighed before telling them:

“Find him. But don’t kill him if there isn’t need to. If your life comes at risk, run. Leave without us.”

The sisters nodded in agreement and touched their weapons to their chests as a salute. Ned returned it, shaking

both of their hands heartily.

“Without us?” asked Winceham incredulously. He was dumbfounded enough to be unable to find the words while his mouth opened and closed, when Ned reminded him sternly:

“Nadragatea, Wince. Until death, or dishonor, you’re binded,” pointed out Ned.

“Same thing were I come from, really,” said Winceham with a sigh filled with regret.

“Right. Take her up,” said Ned to Culliper coldly. He was surprised to hear Hobb’s glorified henchman smack back a snarky comment with mocking undertones:

“I live to obey, master. Oh, the overwhelming joy of riding the seas under your fruitful command. I’m glad I lived long enough to witness such a-”

His voice trailed off into a thud as Ned pistol-whipped him once more into meeting the deck head first. Ned caught the spinning wheel of the helm firmly before the ship began to list dangerously.

“Are you sure you can handle that?” asked Lerneia with a knowing look. Ned replied with a sorrowful smile, seemingly out of place:

“You just pull when you want to go up, and push when you want to go down. There’s a pair of pedals for speed, too. In all other ways, it’s like the wind’s always astern.”

“You know what I mean,” she insisted.

“I don’t think I have it in me. I wish I could kill him back then, but now... I just want to help the woodkin. For now.”

“For now,” she repeated with a nod as Ned pulled back on the helm and the ship began to rise through the clouds.

“I think I’m feeling sick,” muttered Winceham under his breath as the ship tilted itself in an upwards angle. Parcifal asked him without a hint of irony:

“Are you sure you’re a not just a child where you come from?”

“I’m sorry for spoiling your dinner appetite, princess.”

“Was that meant as an insult?” asked Parcifal, frowning her brow acutely.

“Bright too,” said Winceham with a pale face and Lernea interjected smartly:

“I fear discussing my sister’s eating habits will have to be postponed until after assaulting the pirates’ stronghold.”

It was then that the ship pulled out of the cloudscape, little wisps of cloud like smoke trailing her bow and hull, unwilling to let go for a moment. Around them, a vast sea of rosy, mellow clouds stretched in every direction, as the sun began to dive below the horizon.

Ned brought the hull to bear against the top of Hobb’s keep, growing closer with each passing moment. There seemed to be little activity going on; torches had not been lit yet.

“Won’t they know something’s wrong when they see us instead of Culliper and his men?” asked Theo, Bo fidgeting inside his robes, his bunny ears unable to be contained.

“Probably,” said Ned without turning to look.

“What do we do then?”

“Kill them,” said Parcifal with a grin.

“If it comes to that and they will not yield,” said Ned looking at Parcifal from under his eye.

“I see,” said Theo and flexed his fingers. Everyone else readied their weapons as well and hunched low to the sides of the ship. At the tower, an elevated wooden platform stood out, acting as a dock. It was supported on a wheeled scaffold which sported some kind of pulley arrangement. The whole

dock seemed able to move, elevate and rotate with the help of some ropes and weights.

A lookout had seen the ship approach; he was standing on the platform scratching his head. He rearranged his hat and squinted his eyes. A scruffy-looking dog was barking non-stop.

“Ahoy there! What took yer so long? Why’s everyone shy? Jessums? Is Scubbs acting like the fool again? It ain’t no ghost ship this time, I can tell!” yelled the pirate and fell into a death-defying giggle that involved clearing up one’s lungs and nose cavities thoroughly. He spat a greenish globule, the color of grog and the consistency of glue. Even the dog cared enough to move, flee-bitten and ridden with lice as it was. No answer came and Ned simply let the ship slide effortlessly sideways, the platform grazing the hull slightly:

“Och! Watch the paint, you dumb rum-sacked lolly-gagging halakazoo!”

A rope seemed to shoot off itself down to the tower and Ned appeared suddenly and stepped on the platform, his crossbow in hand, aimed squarely at the pirate. Lernea followed suit and nocked an arrow in her bow, while Parcifal simply unsheathed Encelados. The pirate was superbly equipped to deal with the situation at hand.

“Oy, I yield,” he said in a flat monotone and raised his arms, while the dog beside him had a go at the goo that could possibly be some of the best stuff the pirate had ever produced.

“See? Simple enough. Theo, help me tie her down. Sisters, you go on ahead and make some noise.”

“Gladly,” replied Parcifal while Lernea eased her bow only slightly and followed her sister to an open staircase that led below.

Winceham felt it was high time he asked someone before everyone was caught up in doing something serious:

“Anyone with some flint and steel? Something to light my pipe, I’m dying out here!”

Seemingly out of nowhere, a burst of flame ignited the pipe in his hand thoroughly. Winceham turned around and saw Bo peeking out of Theo’s robes, grinning at him uncan-nily.

* * *

Winceham and Ned had been silently climbing down the many stories of the keep. Winceham could be perfectly silent when he needed to; he scouted ahead and made sure the way was clear before Ned followed in his steps.

It was for the most part, an easy way in. There wasn't such a thing as patrols, but rather bands of merry pirates with a lot of time on their hands and little to do other than participate in pissing and drinking contests, though not necessarily in that exact order. A few rooms had pirates in the guise of guards posted outside who instead of actually guarding them, played craps, cards, and other gambling games, usually with very lopsided results that ended in sharp instruments being used to clarify things.

All in all, Winceham listened, watched and waited, before Ned followed.

They hadn't ran onto anything especially interesting or dangerous; there was a vague hope the woodkin would be held in the dungeons deep below, but other than that the complete lack of noisy conundrums above meant that the sisters were either brilliantly successful in their task, or in grave danger. Winceham expressed that belief with a whisper, and Ned replied with almost a hiss:

"Maybe they're waiting."

"For what? Dinnertime?" asked Winceham, his face screwed up in anger. He was about to take another step forward and lead them another floor down when he heard a duo of pirates conversing casually as they came down a corridor to meet the staircase:

"Oy, how do we go about that then?" said one, scratching his head under his hat, evidently befuddled.

"Well, I suppose we ditch them in the pit and let the crocs do the rest," replied the other with a shrug.

“No, you see I was wondering, how do we push them inside the pit. I mean, there’s like more than just two of them,” insisted the somewhat not-so-bright-as-his colleague pirate.

“Boyo, you’re right! How ’bout we kill ’em first so they don’t move about and all?” said the other with mock surprise and excitement which did not carry over as intended.

“Dunno ’bout that, boss said feed them to crocs alive or it spoils their meat,” came the wavering answer.

“Well, he won’t know the difference know, will he?” said the other with a mischievous grin that could’ve been sparkling had more teeth been available.

Winceham nodded to Ned and then casually appeared in front of them from behind the staircase wall:

“What is it with you pirates and dental hygiene?” he asked with a cocky grin.

“Is it one of them? What’s it doin’ down ’ere?” asked the pirate uneasily, while the other turned and replied with a frown of uncertainty:

“No, too short, not blue enough. Oy, boyo, stick ’em!” said the pirate and brandished a cutlass. To his surprise though, Winceham wasn’t standing where he was supposed to be. Instead, the pirate now faced Ned’s crossbow, and his rather dull partner had a stiletto sticking out of his gut.

“The woodkin, if you please?” said Winceham and waved his bloodied stiletto menacingly. Ned kept the crossbow trained at the now glum-looking pirate, who had to ask:

“Who?”

“The woodkin, the elves, the dark-skinned fellas you captured!” said Winceham with a slight growl. The pirate still didn’t seem to cooperate.

“What ’bout them?”

“And I thought you were the brighter of the pair. The people you were gonna feed to the crocs!” said Winceham angrily, trying to keep his voice below a shout.

“What? The pigs?”

“That’s going too far even for the likes of you, sirrah,” said Winceham with a snarl and felt a sudden urge to stab the pirate vehemently. Ned stayed his arm and asked the pirate:

“What pigs?”

“The pigs, in the sty! We were gonna feed them to the crocs in the moat!”

“Where are the woodkin then?” asked Winceham urgently.

“Who?” asked the pirate with an ever more frightened, bewildered voice.

“Please, Ned. Let me,” said Winceham, his voice trembling from aggravation, an ill-tempered gleam in his eye, the stiletto swinging in his hand.

“The jungle folk. Where are they?” asked Ned as calmly as possible.

“Oh, them you mean? Off-world with the last shipment!”

“The last shipment?” asked Ned and Winceham followed suit:

“Off-world?”

Then they heard a cry echo down the walls. And then another. They were high-pitched and sounded familiar.

“A woman’s cries,” said Winceham under his breath and instinctively looked up, from where the sound came.

“The sisters!” yelled Ned and ran up the staircase as if the world was about to end.

Winceham told the pirate:

“Duck.”

“What?” asked the pirate with a screwed up face, unable to understand. Winceham sighed.

“Never mind, too tall anyway,” he said and tripped the pirate, sending him careening down the stairs. Sounds of broken bones and muffled cries echoed, while Winceham ran up the staircase as fast as any halfuin could.

* * *

They ran up the stairs and down corridors meeting little resistance. A couple of unlucky pirates who wanted to see what the commotion of running feet was all about, met a deadly, painful fate in the form of a bolt between the eyes and a stiletto in the nether regions. Not so silent but rather deadly, Ned and Winceham searched for the sisters, like a wild swirling dervish would dance about a desert of stone. The keep was almost empty, it suddenly occurred to them. And the sisters were nowhere to be found, or seen.

Until they heard a different voice, in a very different way.

The top of the tower, if you please.

“Did you hear that?” asked Ned.

“I’m trying to quit,” said Winceham reflexively, in a purely defensive voice. He then realised that Ned had heard it as well.

“Top of the tower?” asked Winceham to make sure they were hearing the same voice.

“Speaking in our minds? What devilry is this?” asked Ned in disbelief.

“I’m not sure, but it could be a trap,” said Winceham nodding.

“What choice is there?” said Ned with a shrug. Winceham added:

“True, but I felt compelled to say that, just to make my point when things go horribly wrong.”

Ned placed a hand on Winceham’s good shoulder and told him with ardor:

“Hurry, Wince. Be on your toes; try to hide yourself in the shadows up there.”

“Believe me when I say that would have been my first choice as well,” said Winceham and sighed.

The two of them ran up the tower expecting some kind of surprise on the way, but nothing obstructed them. Soon, they emerged at the tower's top, the night sky glistening with starlight, the clouds below a soft, tempting, milky white mat-tress. They noticed alarmingly that the ship was missing, along with any signs of Theo and Bo.

What really caught their eye though, was the way the sis-ters stood, not far away from the tower's edge right in front of the staircase. They were frozen like statues, the intensity of their plight drawn on their living faces. They looked as if a last, stilted breathe remained in them.

Parcifal stood with Encelados blaring white hot above her head, both hands on the hilt, her face scrounged up in a mix of terror and hate.

Lernea was right beside her, calm like the sea, determined and unyielding as she was about to let an arrow fly; yet the bow's string remained taut, and Lernea stood there as if pet-rified.

Right behind the sisters stood an extremely tall, lavishly robed man with a beard, ruffled hair and a sharp, too sharp too be real, icy blue gleam on his eyes. Winceham tried to meld into the shadows, taking small back-steps to the nearest ledge of the tower, his hood over his head. The bearded man spoke then with a rolling, deep voice that sounded like stony reeds alongside a foaming river:

"Now, now, Mr. Abbermouth. That would be futile, as much as it may hurt your ego."

"Hobb," stated Ned coldly.

"Well, yes. Among others," said the man, the torch in his hand casting wild, creepy shadows of the two sisters as he silently and uncannily walked between them. Winceham no-ticed an unsettling thing about him: He wasn't actually walk-

ing; he was gliding a couple of inches above the stone floor.

“I hold you responsible for my father’s death,” said Ned and glared at him, heedless of how peculiar the man’s voice and looks were, apart from the fact he was levitating. Hobb came to a stop a few yards away and smiled thinly:

“Weird things, humans. You blame me for your father’s death, while Culliper pulled that trigger. Still, you couldn’t kill him.”

“How do you know that?” asked Ned with uneasy suspicion.

“I know many things. But what I crave right now is one: the amulet.”

Hobb’s voice had a deadly finality to it. It took great composure and strength of character for a man to simply talk with that man around, yet Ned found in him the audacity to talk back.

“I’m not a jeweler; you have the wrong person.”

Hobb’s face suddenly got screwed up horribly and stretched impossibly. With another twist of its flesh and a growling, the human face was torn away, evaporating instantly.

In its place, an elongated head was now visible. Grey-blue skin shone slick in the starlight and a flock of stubby, short tentacles like anemones writhed around a circular, sharp-teethed maw. The hands had turned into webbed claws, sharp like scythes. Hobb, it turned out, was literally some kind of monster out of a nightmare. The creature that had disguised itself as Hobb looked at Ned with an irritated curiosity and blared ominously, its voice now grating:

“Don’t play coy with me! I know about your little escapades, and I’ve seen these females pathetic dreams! I couldn’t care less. Where is the amulet?”

“That’s a really ugly way to ask for things,” said Ned, while he noticed Winceham stood silent and immobile as a rock. Ned realised he was suddenly a little bit outmatched but carried on, trying to understand the foe in front of him and think of what to do next, really really fast. The creature approached him with unnerving silence and stood hovering in the air a few feet away. Its blue-on-blue eyes had the colour of the deepest sea.

“The comedian. Humor. How infantile. Not unlike your race.”

“Better infantile than have a mop for a face,” Ned told him and pointed to the maw.

“You mock me? I am beyond mocking,” replied the monster with a rumbling voice.

“Yes, I see mopping really is beneath you,” said Ned grinning, gesturing at the tentacled maw.

“You puny little human, you cannot begin to fathom the eons that have born me.”

“No, but I’m pretty sure you bore me,” said Ned and noticed Winceham’s eyes twitch.

“I was hoping I did not have to feed tonight; your minds sicken me,” the creature said and hissed.

“Well, I could say the same thing about your face but that would be a compliment in your case,” replied Ned, and saw Lernea’s hand spasm ever so slightly.

“I’ll have what is mine, Ned Larkin, and you’ll have what you deserve!” said the monster as he lunged forward with a gaping maw, aiming squarely for Ned’s head, its powerful long arms springing to catch Ned in a deathly embrace.

But it was right at that time that Lernea’s arrow struck him in the back, causing it to turn around reflexively and growl, its maw tentacles writhing like the feet of a millipede. Ned slid

away and ran towards the wheeled platform where the ship had docked. From the corner of his eye, he saw Lernea was trying to move and Parcifal's hands were trembling. Winceham too, could move his head again.

"I will find great delight in sucking your skull dry, Larkin!" cried the creature as it hurled himself against Ned, its robes fluttering in the night breeze.

"With your sense of humor, that's a no-brainer!" yelled Ned gleefully and saw Lernea, Parcifal and Winceham suddenly unfreeze completely. Without a second look at their surroundings, their weapons were being trained against the creature. Their angered shouts and brave cries rose into the night air.

"By Skarla, we'll have vengeance!" yelled the sisters, and Winceham asked before rushing towards the blue-skinned terror:

"Ya think you're tall, eh?"

With a wave of its hand and a low-keyed hum from its maw, all three of them were pushed back in the air. They landed hard on their backs, their weapons flying off their hands. The monster turned its attention squarely at Ned, before it added gleefully:

"Where is the humor now, human?"

The last word had the subtle hints of sounding exactly like a writhing mass of worms would. Ned smiled coolly and retorted:

"You just keep asking yourself, don't you?"

The creature let out a terrible sound between an infuriated growl and a cacophonous gurgling laughter before it reached for Ned.

Right when there was nothing funny to joke about, right about when Ned could see the others were still trying to get

up, too far away to act, he saw Bo, the bunny with the flaming eyes jump right in front of him. Bo grinned at Ned widely and hopped back out of view in a split second, right before a hot molten cannonball hit the monster square across the face and embedded what was left of him and his smoldering robes in the tower's stony floor, a few feet away.

He then saw the ship wobbling uncertainly, sails rippling with small gusts of wind. Theo hurried to man the helm, while the bow cannon cooled with a red after-glow on its lip. A thin wisp of smoke wafted westward, where the wind blew.

Ned smiled broadly and sighed with relief, while Winceham yelled as he looked around him, waiting for confirmation:

“Did ya see it? Did ya see the bunny?”

The sisters got up on their feet, nursing aching muscles and perhaps a couple of displaced bones. Lerneia was about to say something to Winceham, but she lost her words when she saw a bright flash and an uncanny oval slit appear right above the tower floor in mid-air, at the place where the creature should have met its demise.

The slit made things look as if peering through a strange, stained looking glass, all broken and uneven. It was like someone had pieced together parts of another night sky; as if another place lay beyond that oval slit. The monster was limping heavily; it glanced at Ned and said nothing. Its eyes flashed suddenly, before it crossed into the oval slit, which then disappeared as strangely and abruptly as it had appeared.

Ned stood there unable to really understand what had happened. So did the others, apart from Theo who, seemingly unfazed, settled the sloop near the platform a bit awkwardly. He jumped off the ship and quickly tied her down to the tower with a mooring line. He sounded awfully excited when he

rushed over by Ned's side.

"Wow! Did you see that? I think it left a crater on the floor!"

"Where were you?" asked Ned weakly.

"Well, that pirate was making weird noises like the ones people do when they die and Bo seemed really worried when the ship began to wobble real bad. He kind of insisted that I placed my amulet in this weird slot in that awful chair, and then all the wobbling stopped. But the pirate died," answered Theo truthfully, his voice trailing off with sadness.

"No, I mean, where were you when all this happened?"

"Oh, I heard this weird voice in my head and it felt all wrong; I was in the ship, where you told me to stay. But for some reason, Bo was already gnawing on that rope we had tied and before I could convince him otherwise, the ship had drifted away. So I thought I'd give her a spin," said Theo excitedly and added thoughtfully:

"You did say I should keep an eye on her, didn't you?"

"Yes I did. I'm not sure though what would have happened if I hadn't. Or just what kind of a bunny Bo is, really," said Ned, ponderously gazing at Bo who was happily tucked away again inside Theo's robes, his face barely protruding, his nose twitching as if he was about to sneeze.

"Well what about that? You might be actually funny, lad. I think it saved our lives, to be honest. I couldn't flutter an eyelid, but everything you said, it just cracked me up for no reason! And then I could move again!" said Winceham as he nourished a bruised elbow, grinning as he approached Ned and Theo. The sisters followed close behind, bickering about which one's fault some thing, or the other, really was.

"He, it, whatever, caught you by surprise!" Lernea accused Parcifal. The younger by one minute sister, replied in

aggravated tones:

“Me? You were the one who said to go have a look! Your decision, your responsibility, your fault! I was simply carrying out your orders, my queen!”

“Only when it suits you, sister!” yelled Lerneia, right about when Theo saw Culliper untying the rope that held the ship moored to the tower.

“He’s trying to get away!” cried Theo and began to twirl his hands in the air for no apparent reason.

“You didn’t tie him down?!” asked Ned in wild-eyed disbelief.

“You told me to look after the ship, not him!” replied Theo as the air between his hands began to fill with a warm, violet light.

“Amateurs,” said Winceham softly and picked up a loose cobblestone. He closed one eye and aimed at Culliper, just as he was about to start running back to the ship. Winceham threw the stone expertly and it connected with Culliper’s head at a very accident-prone spot; the back of his head. Culliper staggered for a couple of steps, before collapsing.

The violet light between Theo’s hands died down softly; he and Ned walked over to where Culliper lay. He wasn’t exactly unconscious, but he looked painfully disoriented. His face sported a furrowed grin, quite suitable for someone possibly brain damaged. Ned caught him by the nape of his jacket and told him more so, than asked him:

“We’re not done yet. Where do you think you’re going?”

“Tallyflop,” said Culliper drowsily.

“Where’s that?” asked Ned and Culliper simply pointed up in the sky. Ned asked again, his voice giving off signals he wasn’t in the mood for jokes.

“I’m not in the mood. Is that where the last shipment took the woodkin to?”

Culliper nodded like a drunken chicken would.

“Where is that?!” yelled Ned and still, a single finger pointed up into the sky. Theo asked rather calmly:

“The stars?”

Culliper smiled like a five-year old boy and happily crumbled down on the platform.

“It can’t be. Off-world,” remembered Ned.

“Why not?” asked Theo.

“Flying is one thing. But the stars?”

“Well I’m sure it’s perfectly safe.”

“What is?” asked Lernea, newly arrived over Culliper’s unconscious body.

“Flying to the stars,” said Ned and nodded.

“Ridiculous!” said Lernea with a scoff, while Parcifal commented with a curious smile on her lips:

“No-one in our history has done that before, have they?”

Winceham had only heard Parcifal speak, so he had to ask in turn:

“What’s never been done before?”

“Flying to the stars, to a place called Tallyflop, to save the woodkin and maybe get back at Hobb or whatever that thing was called,” said Ned, quietly gazing at the starry night sky. Winceham caught a glimpse of everyone contemplating this seriously, and after a moment or so of thinking, said with a sigh:

“Maybe, just maybe, if I’m lucky enough, I’m still just having a bad trip.”

* * * END OF BOOK I

“I’ve never really understood all those planet-bound folk that look at the night sky all starry-eyed and gaze at it with a superbly idiotic grin and lose their grip on reality, making up all sorts of ideas about what space is like. I’ll say this just once, hopefully some of you cadets are dead drunk not to notice the mistake you just made; space is boring, unforgiving, empty and a lot bigger than it looks like. A real lot.”

– Rear Admiral Stephen Zondmeier VII, Human League fleet academy welcoming speech

Ned was leaning against the upper deck railing, gazing at the milky blue sheen of a swarm of stars that showered the ship with a fuzzy, moon-like glow. For the last few days, ever since they’d sailed into the stars, a strange smile seemed to occupy his face for most of his waking time. In his sleep, all he could see was the glitter of stars and the image of his father, waving at him encouragingly to move on into a beautiful unknown. Or perhaps take an order; Ned wasn’t clear on that. But it did make him feel better.

The ship traversed the deadness of space in a suitably dead silence; one could only surmise it was really moving at all because of the twinkle of the stars as their light bounced off the metal ramrod at its prow.

Wincham, the self-proclaimed, semi-retired halfuin rogue of the party was snoring heavily nearby, on a simple hay bed he’d brought from below deck. For the most part, Winch had enjoyed their journey so far, even though he spent most of his time kicking in his sleep.

Parciful, the feisty redhead princess regent in exile, kept a mindful, worried eye at how her twin sister, Lernea, queen of

Nomos for a day, handled the ship. It was in fact the look of utter and total boredom that worried Parcifal; it seemed like it was catching.

Theo, naturally inclined in the ways of sorcery, had just finished re-knitting his blond, silvery dreadlocks.. The traditional hairdo of the woodkin elf, the dreadlock, didn't suit him, tall and fair-skinned as he was. But it was his people's heritage, even though he wasn't really one of them. Him and Bo, his fiery-eyed bunny companion were shooting fireworks far off astern. They looked unequivocally happy.

"It's wonderful, isn't it?" said Ned to no-one in particular, and for a rather awkward amount of time, no-one bothered to reply. At length, Parcifal turned her head around and looked at him morosely, her hands folded behind her head as if surrendering to the uneventful, humdrum quagmire that she felt their journey really was.

"What, exactly, is it that you find wonderful?" she said in a monotone voice. Ned spread his arms as to hug the vastness of space surrounding them and replied in earnest:

"All this."

"This," she said and nodded to a random patch of blackness, "is a void. A nothingness. I'm nearly spent by boredom."

"Oh, you're just lacking the flint to spark the imagination within you. I've written down a song about it. Dozens actually."

"Please, not another one," said Parcifal wearing a worried, sickly frown; she even thrust-out her open palm in a begging gesture. Ned was puzzled; it showed in his voice and the sudden jerk of his head.

"Why not?"

"I'm not in the mood. Gracious Skrala, not now, not ever

again,” said Parcifal and failing to find the north in a place where it meant absolutely nothing, she sighed and made the warding gesture of Skrala; hands extended to the north in the shape of half a box.

“Mood is a thing for cattle, and love-making,” pitched in Winceham with a grumby, muffled voice without warning.

Though half-asleep he was yet instantly aware of what was being discussed, his rogueish instincts always at the ready. Lernea’s hard, solemn face, adorned in her long brown locks of hair, changed abruptly to that of a radiant, noble lady such as her lineage would demand of her.

She let go of the ship’s helm and said, or rather announced, in a beaming voice:

“Mr. Winceham, I think that now, as they saying goes, she’s all yours.”

“I wouldn’t want to intrude on your persons miladies. I think your sister’s rather tall, too young and inexperienced for me tastes, not to mention somewhat lank on the waist,” replied Winceham, with his face still buried in the soft cloth mattress filled with hay. Parcifal looked at the short halfuin with a perplexed frown, before she came to realise he was referring to her; her boot shortly thereafter connected with the halfuin’s behinds, shoving him off the cot and onto the hard deck.

“My waist is fine by all accounts, thank you,” said Parcifal looking mildly annoyed. Winceham picked himself up sporting a grin of mischief and no ill feelings, while Ned added, riding an entirely different train of thought:

“Are you saying, my singing is bad? Because, if I recall correctly, it worked like magic with those pirates and their ape-men.”

“Which is to say,” interjected Lernea, strolling around the

deck stretching her back, “it’s fit for animals and scum.”

No-one was at the ship’s helm, a matter which was soon made entirely apparent to everyone as the ship began to slowly list to port. Just as Parcifal walked over to grab the helm firmly with a look of annoyance on her face, she saw Bo flying accross the air as if falling slowly sideways, his fluffy ears shooting up in strange directions, firm and upright as if frozen by an amazing sense of danger. Theo followed close behind, smiling as broadly as a child left to its devices, all alone with a cookie jar. Parcifal stood baffled, while Theo grabbed the helm as he flew past it and turned the ship back on its proper course. He twisted his body to settle his feet on the ground with the grace of a dancer.

“And.. It seems that now, I can fly!” he said proudly, while Bo could be seen a few feet away, happily munching on an oversized leek with awe-inspiring veracity, slowly tumbling in the air.

Ned exclaimed on cue:

“It’s space! It’s so grandiose, so alluring. Anything is possible, see?” he said and pointed at the levitating bunny with a gleaming smile. Winceham and the Teletha sisters did not seem to share in the enthusiasm.

“That’s what you’ve been saying for the past two weeks,” said Lerneia and let herself slump to the cot with a weary sigh. Parcifal on the other hand, sounded worried.

“Not to mention that all we’re navigating blind, based on that scum’s word alone.”

Culliper lay in shackles in the hold; he’d told them as much as he knew himself. He had been told to raid the village and that he would collect his pay at Tallyflop. Even though Parcifal nearly convinced the rest to throw him overboard and use him as target practice, cooler minds had prevailed. Ned

though very troubled about what to do with his father's killer, did not want to have his blood on his hands. He knew that wouldn't bring back his father.

"He'd be a fool to try and swing us. We'll reach some kind of port, at some point. That's for sure. Food and water is aplenty though, no worries there," said Winceham scratching his head and grooming his beard with a make-shift brush made out of some poor thing's teeth.

"Well, what if we're walking into a trap?" asked Parcifal, shaking her head, looking agitated.

"That would be sailing into a trap," corrected Lernea from was she now considered her cot, without bothering to take her arm off her shut eyes. Theo sounded confident, seeing as he kept the ship on course with little effort.

"I think everything's as it should be. Bo isn't the least bit nervous," he said and toyed with the bunny's ears. Bo seemed to wriggle with pleasure on Theo's shoulder.

"Bo is a bunny, Theo," said Parcifal with a voice that teetered on the brink of a shrill. Theo wasn't taken aback and insisted:

"Well, I trust his instincts. You'll see."

"Believe me, I'm dying to," said Parcifal, brandishing her lack of good humor for everyone to see, as if it were Encelados, her trusted blade.

"Harsh words in haste can oft be bad in taste," said Winceham in a sing-along voice as he produced his smoking pipe and pouch from a vest pocket.

"I thought Ned was the poet," said Lernea with a puzzled voice and a childish frown. Ned was sincere in what he thought was an apology:

"I hate to disappoint, but I do not do free verse."

"Well, Svarna be my guide, there's hope for our ears yet,"

replied Parcifal in an utterly disenchanted manner. Ned was beginning to realise his talents were being judged too harshly, all too unfairly.

“You keep making these remarks about my singing.”

“I thought you’d never notice. Frankly, I’d prefer you kept those kinds of performances to yourself,” said Parcifal and sat down on the deck, legs crossed.

“That’s what I do, Parcifal. I perform,” said Ned. It was obvious in his stricken face he felt more hurt than offended. Parcifal drove home what sounded like a thinly-veiled insult.

“Well, it would be more beneficial if you tried your hand at something else. A man without a sword is like a cup riddled with holes: useless.”

Winceham lit his pipe, drew heavily and added as smoke left his nose and mouth freely:

“And dry as hell to boot. Cut the lad some slack, milady; he’s more than proved his usefulness when that blue-eyed horror had us at the mercy of his maw.”

“You’re being unfair, sister. You stood there frozen, incapacitated, just like the rest of us. Except Ned,” said Lernea and from the comfort of her cot pointed a blind finger at Theo, missing Ned wildly. Parcifal unsheathed Encelados and dutifully began to check the blade in detail, from all angles. It looked sharp as ever in the starlight.

“I would still think that was a freak occurrence. It has never happened to me before,” she said, seemingly without giving the incident much thought.

“Well, there’s a first time for everything, milady. Maybe you’re too young to know better,” said Winceham and looked away, drawing on his pipe, trying to look innocent. A smirk full of mischief adorned his face. Parcifal noticed, and was quick to answer.

“Is that another one of your sexual innuendos? Mother always said men are immature. I had no idea she meant old people as well.”

“I’m not that old, mind you. I don’t usually brag about it, but I could keep a lady up all night,” said Winceham and secretly wished he could really remember the last time that had happened.

“It must be all that snoring,” Lerne said matter-of-factly, and Parcifal grinned without a word. Her sister, she thought, had aptly filled in for her.

“There!” shouted Ned suddenly and pointed a finger, his excitement threatening to tear his face apart. Everyone turned their heads as if silently obeying an order. A moment or so passed before Parcifal asked with a somewhat surreptitious, wary look, her hand drawn to Encelados’ hilt as if on its own:

“Where, exactly?”

“Don’t you see it?” cried Ned as he rushed to the ship’s bow like a five-year old waiting for ice cream to manifest itself out of thin air. Winceham furrowed his brow and toyed with his beard for a moment before he couldn’t help ask himself:

“What are we looking for, lad?”

“That star! See how its light trembles? How it flickers, fading in and out? That’s it! That must be Tallyflop!” shouted Ned without taking his eyes off the trembling, pointy source of light. Bo’s eyes lit up like a blowing furnace all of a sudden and he made sure he had Theo’s full attention, jumping up and down around the ship’s steering wheel. The elf knew the bunny meant business so he brought the ship’s bow to bear dead-on where Bo had been pointing to with his whole body, much more like a hunting dog than an innocent-looking herbivore would.

Lerneia spared a moment or so to take a look as well, barely lifting herself up from the cot. It was as if she was trying to peer over an invisible perch.

“All I see is a twinkling star,” she said drowsily and fell on the cot again, half-expecting to be roused for school, too soon for comfort.

“It could be a beacon,” said Winceham stroking his beard thoughtfully.

“My thoughts exactly!” shouted Ned gleefully, while Theo exclaimed:

“Bo sure looks excited!”

Parcifal looked at the star, growing subtly larger with every passing moment. Then she stared at the elf and the bunny for a moment or so, her look full of apprehension. She said to Theo:

“Whenever those eyes flame up.. Nothing good ever happens.”

Theo would have none of that. He waved a hand dismissively; with eyes fixed on the twinkling star up ahead, he said firmly:

“Preposterous. Utterly unfounded. Pessimistic superstitious misconceptions. Bo’s eyes flaming up and our own predicaments have absolutely no correlation, on a scientific or thaumaturgic basis whatsoever.”

Winceham turned and looked at Theo rather confounded. Yet he seemed to approve of Theo’s answer, at least in principle. He nodded and said:

“Well said, lad.”

Winceham smiled at Theo, who in turn bowed lightly towards the halfuin. The brief moment of well-earned flattery made Parcifal roll her eyes and sigh. Winceham, always prowling about to boost his ego in many small ways that to

him added up to enormous amounts, was about to make a sly, wry comment on the virtuous of proper language and etiquette. The grin on his face was a sure sign he was going to enjoy it no matter what Parcifal's reaction would be.

To his surprise though, the only words that came out of his mouth when his gaze ventured upwards before it came down again, had nothing to do with proper language and much less, etiquette:

"Blasted, gracious, all-mighty hairy cactuses and a turtle-mother's tit!"

Parcifal spent a moment with her flustered face stuck in a deep frown, trying to fit the words she had just heard into some order that might make sense. Her finger was already raised as a warning when she looked at Winceham with a seething glare and shouted:

"Recant, sirrah! I know an insult when I hear one, even if I can't fathom it!"

"Look!" cried Ned as he ran towards the bridgehead, his head stuck upwards as if he were training for a sword-eating contest.

Parcifal only had to look upwards to see both Theo and Bo were looking up as well, their faces and fur respectively strangely illuminated, standing perfectly still like under some sort of enchanting spell. Her hand instinctively went for Encelados' once more but half-way it froze as well: the sight in front of her eyes had captivated her very soul, and the souls of everyone else as well, it seemed.

They were sailing under a majestic field of starlight; rivulets of stardust and beams of light wafted down from above, where the giant gnarly branches of an old, wizened tree dominated the starscape. Where before there had been nothing but the faintest pin-prickles of light and a dark,

solemn void, now the ship felt like it drifted onwards amidst a giant forest in spring, like a butterfly loitering around a blooming flower.

Their course took them gracefully soaring by clusters of huge green leaves, easily the size of a hamlet or small village. The huge leaves emanated a faint greenish glow, while in the distance all around them, more and more leaves and branches appeared little by little, like some omnipotent invisible hand was clearing up a fog-stained window.

Swaths of light and soft shadows crept over them at an easy pace as the ship continued on its course, as if sailing under a soft, thin, silken-coloured bedding the likes of which every child would only ever hope to dream about. A tunnel of light and shadow had manifested itself on top of a playful, shining net that tossed and writhed about them in a beautiful dance that seemed to have a breath of its own.

“What kind of wonder is this?” Ned asked himself, a feeling of awe washing over him like a wet breeze would, every inch of his body feeling it bit by bit.

“It certainly looks like a tree,” said Winceham, unable to peel his eyes away from a sight that now enveloped the whole of the ship.

“By Svarna, it’s the most beautiful thing I’ve seen. Other than the Holy Mountain,” said Parcifal with a stupefied grin on her face, all her worries and fears instantly gone, her smile beaming with a shine her armor could never match.

“See? I told you Bo had a good reason for being excited. Isn’t that right Bo?” said Theo gleefully as he kept the ship steadily trained between a pair of nearly parallel branches that seemed to lead them on like a pair of guiding rails.

Then suddenly, literally out of nowhere, a ship the shape of a bumblebee and easily twice the size of the *Mary*

Watchamacallit appeared at her prow; ridden with holes and clumsy patches of copper plating, sporting shoddy, badly trimmed sails. It would have been more fair to describe it as flying collection of scrap, rather than a ship per se.

The mere fact though that a ship like that could actually sail into space, suddenly made the whole endeavor of traveling through the stars acutely unremarkable. If it wasn't for a pair of large harpoons trained on the *Mary Watchamacallit*, it was certain that such a sorry excuse for a space-faring vessel wouldn't have drawn everyone's attention with a snap. The oversized sharp implements of hunting and warfare were manned by unruly pairs of short, ugly, mischievous-looking green little things wearing ridiculously extravagant goggles, oversized leather helmets and sadly, rather than shockingly, nothing more.

"It's an ambush!" cried Parcifal and clutched Encelados defiantly with both hands, warily checking all around her, as if she half-expected more invisible threats to materialise any minute. The blade though, remained a shiny grey steel color; it did not give off its blueish glow of warning against evil.

"It certainly looks like an ambush," said Winceham not knowing whether he should ready his stiletto or finally have a try at space swimming. In retrospect, swimming in space did not seem like a dangerous waste of time in view of the harpoons. Theo remained silent exchanging some oddly thoughtful looks with Bo, even if that meant mainly staring at the rabbit's frenzied twitching nose. Its eyes though did not flare up; a charred mayhem seemed an ever distant possibility.

"It's fairly normal, I think," said Theo coolly, his lips forming a thoughtful pout. Ned a worrisome comment to make.

"Which is, the gargantuan tree floating in space or being

ambushed by naked goblins?”

Theo gave Ned a flat shrug, failing to see that an answer was not really expected of him. A deafening, snarling sound made everyone’s face twitch and contort unpleasantly as it was amplified needlessly through some sort of makeshift speaker device:

“Oy! ’Tis Mr. Snog, Cappn’ o’ the *Mary Celestial*. We’ll be towing her into the harbor, mind you. Don’t try and scuttle the ship or break away; we’ve got hooks and arrows and cannoshot and all sorts o’ thingamajigs to take care o’ the runaways.”

A cough, a loud buzz and a shrieking noise followed in amplified fashion before the voice died down. The little green creatures wearing the goggles seemed to be enjoying this immensely, judging from the way they giggled and toyed around with the oversized harpoon launchers. Crude-looking contraptions as these were, they were menacingly sharp and shiny nonetheless.

One of the crew jumped off the goblin ship and floated in space, holding a thick rope in hand; it was a towing line. The little goblin was wearing nothing but a toothless grin.

“What did he say? They’re towing us in?” Ned asked Winceham who nodded affirmatively with a frown. Parcifal still held Encelados at a defensive stance, somehow waiting for the small, naked green goblin to transform into a towering champion of the goblin race. Reality, once more, failed to indulge her whims.

“What for?” she asked, while Theo again offered another shrug of almost complete indifference, seemingly too preoccupied with steering the ship, a soon-to-be irrelevant task.

“I’m up! I’m up! Stop that awful shouting!” said Lerneia who jumped out of bed with her hair in a wild, ruffled shape.

She rubbed her eyes profusely and looking wild-eyed, was apparently trying to understand why there was a large oak tree yelling at her in space.

“I really don’t understand why they’re naked”, said Winceham and Ned threw him a wary look and a deeply troubled sigh before telling him:

“I really don’t understand how answering that is going to help.”

“I wasn’t trying to help. They’re sending one of their own to tie the line,” said Winceham and pointed to the naked, grinning goblin.

“I see,” said Ned and blinked vacantly with his hands in his pockets, while Parcifal couldn’t help but ask all of them with a voice on the verge of breaking:

“Are you just willing to let them have this ship?”

“They’re just towing us in. It’s not dangerous. Unless the ship breaks in half; at least that’s what I think,” said Theo and petted Bo around his ears.

“Think of it as a harbor service,” said Winceham stroking his beard, his eyes trying to focus where the goblin’s genitals might possibly be. Lernea scratched her head and straightened her back before opening her eyes wide enough to let what has happening around her sink in. In a moment of sudden, angst-ridden clarity she exclaimed:

“We’re being boarded!”

To which the goblin tying up the line on the prow answered flatly from afar:

“Yer bein’ tooed.”

“That probably means we’re surrendering! I’m not surrendering to a bunch of naked.. Things!” cried Parcifal, Encelados trembling in the air hesitantly.

“Goblins, lass,” said Winceham and nodded to himself before starting to walk towards the towliner onboard the *Mary Watchamacallit*. As both ships moved closer to the immense trunk that still looked not very far yet wasn’t that close, the air around them started to pick up a heady, peculiar smell. The air smelled like a mix of oil, walnuts and grog gone horribly bad.

“Stay yer footing!” shouted the captain of the *Mary Celestial*, easily recognizable by an eye-patch and a ratskull-adorned black hat to boot. Winceham raised his hands in the air and lowered his head, trying to peek at the diminutive goblin’s privates. His voice was a serious, well-thought out affair.

“I’m just curious about the size, you know?”

“Nun o’ yer business, ya dwarven bastard,” said the towlining goblin, its face scrounged up in an even uglier way than generally thought possible for a creature universally thought to be the low point of evolution.

“He’s a halfuin, actually,” said Theo and nodded to himself, looking pleased he had something helpful to offer in what he deemed to be a discussion of sorts.

“Of dwarven heritage, still,” added Winceham not the least bit mindful of the insult but still focused on trying to guess the average girth of goblin genitals from an innocuous distance.

“Is no-one with me?” cried Parcifal in vain, while Lernea looked thoughtful, trying to quickly put the pieces together.

“We can’t afford hasty decisions, sister. We must think this through,” she said Lernea while Ned looked at her with a sad expression. His voice was weary and soft.

“They’re already towing us in, Lernea. They took us completely by surprise; their ship might look like a heap of trash but I can count four cannons, two harpoon launchers and

maybe two dozens of them leering at us for no good reason I'd care to think of."

"They're even smaller than Winceham!" cried out Parcifal in wild-eyed protest only to receive Winceham's sharp, irate reply.

"Never underestimate the small folk, lass!" he shouted.

The goblin onboard the *Mary Whatchamacallit* lit a pipe and nodded to Winceham. It decided to share some appreciative thoughts with Winceham.

"Now ya tell'er what's right, ya dwarven bastard."

Winceham gave the goblin a curt bow and replied congenially:

"Can't be wrong when speaking from the heart, dear sir."

"Dear sir, he says! He's calling the pirate goblin, a dear sir!" cried out Parcifal, Encelados waved about by her fumbling hands more like a banner than a sword proper.

"That's his prerogative, sister. It's a form of negotiation. You should do well to take notice of Mister Winceham's diplomatic skills," said Lernea and searched the trunk near the bed on deck for her tin of tea. Ned wished he could do more than simply sigh, but by the look of things, sighing would have to do.

He approached Parcifal with a friendly, knowing look. She looked at him with a desperate longing to let her have a go at them all, but he took her by the shoulder and told her with an unshakeable calm:

"Maybe next time."

Parcifal looked at Ned with befuddled sadness. All she could utter was a half-croaked, puppy-eyed disagreement that quickly fell on its own face.

"But.."

“Ah, no worries,” said Theo wearing the smile of a child on its first trip to the sea. “She’ll be right,” he told her with a misplaced sense of assurance.

A voice echoed around them. It was a loud, metallic screeching covered in overtones of disgust which was a very rare occurrence amongst goblins.

“You, the dwarf! Stop harassing my crew or you’ll be fired upon!”

The air inside the goblin dockmaster's office had an almost suffocating quality. The atmosphere felt thick as oil, smelling of ink and rough, cheap paper. Tallyflop's dockmaster's office was built inside a hollowed out section of the giant oak's skin. Its walls rose steeply into a dark, shadowy place with no ceiling in sight. Goblin helpers and staff could be seen running atop tiny overhead railings and metal grates; they passed through glass pipes, along rope bridges and wooden ladders. The almost always insidious-looking creatures appeared suddenly and disappeared just as quickly through small trapdoors built in the wooden walls. Sniggering like madmen at times, many of them carried large stacks of papers strapped on their back; they were all invariably naked.

Lernea's look darted around uncomfortably. It was as if she felt soiled by her mere presence inside that room. Parcifal wore a brooding expression; her hands were stuffed in her armpits. She was pouting like a child scorned.

Winceham looked intently at the stacks of papers and scrolls rising up into nothingness. He could make out the goblins above, criscrossing the room with all the fury of rats in a cage. Stroking his fine beard, the odd look on his leathery face meant he still couldn't make up his mind about the goblins genitalia. He looked committed; he just had to know.

Bo sat on Theo's shoulder idly. The bunny rabbit was practically asleep; the flames on his eyes were nowhere to be seen. Theo was silently trying to count the books and ledgers surrounding them; he had managed to start over and over again more than a few times.

Ned sported a troubled look and a screwed up face. He was trying to understand what it was exactly they were dealing with.

"What do you mean the ship's impounded?", said Ned

as calmly and clearly as possible. The goblin sitting down behind an oversized desk in front of him, had earlier identified himself as Tallyflop's dockmaster who went by the name of Zed.

The goblin was wearing nothing more than a smudged, shattered monocle. It was very doubtful that the monocle was able to serve its original purpose, but Zed nevertheless straightened it out before giving an answer.

"I mean, it's being withheld," said the dockmaster without looking up from a huge ledger that was easily three times his size. Ned allowed for a small pause before he cleared his throat.

"On what grounds?" demanded Ned. Parcifal's eyes narrowed; her focus turned on the goblin's head.

"As per contract," replied the dockmaster tersely with a shrilly voice, flipping some of the pages almost at random.

"We never signed any contract!" exclaimed Parcifal and red hot anger poured from her voice. The dockmaster raised his head and looked at her through the monocle, blinking erratically and trying - impossible though it seemed - to focus for a moment or two. He dived into the huge ledger in front of him again before answering; he waved a bony hand dismissively.

"That's irrelevant."

"How is that even possible?" shouted Ned, his face trying to express a righteous befuddlement words could not.

"Under statutory law," said the dockmaster calmly, shooting a straight eye at Ned for the first time.

"Meaning?" asked Ned with and threw his hands in the air with exasperation.

The goblin took a moment to himself; he then looked at all of the party crammed inside the little space that remained in front of his desk. With a raised brow he said flatly before

returning his attention to his ledger, dipping a pen in some ink and adding a smudge that highly resembled goblin genitalia on the side of a page:

“The ship’s being impounded.”

“I can see that. Where does it say you have the authority to do that?” said Ned pointing to the goblin crew outside the tiny window on their back. The goblin wrecking crew were hoisting down the sails. Lernea looked behind her shoulder and saw a large metal barrel-like construct on wheels, pushed on a ramp. It had a number of saws and hatchets attached to it and left a trail of smoke as it vibrated violently on the *Mary Whatchamacallit*’s deck. The next moment, it exploded with a dumbed-down thud, sending perhaps a dozen goblins flying off into space. A rush of maniac laughter and snot-brained giggling followed suit before the wrecking crew went back to what appeared to be just another day’s work for goblins.

“They really seem to be going out on a limb,” said Winceham with a grin and Ned looked at him as if he felt his coin-purse had suddenly gone missing.

“Same place it says you can take it off Mr. Culliper there,” replied the dockmaster and barely nodded to the shackled figure of Culliper, his mouth gagged with a very unhygienic-looking rag. Culliper was propped upright, tightly pressed between Lernea and Parcifal; he rolled his eyes but no-one was paying any attention to him, except perhaps for Ned.

Ned shot the pirate a hard look. His jaw tightened and his face became ashen gray. Ned’s mind went back a few days; it was a very unfortunate series of events that had led them all the way to space and Tallyflop. The matter of Culliper’s fate remained still a matter to settle. Ned felt the pressure piling up; he looked like he was about to grab the dockmaster by the throat when Zed cleared his throat just in time to prevent that.

“Says on section eight, paragraph fifteen dash seven of the ‘Bloody Infamous and Rather Fair Codex of Ethical Piracy’, and I quote: ‘Once ye take a ship, ye partake in all it is ridden with, be it bloody tax, bloody berthing charges, bloody refitting and in any bloody way legal or not so much investments or expenses accrued in relation to the ship’s hull or bloody floating bits thereof’.”

Ned took a deep breath and cringed his face with a hand. He appeared to gather every iota of self-control and shouted at Zed, barely constraining himself from having a go at him.

“Meaning?”

“The ship owes us money,” replied Zed flatly.

A loud creaking sound was then heard, followed by a couple of thuds and reverberating knocks. The floor vibrated a little, grabbing almost everyone’s attention, except for Ned and the dockmaster; their gazes were locked in a silent, mysterious struggle. Outside, at the pier, the goblin wrecking crew had just chopped off the main mast and were trying to peel off it what had previously been a somewhat less flat, more alive, goblin. There wasn’t much laughter involved, at least not until the moment one of them brandished a literally bloody spatula, much to the merriment of his co-workers.

Parcival exploded with a shout, condemning the lack of logic behing the wrecking of the *Mary Whatchamacallit*, rather than simply stating the obvious.

“But you’re bloody wrecking it!”

Theo was now trying to count goblin parts and limbs flying off from the ship now and then, while Winceham’s fascination with goblin genitalia seemed to finally come to an end. There was a glad look of relief on his smiling face when he shook his head as if everything finally made sense to him.

“It’s one bloody size smaller then!”

“Ah, I see your friends here like to talk legalese. We’re wrecking it because it’s our bloody prerogative, ain’t it?” said Zed with what could’ve been a smile if it wasn’t impossibly lopsided, the dockmaster’s saw-like teeth failing to follow the geometry of the mouth.

“How are you going to get anything worthwhile from that ship by hacking it to pieces?” said Parcifal frustrated, while Ned looked engrossed in thought, his eyes wide shut.

“You’re not very experienced in the shipping business, are you?” remarked Zed and added another blot of ink in the shape of goblin genitalia on some page on his ledger, before he turned the page and went back to trailing some other piece of text.

“Is there a problem with that?” said Parcifal sharply and tried to approach the goblin threateningly. She moved about a couple of inches before bumping onto Ned’s back. Her sister shook her head disapprovingly and motioned her to just stay put.

“Ned can handle it,” she said and after a look at Ned added, “For the time being.”

Ned swallowed hard and nodded thoughtfully to himself before turning to look at the ship being hacked and sawed without a lot of regard for the craftsmanship or the safety of the wrecking crew.

“You’re selling it for scrap, isn’t that right?” asked Ned pointing at the dockmaster.

“If by scrap you mean firewood, that’s right,” replied Zed.

“Firewood? Isn’t that liable to catch on fire? Fire is a dangerous thing, isn’t it?” said Theo suddenly and everyone looked at him as if realising for the first time he might not be actually aware of his surroundings most of the time. On the other hand, Bo seemed quite alert and perky; yet his eyes

weren't lit up. He simply wiggled his nose and scratched an ear with a hind leg.

"It doesn't make much sense to hack down the whole supporting structure on top of which this city is built upon. It'd be like turning a castle's foundations into a quarry," said Lerneia nodding thoughtfully.

"Still, it can't be all that valuable. I mean, how much firewood does a city this size need, really? It's not like it's that cold in space," said Winceham with a shrug of his shoulders that went largely unnoticed, especially since he stood smack in the middle of them all, hardly able to breathe properly, crammed as they were.

"Steam engines," said Ned with a sudden flash of insight. The goblin nodded affirmatively and tried to smile congenially; the end result though was less than inviting.

"By steam, you mean that thing that's like smoke, except it only appears to be around baths and hot springs and such?" asked Winceham, a very uncertain expression painted on his face. He absent-mindedly scratched his chin, breadcrumbs falling off his beard. None bothered to answer him; they were rather trying to absorb the implicit declaration that the smell about Winceham wasn't just a matter of unfortunate timing, but rather a way of life. The minimal space inside the dockmaster's office made it all but impossible to ignore.

"Well, now that we've got everything sorted out, would you be bloody kind enough to leave? Work just keeps piling up," said the dockmaster and as luck would have it, a goblin passed overhead riding a small unicycle on a rope and tossed an impossibly thick book on a huge stack that came crushing down barely a moment later, adding a little bit of height in a small hill behind Zed made entirely out of paper.

"What's a steam engine?" asked Parcifal with a quizzical

expression; it was obvious she had never heard of such a thing before.

“It’s an apparatus that creates force applied to a system that can create movement through the use of the properties of water or other liquids in their gaseous forms,” said Theo matter-of-factly and petted Bo behind the ears. The bunny seemed to concur, if one were an expert on reading whiskers. Theo’s answer once again drew some weird looks but this time those were looks of surprise, coupled with the usual failure to really understand what he was talking about.

“It’s what makes the ships fly,” said Ned with a face shaken by a sudden, acute realisation. He looked at Lernea and without uttering a word, he saw that same look mirrored in her face. She was at a loss for words for a moment. Zed was trying to look inconspicuous while eyeing a strangely illustrated centerfold page dangling from his ledger, containing fancy, dressed up goblins of indeterminate sex.

“You’re not selling the metal bits as well?” asked Lernea with a rather off-beat tone, as if she was being merely curious. Ned picked her train of thought, nodded and went a step farther:

“We’ll sell you Culliper in exchange for that metal chair belowdecks.”

Everyone, except Parcifal, even Bo, looked at Ned like he had just admitted to being a large, furry whale dancing in a pot. Culliper did not even flinch; his stabbing stare was stuck on Ned.

“What chair?” asked the goblin looking suddenly quite intrigued; he then started shuffling the pages in the ledger in front of him with furious speed, one eye searching the text on the pages and the other not daring to leave the naughty centerfold page out of sight.

“Ned lad, that’s bloody slavery,” said Winceham with a hushed, almost fearful voice. Lerneia looked troubled, while Parcifal was smiling, either lost in thought or staunchly approving of Ned’s decision. The former queen of Nomos for a day looked at Ned with a pang of worry and told him:

“Are you sure?”

“Unless they throw him into a fire or something, that probably counts as slavery,” said Winceham out of turn.

“Yes. I’m sure,” said Ned and shot a bland look at Culliper. The pirate’s eyes looked like small, glistening beads. He made no effort to so much as croak a muffled pleading voice. Instead, it looked as if his mouth curled up in a wicked, sly smile.

The dockmaster traced a very curly line of goblin handwriting with one crooked finger and mumbled loudly:

“Mary Whatchamacallit... Six pence and seven tiblins... Shoddy crufty rudder... Trimmed sail... Bronze thaumaturgic device... Propensity to drift when not handled... Broken Grog dispenser...”

“You’re selling Culliper as a slave for a grog dispenser?” Winceham asked Ned with a feeling of awed respect in his voice and Theo, who rarely jumped in to actually help someone else understand, helpfully added with a smile:

“The grog dispenser was the strange barrel with the lever and the tap near the lavatory, down below in the hold; not the one in the back with the odd slot.”

“There was a lavatory?” asked Winceham, sounding mildly suprised but otherwise unshaken.

The goblin gave the matter a small amount of thought while drool with the viscosity of tar started dripping off his mouth. He was looking at the centerfold page intently wild-eyed and frenzied when he suddenly cried “Done!” and of-

ferred his hand to Ned. After a moment of reflexive hesitation, Ned shook it firmly; he then couldn't help but look at Culliper for a long, tense moment before he turned to leave. He fell on Parcifal and realised she was blocking the narrow, short exit. She was still lost in her own, grin-inducing thoughts.

"What have you done, Ned?" asked Lernea while Ned slid past Parcifal who was trying to squeeze herself into the wrong amount of space at the wrong moment. Once past the exit he looked at Lernea with what must've been guilt and told her:

"It's better than the alternative."

"Is it? That's not justice served, Ned," she told him with consternation, her head raised slightly above the others as Winceham tried to squeeze through everyone else and out of the impossibly small onto the promenade boardwalk.

"I needed to do something about it," said Ned and shrugged slightly. Lernea bit her lip and shot a look at Culliper who was already being whisked away using a harness and a pulley, ever higher and higher by goblins hidden from sight. His ice-cold gaze sparkled away into the darkness; Culliper and Ned locked eyes. A moment of gritty tension passed like glue becoming undone; Ned felt like he had already made a terrible, unavoidable mistake.

A moment later, Winceham asked Ned even as the others left the crowded office with more ease:

"Where are we going to find a new ship? What's so important about that chair anyway? And why might I add, did the ship have a lavatory?"

"Maybe Theo can answer that," replied Ned and Bo's eyes suddenly lit up, even as Theo bumped his head on the doorway and silently nursed his head with a thoughtful yet promising look, as if something new and wonderful had just

happened.

His fingers went for the crystal around his neck. The shimmer on its surface as light fell from all the thousands of lamps and fires around the innumerable tall branches all around, above and below, was the warm orange glow of a dear hearth.

As they stood outside the dockmaster's office, Parcifal was the last one to come out. She asked without really looking all too worried, or indeed caring:

"I can't find Culliper."

The metal chair that had flown the *Mary Whatchamacallit* was being hoisted into the air and brought onto the promenade, near where they stood. At the same time a team of goblins fell into the void as the poor ship split in two after the last few beams that held its keel together were chopped off into splinters.

"Ned sold him to the dockmaster for that chair," said Winceham, looking undecided on whether or not that was a good trading decision.

"Excellent," said Parcifal and walked along the promenade that slowly turned below them like a corkscrew, leading to a brilliantly lit, brightly coloured neighborhood where rowdy cheers and song could be heard, accompanied by the heady smell of fuel quality grog and an indistinct aroma of badly charred meat.

"Where do you think you're off to, young lady?" demanded Lerneia with all the trained haughtiness of a queen and older sister. Her younger sister replied with her hands in her pockets, strolling about casually.

"To find a drink."

"I'll drink to that," said Winceham with a mischievous smile and set out after Parcifal, trying to catch up with her.

“There’s things we need to settle first! We need to find the woodkin! We need a budget for lodging, we need to delegate tasks and agree to a course of action! We need to find out what this thing is!” she said and pointed to the metal throne and with one hand and the giant oak all around behind them, before pleading, “Ned, say something!”. She sounded slightly panicked; her voice suddenly carried a lot less authority.

“Let them be, Lernea. They need to blow off some steam,” said Ned and managed half a grin.

“It’s been a very boring journey, that much is true,” Lernea replied as she looked at the strange contraption in the form of a chair sitting squarely in front of her on the promenade, a couple of leather straps still dangling from it.

“I could have given a few more performances if you’d only asked,” said Ned in an apologetic fashion, looking suddenly all too self-conscious.

“I said boring Ned, not suicidal,” Lernea retorted and changed the subject even before Ned had time enough to protest.

“And how do you suggest we carry that?” she said and Theo, who had been feeding Bo a thick stick of limegrass from one of his many pockets, inserted the crystal around his neck in the slot on the chair and by way of magic, it floated easily almost a foot above the air.

“There. Nifty little thing this crystal, isn’t it? I wonder how it actually works,” said Theo and his eyes turned into thin slivers as he peered over the throne.

“With magic?” asked Lernea and raised an eyebrow. Theo replied after a moment absorbed in thought.

“It might be, it might be. But what kind of magic?” he said in all seriousness, while Ned touched the chair and

pushed it forward using just one finger. He shook his head approvingly and said:

“Now all we have to do is catch up with Parcifal and Winceham.”

“My sister always tends to act before thinking. If she had just waited to exchange a few simple words, we wouldn’t need to spent more time finding her in that awful crowd down there,” said Lernea and pointed to the massive marketplace that was chock-full of people below.

“That’s Parcifal alright,” said Ned and walked beside Lernea at an easy pace, pushing the aloft chair alongside him.

“You mean near that blue bright glow dancing in the air down there?” said Theo without realising the full implications of what he was seeing.

Ned and Lernea exchanged knowing, troubled looks and sprang to a running pace, while Bo jumped off Theo’s lap, flames brilliantly wild in his eyes. The bunny easily outran them both in a few heartbeats. Theo then realised that something important was happening and decided he just might as well fly towards the glow instead of hopping along so inefficiently. He leapt off the promenade and into the vacuum with the practiced ease of someone putting on his slippers.

By the time he realised something was slightly off, he was freefalling, trying to swim in the dead of space and doing a frightfully awful job of it.

* * *

“Is it now?” cried Parcifal as she swung Encelados fiercely over her head, the blade glowing blue hot. Lernea had her back, arrows flying from her bow with a trained, fast pace.

“Now is not the time, really!” shouted Lernea and the body of an orc clad in chainmail fell flat a couple of feet away from her, two arrows protruding from its head viscerally.

“Phew! What a putrid smell!” said Winceham, attracting aggravated looks from Ned even in the thick of battle. The halfuin was ready to make a wry comment when his senses alerted him to a new threat. He stepped on the ledge of the promenade and vaulted himself into the air with a backflip; the next moment he landed on the wooden floor, his tiny yet lethal blade stuck in the neck of an orc. Vile green blood gushed in spurts as the orc toppled and fell off the promenade and onto the void of space, without so much as a gurgling sound.

“That came too close, Wince!” shouted Ned and reloaded his crossbow with a new bolt. He took aim at two orcs who were rushing the sisters with a pair of raised bucklers. Ned took his time before he let fly a shot; it missed wildly at the last moment. The orcs drew their weapons, a murky blood-spat axe and a rough whaler’s spear. Ned was already reloading.

“Incoming, lasses!” cried Winceham and filled his sling with a hefty ball of lead, a memoir from the ship’s armory.

Parcifal was locked in a swordfight with the orc that was, in all probability, the gang’s leader. It was a tall, brutish orc with a lisp; he wore real mail and the nasty ability to dodge and parry like the devil’s barbed tail. Lernea heard the halfuin’s warning just in time; she quickly loaded her bow with two arrows and knelt coolly. The crowd applauded at the ap-

parently rare exhibit of teamwork the party was providing; most of the boardwalk was filled with people wanting to take a peek at the unscheduled fight.

“Yer worth the money, ya ferretth!” cried the tall orc, as he parried yet another blow from Parcifal aimed squarely at the small gap at his neck, between his helmet and his armor. Lerneia held her breath and let the arrows fly even as the orcs were ready to leap onto her; the next instant, their weapons were flying harmlessly in the air, all the rush of their wielders diminished with a sudden flop. The two orcs were lying slumped against the floor, an arrow having pierced their skulls clean through.

“Blathted windth o’ Morrogah! I thould’ve athked for double the coin!” shouted the tall brute of an orc. He then dodged a blow that would’ve cut his arm off in the nick of time and managed to tackle Parcifal with a sweep of his leg, dropping her on the ground. All of a sudden, there was a blinding flash of light; thick smoke covered everything as far as anyone from the party could see. A mistimed flurry of missiles was absorbed into the cloud harmlessly.

“Is everyone alright?” asked Ned and coughed slightly as the thick smoke made it difficult to breath.

“Short bloke’s team won! Pay up, ya sorry gippos!” said a delighted, rough voice coming from somewhere outside the smoke cloud that was slowly clearing up. The cheery tone of his voice was starkly contrasted by a lot of muttering and swearing for those that had placed the losing bet.

Parcifal stood back on her feet, panting from the exertion. Encelados had never left her grasp; the blade was silver gray again, yet stained with dried orcish blood, the colour of weathered copper.

“I couldn’t land a single blow,” she said in a whisper and

wiped the sweat on her furrowed brow with her free palm.

The promenade slowly returned to its more usual hub-bub; the traders at the stalls picked up from they had left and started shouting their offers of smelly sea-urchins-on-a-stick, while groups of sailors were busy smashing cups of grog against each other's head again. A few of the intelligentsia even applauded the party as the smoke eventually cleared and cheered them on for an entertaining, well-performed fight. A couple even tossed some coin at Ned and Winceham's feet.

"How do they dare mock us?" asked Lernea as she was rounding up her arrows from all the orc bodies she had felled. Ned wasn't sure about the crowd's reaction; he looked up, around the trees' giant leaves and branches where other boardwalks snaked their way. Up there, all around, small gangs of crowds amassed as well, gazing from shady balconies and lit terraces alike. By the looks of it, deadly combat counted as entertainment for these people. It was a troubling idea that the halfuin was quick to analyze more fully.

"Nah, they're just being appreciative. A good fight's always a good fight around places like these. The jokes helped as well," said Winceham offering his own perspective as he gathered the coins, as well as any and all valuables the orcs carried on their persons, especially if those that showed any teeth.

"I didn't tell any jokes," said Ned without being completely sure. The halfuin produced a pair of pliers from his belt and went for an orc's mouth.

"See, that helped since it didn't spoil the mood," said Winceham as he pulled out what looked like a silver, saw-like tooth.

"Everyone's a critic. I see," said Ned as he looked around, vaguely searching for something specific.

“Where is Bo?” asked Lernea with a contemplative look on her face. All of them exchanged strange looks before gazing at various random points around them.

“He should be with Theo,” said Ned and kept searching in the shuffling crowd around them in vain.

“Where is that oddball?” asked Parcifal, looking positively miffed and genuinely tired, all because of the swordfight. Lernea looked at her sister sternly.

“Princesses have to adhere to certain principles, sister. You can’t just use any word. ‘Oddball’ sounds rather demeaning. ‘Special’ is much more appropriate in Theo’s case.”

“Call him daft if you like, but he’s missing, that’s for sure,” said Winceham and sat down to have a smoke.

“Are you sure?” Ned asked, sounding rather shaken.

“I just said that’s for sure,” reiterated the halfuin, and stuffed his pipe with a generous amount of tobacco, before adding with a measure of apathy, “and those two weirdos aren’t the only missing items.”

Ned realised it immediately then; it was Lernea who voiced it on cue.

“The chair. It’s gone,” said the exiled princess with a flush of anger on her face.

“Forget about the chair now! Theo and Bo are missing!” said Ned.

“There’s no bodies lying around,” said Winceham after shooting a mere glance and exhaled a cloud of smoke as if it somehow added validity to his point.

“This is serious Wince. They’re probably in danger and it’s my fault. It’s all my fault,” said Ned and shook his head.

“Since when is everything your fault?” asked Lernea. Ned looked at her with a sudden, yet restrained anger.

“Isn’t it? It’s how it all started, isn’t it?”

“Stop being foolish. I don’t suffer fools gladly. And you’re not one, I can tell. I’ve developed a keen eye for them over the years.”

Lerneia walked over to Ned’s side. Parcival asked with a feeling of uncertainty:

“Are you referring to me?”

“Usually I’d chide you for being so self-absorbed, but I did have you in mind,” replied Lerneia.

“Would you mind your step please, missus?” said a tall, lank fellow with a bland, ghostly pale face who seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. An almost identical man beside him was pulling a rather large handcart. They were dressed in simple, loose-fitting violet-colored robes and matching sandals. The two men began to load one of the bodies onto the cart.

“What are you doing?” asked Lerneia as if someone had just spilled milk and cookies on her palace’s most expensive rug.

“Just clearing up the promenade. If you don’t mind,” came an answer without any sort of color in the voice, except perhaps bland indifference.

Suddenly, an arrow zipped through the air and got stuck on the pale-faced man’s back. He slightly furrowed his brow, smiled hesitantly, and fell dead right on top of the body he was carrying. Lerneia took a step back reflexively and saw there was a note attached to the arrow. The other man in the robe observed a moment’s silence and nodded to himself pensively.

“Mack always said he wanted to go out on the job. You know, doing something notable,” said the dead man’s colleague and continued with the job of loading the bodies without another word. Lerneia overcame her shocked surprise and

read the note. Her face became an oblique mask of harsh determination.

“They have Bo. And the device,” she said flatly but her eyes shone fiercely.

“The grog dispenser?” asked Winceham simply out of curiosity, sending tiny circles of smoke up in the air without so much as batting an eyelid.

“The thaumaturgic device,” replied Ned searching their surroundings for signs of the messenger, to no avail.

“The what?” asked Winceham once again, as if he were hard of hearing.

“The grog dispenser, yes,” said Parcifal irritated, tying up a small gash with some clean cloth she always carried. Lernea pondered at the note for a moment.

“That means, they don’t have Theo,” she said and her face turned thoughtful.

“Who are ‘they’?” asked Parcifal, wiping off the rest of the orcish blood from Encelados with one sudden sweep of the blade.

“The Culprits,” said Lernea, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes, I heard that. I mean, who are they?” insisted Parcifal.

“It’s signed, ‘The Culprits’! With a capital ‘C’!” shouted Lernea angrily. Winceham was lying down on the promenade totally relaxed, even when the body collector started washing away the thick, green sticky pools of blood lying about.

“It says that if we try to do anything funny - and I quote - the bunny will snuff it. They promise to return him, once they’re done.”

“That still doesn’t mean much. Done with what? Making stew out of him?” said the halfuin.

“That’s not funny. We’ll have to find out what it means ourselves,” said Ned.

“What about Theo?” asked Lernea. Ned shrugged and paused for a moment. At length, he said:

“Maybe he’s lost. Maybe he was scared, I don’t know. Maybe he’s just fooling around, who can tell? It’s Theo. Then again, if we find Bo, it should be easier to track down Theo, and vice versa. Him and Bo, they have this..”

“Affinity,” chimed in Lernea and added, “We’ll just need to ask around. And we need to know what happened to Theo’s people.”

“How do we go about that? We just got jumped in plain view. Was it those Culprits’ doing? The place seems to be full of gangs like these. Still, we don’t want to attract too much attention, especially not now,” said Ned and crossed his arms against his chest.

“I think I know the right man for the job. Well, almost a man,” Lernea said and shot a gaze full of meaning at Winceham, followed by a grin. The halfuin noticed, exhaled a puff of smoke and said with utmost sincerity and a misguided sense of manliness:

“I knew you’d come around. It must be the smell of danger, isn’t it? Ladies just love the smell of danger around me.”

* * *

Theo opened his eyes and couldn't see a thing. He blinked a couple of times until his eyes adjusted to the nearly total lack of light. Still, he saw nothing more than a faint orange glow caressing a crude opening somewhere to his right. He surmised he was in a large room of some kind. The atmosphere was warm and pleasant, with an earthly feeling about it. Theo felt his hands itch; he then heard the sound of rustling leaves as he propped himself up, resting on his hands. He was lying on a bed of leaves. Oak leaves, judging by their fuzziness factor. Theo only knew this wasn't where he was supposed to be.

He then remembered falling off the promenade, trying to swim in space after flying had somehow failed him. And then he remembered the piers off the huge branches, all kinds of ships in their berths; lights on the promenades and the ledges of the giant tree. Everything had seemed to go by at a steady, easy speed. Perhaps it was him falling downwards, he wondered briefly; he never was good with the technicalities of events.

He got up and blindly staggered forward, his hands splayed with open palms. He was hoping to find a wall or a lamp, anything that could illuminate his whereabouts in any helpful way, literally or not. His eyes tried to pierce the darkness, without much success. It wasn't the usual sort of darkness his elven eyes could at least help him navigate without tripping and landing on something unhealthy.

After the first few steps, the sound of leaves under his feet became a mute, silent caress. Theo was stepping on fuzzy, soft grass. His outstretched hands then bumped onto something soft and furry. The unknown surface was warm and inviting to the touch; it felt strange to Theo, yet somehow familiar. He seeked its outline with both hands; the soft fuzziness

ness stretched onto a wide arc before it dipped downwards and then upwards again, like some sort of peculiar mass of rolling hills.

“I gather you’re awake,” said a deep, rumbling voice with a hint of annoyance, followed by a low-keyed snarl. No answer came from Theo; he was hard at thought about how to answer. It wasn’t a question per se, but it did make him think about whether or not he was genuinely awake.

“I’m not sure. How can I tell if this isn’t a dream?” said Theo in absolute seriousness, his hands groping the soft furri-ness in front of him reflexively. He then felt a slap across his face that left him speechless and his hands frozen stiff, now groping nothing but air. There was a loud clap-like sound like wood meeting stone and then light suddenly poured from numerous points that seemed set in a circle around him.

As light filled the emptiness it quickly defined a large enclosed space, the natural walls nothing more than huge root outgrowths. Theo realised he was in an indoor grove of sorts; the dirt floor was covered in grass. There flowers, various small trees and little gardens; water and naked roots abounded.

The most inescapable reality though was that the voice seemed to belong to a nine-foot tall bear wearing a bright, orange toga down to its waist, decorated with blood-red shapes and some sort of writing.

Theo glanced at his splayed hands and realised his shoulders were the same height as the bear’s behinds. The bear, as if on cue, turned around and lowered its head. Theo hoped that perhaps by some sort of small mercy and an inordinate amount of luck the bear would be deaf, dumb and blind. It wasn’t so; the bear stooped low and seeked eye contact with Theo. Its eyes were the colour of honey and its rotund,

white-grey face nearly filled Theo's view in an imposing manner. The elf raised his eyes almost involuntarily; their gazes locked. There was a stern, crystal-clear shine about the bear's eyes, like a pair of tiny, spotless, golden mirror beads. The bear stood there for a moment before it made a statement with an elevated sense of importance.

"Now, you stand enlightened."

"Do I?" asked Theo befuddled, nursing his flush-red cheek. The bear nodded just once, but its whole bulk seemed to shake as well.

"Question everything; that is the path of balance."

The words came effortlessly, as if recited. There was approval in the bear's gravely voice.

"Where is that path?" said Theo, his eyes darting all around the floor and then the walls, literally searching for some kind of path or trail.

"Within," said the bear and bowed with reverence, its great paws pointing to its huge chest, "and without," it added stretching its hands. Theo looked nothing less than confused. He barely managed a word purely out of trying to appear polite, especially since he had - however inadvertently - grabbed the bear's behinds not a minute earlier.

"Ah."

The bear motioned with one paw for Theo to lay himself on the ground as it did so as well. Theo looked a bit undecided, but nevertheless sat down on a patch of grass right beside a short, delicate-looking tree. Water ran under it in a small stream not wider than a man's palm. The bear sat itself down near the old, mossy bark of the wooden walls. A few feet separated the two of them. When the bear spoke, its voice reverberated serenely across the picturesque grove.

"Please, sit. Let us share."

Theo searched his robe's pockets and felt embarrassed to find nothing but a piece of lint. He then realized the crystal was still lodged inside that strange chair. That also brought to mind Bo; the bunny was nowhere around. Theo suddenly felt a chill rise up his spine and a terrible feeling of loneliness overcame him. The bear saw Theo was looking nervous.

"Are you thirsty, friend?" asked the bear gently.

"Is there a wrong answer?" countered Theo with some alarm in his voice. A wide, homely smile formed on the bear's mouth. It seemed to be surprisingly happy.

"Indeed. There is no wrong answer; there is no right question. The universe, my friend, is always in flux."

"Then I guess a drink wouldn't hurt."

The bear nodded and flexed its torso around in an astounding show of agility. It reached for a couple of bear-sized wooden cups perched on a natural shelf along the walls. He offered one cup to Theo who held it in both hands much more like he would a jar or a vase. The bear put its own cup down on the ground and made a gesture with both its front legs that it used readily like arms. It matched both its paws, flexing the edges preternaturally, forming some kind of winged shape, and closed its eyes.

A loud hum then reverberated outwards from the bear's chest in a rhythmic pattern. The humming stopped abruptly a few moments later, just as it was beginning to become too loud for comfort. Theo was about to ask for a cup the size he could handle, when suddenly a swarm of lights filled the grove. They whirled around them with a benign, almost melodic buzz. The swarm looked like tiny sparkles of glittering raindrops fluttering in the air; it suddenly split in two, and each part dived away like a single mass in each cup, spinning wildly inside.

The next moment, their shininess was no more; all that remained was little ember specks wafting in the air, vanishing as swiftly as they had appeared.

The bear raised its cup and bowed imperceptibly. It then opened its eyes and cocked its head in a manner which implied it was having a spiffy time indeed. That, or it was right about ready to rip the living flesh out of Theo in one bite.

“My name is Tejewel Al-Dub. May the desert be fruitful,” he said and drank the cup in one go. Theo looked at his own cup and saw a wonderful, golden-hued liquid sloshing easily about the cup, starry like a summertime’s sea. Theo took a careful, measured sip. His mouth felt like an ocean tide ridden with flowers; his stomach was instantly placated and felt full. His heart felt warm and his mind was put at ease. It felt like drinking the stuff of dreams.

“I must admit, I’ve only heard of deserts, but I’ve seen sand and there wasn’t a lot of fruit involved. I hate to sound rude, though I fear grabbing your behind like I did earlier doesn’t make a good first impression, but honestly: What is this stuff? It’s like distilled magic!” asked Theo blatantly, with just the right amount of solid naivety and amazement. The bear smiled heartily, its eyes nearly lost in their furried sockets.

“The past is always gone from sight, friend. Your cup is filled with glowdew,” replied Tejewel and added, “How does the wind carry your face, friend?”

“I hope it doesn’t. I’m really attached to it,” said Theo sounding seriously worried. Tej laughed and his whole body jiggled along.

“I only meant to ask your name friend. It’s an expression around the parts where I was born.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I’ve only recently travelled to space for

the first time so a lot of this is new to me,” Theo said apologetically and straightened his somewhat ruffled hair. “I’m Hanultheofodor Trypthwifidyr. My..” Theo stumbled for a moment but nodded to himself and continued with a wavering smile, “My friends call me Theo.”

“When I was but a cub the elders called me Tej. Sometimes, I long for those simpler times; I was unaware, but not ignorant. Now I know there can be only one awareness, but I’ve yet to find its roots.”

“I don’t understand. What does that mean?” asked Theo. Tejjwel was to engrossed in thought to answer. He spoke with a clear, proud voice.

“I shall call you Hanul, in the manner of my ancestors.”

“But my name’s Theo.”

“That was before you became enlightened.”

“I am enlightened?”

Tej clapped his hands and complete darkness overcame them as light vanished like a swiftly waning moon. He then asked Theo, his eyes still glittering faintly in the dark:

“What do you see?”

“Darkness,” replied Theo flatly, still not sure what the obvious questions were all about.

“Exactly!” cried Tej with excitement.

“Is there something else to see?”

“Is there, really?” wondered Tej with a sombre voice that was meant to carry deep, profound meanings.

“I don’t live here. You should know better,” said Theo with a crease on his forehead. The bear erupted in joyous, body-shaking laughter.

“And you say wonder about enlightenment!”

Theo felt befuddled, perhaps more than ever. He tried to inch his way through the darkness; his hands met the cup and

it spilled all over his waist and legs.

“I’m afraid my cup runneth over,” said Theo apologetically. Tej replied in the same manner:

“Fret not dear Hanul, for nothing but grass grows beneath us still.”

An uneasy silence followed until Theo felt a pleasant wetness in his nether regions.

“I think I soiled my underpants with glowdew.”

* * *

The loud, corny music stopped every time something or someone was flung against the merry, dead-drunk band of musicians, but it quickly resumed with every round of drinks that was announced to be on the house. Apparently, no-one knew what the tavern was called or if it even had a name, and no-one cared just as long as the grog kept coming. As someone had scribbled on one wall, the grog must flow.

“So you haven’t heard an elven tribe from warmer climates? Or maybe about a missing mammal of the Laporidae family? A rather peculiar mammal with strange, perhaps even pernicious powers? You might’ve heard a thing or two about a thaumaturgic device in the form of a floating, ornate metallic chair. Have you? We are very interested in procuring them, for a more than modest amount of money. Even the elves,” said Lernea and stared at the ogre meaningfully, letting her words sink in with as much a feeling of innuendo as possible.

She laid herself back on the rather uncomfortable chair and tried to smile wryly. The rather uncomfortable seat coupled with the unruly, ugly company at their table split her smile in something between a harrowed cringe and a mentally retarded grin.

“Wha’at did she ’ay?” asked the ogre through its cave of a mouth, its teeth a purely decorative add-on, long ago lost and never found. The ogre was the fat, grey-green sort; a typical example of its kind. Its rotund belly was a good indicator that actually chewing one’s food was not a prerequisite for most ogres. Especially those that were usually employed as muscle in the various nefarious trading agreements that took place all too commonly in Tallyflop.

“She’s asking, as far as I can recall, if you’ve ever seen a flying bunny or a flaming chair. Or a bunch of dark-skinned hoots wearing strips of leather instead of normal

clothes. Something along those lines,” explained Winceham and filled his mouth with what was left of his drink. After making a show of sloshing the house special, the last bottle of Mythriam’s Loxsene Famous Grog around his mouth, he swallowed it successfully; which was, without throwing up.

Winceham seemed to feel a bit queasy for a moment before he fell off his stool. Lernea scoffed at him and barely spared Wince a fleeting yet chastising gaze; she returned her full, undivided attention to the ogre. She smiled awkwardly.

“Well? Have you at least heard about a gang called the Culprits?” she asked with her eyebrow furrowed in a way that implied a conniving, insidious sort of discussion was taking place, while in fact it was more of a conniving, insidious monologue. The ogre was busy scratching a layer of crust made out of some sort of fungi on its belly; it completely missed the delicately contrived facial expression on Lernea’s face.

“Two dozzin coin fo’ a beatin’; two times an’ one dat fo’ a killin’.”

“We don’t want you to hurt or kill anyone. We just want some information,” said Lernea calmly, still believing a measure of rapport could be achieved with someone possessing the intellectual capacity of a log.

“I don’ do that. Info-irmation. Nah, I doesn’t,” replied the ogre, pausing for a moment of reassurance and nodding to itself profusely.

“Well then, do you know of anyone who does?” asked Lernea patiently. The ogre seemed to give it a bit of thought. It scratched its belly once more and peeled off a piece of skin.

“Yea,” replied the ogre at length. Lernea’s veneer of delicately handling the whole information gathering task was falling apart.

“Well, what’s his name?”

She nearly screeched the words, but the ogre seemed dead set on dealing with its fungi problem rather than do business.

“I dunno. Even if I did, which I don’, I tol’ ya, I don’ do ‘fomation an’ stuff.”

Lernea sighed. She was a staunch believer in diplomacy, but it looked like they were wasting their time. She was about to grab Winceham from his accessory belt and drag him away with her, when she realised the halfuin was actually standing right next to the ogre’s waist, looking at the top of his game and not at all positively smashed.

“Here’s a piece of thirty, ya cock-a-doodly-doo. I want you to hit yourself in the head a couple of times, real good though. You know, for good measure.”

The ogre took the coin, nodded appreciatively and eagerly said, “Aw’ight.”

It then indeed proceeded to hit himself in the head with its powerful fists; the ogre’s eyes went rolling for a while and its head swerved this way and that, the eyeballs trying to remain in their sockets. He raised a blotched hand in front of his face; he had two fingers raised. He then hit itself in the head once more. The ogre was nearly passed out but it stood its ground on its chair, which comprised of a big rock; imported furniture, the good stuff. At length, after it could focus its eyes once more, it spoke once more. There was a recognizable amount of hurt in its voice:

“‘At hoit. A lot.”

Winceham patted the ogre gently on one bucklered knee with a metallic pang. “I bet it did, here’s another ten-piece for your zeal,” he said reassuringly, dropped the coin on the table and went on. “Listen, do you have any idea who might’ve ordered a hit on this blue-green ogre a while back? Say a

minute or so earlier?"

The ogre took the coins, didn't bother to count it and nodding like its neck had turned into jelly it said without thinking about any of the words:

"Ask Lenny the Rat. He be ovah at Lemmy's. Tell'im 'Ken sent me'."

Winceham nodded to Lernea with a smile and offered his hand to the ogre. The gesture went unnoticed, as the ogre was now eating some of the pinkish fungi shaped like tiny carrots that was growing on its belly. "It's been less than pleasurable doing business with you," said Winceham nevertheless and the ogre replied with a nod and a vile-smelling burp.

"Likewoyz."

Winceham bowed slightly and he showed Lernea the exit. As if in a trance, she slowly got up from her seat and straightened the bow strung on her back. They began jostling their way through the mostly drunken, massive crowd that consisted entirely of sailors and their associated ilk, with the exception of a group of space-turtlemen who looked a lot like empty shells after all the time they'd been trying to get a drink.

"I don't understand," asked Lernea; she sounded utterly dumbfounded at how Winceham had been able to get something of value out of the wholly unsanitary and quite brainless ogre.

"That's how you do business in the streets," replied Winceham, as they calmly walked past a blunderbuss duel, right before both duelists' guns exploded in their respective faces. Lernea was still throwing looks behind her shoulder at the ogre.

"But, he could've told me! I would have paid him to tell me. I told him I would!"

“Ogres are genderless, mind you. The ogre doesn’t sell information. Not that it really could, anyway,” Winceham commented and his face missed a flying glass pitcher for an inch or so, purely by luck. Lernea didn’t even notice, but she did sound rather miffed.

“He could’ve at least told us who does sell information!”

“No, that would constitute selling information,” replied Winceham waving a finger. Lernea was right behind him, trying to make sense out of that when a heavily bearded character with a funny hat swept overhead riding a pony-on-a-stick, suspended from a chandelier on fire, shouting insults at someone named Bobby.

“But he just told us to ask that Rat character!” insisted Lernea, failing to grasp the delicate intricacies of Tallyflop’s criminal business underworld.

“Yeah, he did, but that was a tip. A matter of professional courtesy. We did business together so as a tip, an added bonus if you like, he gave us a bit of information. He did us a favor,” said Winceham and picked up someone else’s drink from a messy, knife-ridden bloody table where no one seemed to be breathing. Lernea kept following Winceham blindly, trusting he really knew a way towards the exit.

“Now if I understand this correctly, you’re saying that he wouldn’t sell us the information, but it was fine for him to just give it away for free?” cried out Lernea as they neared the music band and the exit of the nameless bar.

“Nothing’s really free. We did pay him thirty pieces of coin,” said Winceham and downed the cup in his hand in one go.

“Forty pieces! And that was for an entirely different job!” cried Lernea and flung her arms wide in frustration. Inadvertently, someone’s parrot was knocked out cold and fell in

another man's rum-soup; the man thought the parrot was just another side dish and idly flipped the dead bird over.

"The ten-piece was a tip. We paid him to hit himself, yes. But it did get the job done, didn't it?" said Winceham, smiling triumphantly as they finally walked outside the tavern, anointed in a cloud of smoke, gunpowder and grog fumes. A single sign outside the otherwise unassuming establishment read 'B-Warez'. Lerne shook her head and shrugged looking suddenly powerless. She had given up on any hope of understanding the logic behind what had just transpired.

"That's just plain crazy!"

"It is, isn't it? You're getting the hang of what business is like," said Winceham with a wry grin. Once a breeze of cold air touched his face though, he crumbled down on the wooden floor of the boardwalk. A moment later he was licking the wooden planks like a brain-damaged cat.

"By Svarna! You're inebriated to the bone! I thought you were putting on an act!" said Lerne with shocked disapproval.

"It's a medical condition! I'm not wasted or anything! I just blank out tempofurtively! Snot going to reed bad, eels it?" shouted Winceham without being in any position to sound believable.

"You need to get sobered up before we do anything else," said Lerne and forced Winceham back on his feet.

"What? No, there's not enough.. Not enough time.. We need drinkses! We need to get another drink at Lemmy's!" blabbered Winceham, looking hurt, angry and crushed at the same time, even though it looked like he still wanted to lick the wooden planks like there was no tomorrow.

"There's bound to be a bath house around here somewhere," said Lerne and scanned the signs and lantern posts

around them. Winceham looked at her with a half-asleep, out-of-focus look that he rarely employed. It was as if he was trying to ascertain whether he wasn't just imagining things.

"That's not a half-bad idea at all," he said with a wide, lopsided grin. Lernea thought it was weird of Winceham to actually agree about taking a bath, of all things.

A few minutes later, she was about to realise bath houses in places like Tallyflop involved a lot more than just bathing.

* * *

Parcifal straightened her hair, adjusted her armor's bindings and straps and walked back out into the bustling promenade. In the natural alley that formed behind her between two immense branches of the giant oak, there were three figures trying to pull themselves together. They were all beaten up, nursing a bloodied nose, a couple of broken fingers or a cut above their brow. Their teeth had been invariably lessened in number; their flimsy-looking knives, fists and chains thrown out into the void of space. Percifal though wasn't smiling as much as she had hoped she would. Even when she saw them stagger and get lost in the crowd with real fear creeping over their eyes.

"They know nothing. At least, I don't think if they had really known something they'd be that good at keeping secrets."

She stretched her back casually. Ned shook his head and sighed.

"I said be forceful. I didn't ask you to frighten the living daylight out of them."

Parcifal was adamant in her view of things. Her gaze was still following the victims of her manifest wrath.

"I didn't. I actually think I went soft on those scum."

"If you push a man too far, he might admit to everything. Make stuff up as well. I know I would," Ned admitted sincerely. His point and effort was somewhat lost on Percifal who sounded a bit angry at the thought she wasn't getting the respect she deserved even after a thorough beating had been dealt.

"You think they would dare lie to me?"

"I would certainly lie to you if that made you stop trying to turn me into a pulp," said Ned and nodded to himself thoroughly. Percifal's nostrils flared up.

"All I wanted was answers. I tempted them to provide

some.”

“Listen, some people.. Well, orcs even, have already tried to kill us. Theo is missing and Bo has been abducted. This isn’t the time for heroics,” said Ned in what was his most reprimanding tone. That meant he simply sounded a bit disappointed, but Parcifal seemed to take it badly even so.

“I’m only trying to help. Me and my sister.. We were only trying to help.”

“Well, Lerneia does help. She’s easy to work with, she understands timing; she’s familiar with my line of thinking.”

“Perhaps then her help is much more sought after. After all, she is the Queen.”

“I thought she’s the former queen in exile.”

“A queen still. Not a princess regent,” said Parcifal with evident bitterness in her voice.

“Are you.. Are you pouting?” asked Ned.

“That is a silly notion at best. I do not pout. A princess of Nomos, does not pout.”

“You’re jealous, aren’t you?”

“Your conclusions are ridden with nonsense of the worst kind, sirrah!” she exclaimed and looked the other way like a child would.

“You’re jealous.”

“That is an insult! I’m not jealous!” she insisted, while her face had become taught, hard-lined.

“I’ll just leave you be, then.”

“I’ll just leave you first if I can’t be of any help. Do not fret, I won’t go missing!” she shouted and simply shot off into the milling crowd, never to return a stare. In very few moments, Ned had lost her from sight. One thing he had head out on the streets of Tallyflop seemed certain to him now: people could just disappear or be made to just disappear in

the blink of an eye. Ned somehow didn't really worry that Parcifal would really go missing; he knew she simply had a flair for the dramatic.

Whatever her issues, they would have to wait, Ned thought to himself. In his heart, Theo and Bo took precedence, even though it was Theo's woodking people that they were supposed to be trying to save. But there was no talk of them either. Perhaps Culliper had managed to fool them.

Ned's mind raced: the throne from the ship and Theo's crystal were perhaps a lot more important than any of them had thought. The fact that these people who called themselves Culprits had snatched the chair first and foremost, strengthened that perception. Their note said they'd return Bo once they were done, and that did nothing but make things more complicated. *Done with what*, Ned asked himself and feared something very bad was about to unfold.

"I thought I'd never find you," said a sweet, familiar female voice. Ned turned around and saw Lernea standing there, full of smiles.

"I thought you were with Wince," he said and try as he might, he couldn't see the halfuin anywhere nearby. It was a busy, packed time on the promenade. There was a Trading Circus in town; the streets were filled with exotic pack animals, laden with riches from around the cosmos. The sight caught Ned's eye as a small caravan passed. A beautiful, elephant-like creature of a smaller size caught Ned's attention.

"Will you look at those things? I've never seen anything like that."

"They're just beasts from a far away place. Not unlike mules. There's hundreds of them in the streets. Who cares?" said Lernea and did not bother to even glance their way. She

had a strange grin; it looked as if she'd been drinking. Ned noticed and couldn't help asking:

"Where's Winceham? You didn't have any drinks together, did you?"

"Would that be wrong?" asked Lernea with a furtive look in her eyes.

"I'm just saying, he didn't convince you into going off into a wild drinking binge, did he? It's a tendency of his. A condition, he calls it."

Lernea nodded thoughtfully for a moment. Then she smiled widely and put a finger to her temple, as if she had just remembered something.

"Does he now? Well, he did stop for a drink on the way," she said, trying to make it sound as if it was really just one drink, while in fact multiple drinks were being implied.

"That's just great. Your sister ran off just a minute ago. I don't think she's gone missing like Theo though; she just needed her head cleaned up. For all I know, she just might drink her mind off it with Wince," said Ned gloomily and shrugged. He went on as the magnificent beasts of the Trading Circus rode past them:

"It's probably just as well. We didn't get anything useful; just a few street thugs with broken arms, bruised bodies and rotten egos. What about you?" said Ned, looking at Lernea with a hopeful smile.

"Nothing at all. Everyone is so tight-lipped. You didn't get anything? Anything about the Culprits? Anything about Theo?"

She sounded anxious all of a sudden. Her eyes searched Ned's face thoroughly, inquisitively.

"Zilch. Parcifal was rather efficient at making people run on sight. Still, what low-lifes we could get our hands on

seemed like they really knew nothing about the Culprits. In fact, most of them didn't seem to even understand the word," said Ned and shrugged.

"I see. Well, in that case, I think I need a word alone with you," said Lernea, her voice tuned down a notch.

"Alone? We're pretty much alone," said Ned and waved at the indifferent crowds of people that surrounded them.

"There's something terrible going on."

"Go on," said Ned and nodded with arms crossed over his chest, his eyes locked onto Lernea's worried face.

"It's Parcifal. She's really not being herself lately."

"Well, you certainly know her better than I do, but if I were to make an educated guess, I think she's just being jealous of you."

Lernea sounded surprised and oddly excited at the same time. She touched Ned's arm with a sense of purpose.

"Well, why should she be?"

"I don't know, I'm not sure. I must've said something about you that ticked her off. But I'm not sure what or why for that matter," said Ned and his gaze came to stand at Lernea's hand. She was practically leaning against him.

"Well, that's just like my sister now. Ever since she was a toddler."

"What do you mean?" said Ned and felt her warm breath inching closer to his face.

"Since she was little."

"You're only a minute apart," said Ned with a baffled look. His eyes fell randomly at Lernea's chest, but it didn't appear to be so random. She saw that and twisted her gaze away from him suddenly in a dramatic fashion.

"Still though, she's the little one. But enough about her. I think I might have a lead about the elves."

“You just said you found nothing,” said Ned feeling perplexed. Something bothered him, but he couldn’t pin it down.

“But there is a lead! And we need to follow it!” Lernea said with urgency, both her hands gripping Ned’s arms.

“Alright. We need to pick up Winceham first. It’ll be easy to spot him; he might be small but he can make a lot of noise. Especially when he’s had his version of a couple of drinks.”

Ned made to turn and leave towards the direction Lernea came from. She grabbed him by one arm; there was a tone of instant anger in her objection.

“There’s no time for that. After all, he’ll need to get sobered up before he can be of any use.”

“Well then let’s find Parcifal. She’s bound to be somewhere near,” said Ned and started off toward the main boardwalk where Parcifal had lost herself. Lernea would simply not have it; there was an edge to her voice that had never been there before.

“You’re not listening; there’s no time. Our lead is leaving on a ship!”

“A ship? What’s the plan then? Jump him in the docks?” asked Ned incredulously.

“No, no. Just follow me. I know a short cut. We can catch him on his way there,” said Lernea and went right into the same alley where Parcifal had dispensed her sort of justice to the poor thugs of Tallyflop’s trade district.

“What? Just the two of us? Is he alone? What sort of lead? Can’t we just talk about this first?” asked Ned while Lernea was already making her way to the shadowy cleft.

“Through that alley?” asked Ned once more, pointing a hesitant finger.

“Yes!” Lernea insisted with a broken voice, and an alien, ice cold gaze. Ned shrugged warily and followed her from a

distance. He saw her bow strung across her back clearly and noticed something odd: she had her bow on the opposite way.

“Something wrong with your bow?”

“Why do you ask that?” Lerneia said with a shallow voice.

“I’m just saying. It looks like you have it on wrong.”

“Oh, I’m just trying out if it works better this way,” she said and kept walking towards the shadowy alley.

“About last night..” asked Ned and let his voice trail off. Lerneia came to a stop and turned around to face him slowly. There was a strange grin on her face. Her voice was little more than a whisper.

“What about last night?”

“Don’t you remember?” asked Ned with a frown.

“Of course I do! But now is not the time to reminisce!”

“Isn’t it? I thought it was a special night. I thought you loved me!” he said with a voice full of hurt. His hands went to his waist, near his crossbow.

Lerneia looked at his blurry eyes intently. Her face warmed up, her eyes shone with sweetness.

“Of course I do! We can get together again later, but right now we must –”

Then he knew. Ned suspected it, he had felt it in his gut, but it was at that moment that he knew whoever that was, it wasn’t Lerneia.

“Even odds suck, don’t they? Just who the hell are you?”

The impostor changed his body stance. She now stood defiant, a mad grin on her face. She cocked her head sideways and looked at Ned with a crazy, wide-eyed look. Her eyeballs turned pitch black in the blink of an eye.

“I’m just a messenger.”

“Really? What’s the message?” said Ned, the crossbow now firmly in his hands.

“Hobb sends his greetings!” she said and backflipped into the shadows of the alley with blinding speed, in a cat-like fashion. Ned let fly the loaded bolt but he was more than just a heartbeat too slow. The bolt failed to hit; what was more alarming, it was as if the shadow had eaten the fake Lerne alive. Not an edge of her shape was to be seen.

Ned put away the crossbow and took up his machete; a gift from Theo. Again, he was too slow; a tentacle reached out from the shadows and twisted itself around his arm. It reeled him in with such force that he flew in the air, his arm nearly pulled out of his socket. He saw the flash of cold steel and the glint of four evil, frosty blue eyes. He tried to flex his body out of harm’s way but he knew that metal flash was meant for him; he knew those eyes. He’d seen those kind of eyes before.

Another flash of metal nearly blinded him; he felt something cold cover his face in spurts. His arm was free and he was laying on the ground, half-covered inside the shadow. He tried to stand up, the machete still firmly in his hand. He saw another tentacle shoot out from the darkness, but it wasn’t meant for him. It was aiming for someone wearing dark, tight robes and wielding two short blades that seemed too thin to be real. A hood kept the stranger’s face hidden from view.

Ned saw the tentacle cleanly cut away, squirming and spurting a thick murky liquid, like milk of some kind; it was the same liquid that was dripping down his chin. The robed figure then let his blades fly blindly inside the supernatural shadow; instead of crashing against the alley’s bark-skinned wall, two huge spurts of that same white liquid shot in the air. A hollow, otherworldly shriek was heard.

Lerne’s impostor then shot out from the shadow with unnatural alacrity, cartwheeling past the robed figure faster than

before. She was trying to escape; Ned was on his feet and running after her. A few heartbeats later she slumped on the wooden plank floor of the promenade like someone invisible had tackled her. Three star-like pieces of metal were stuck on her spine. A shiny metallic sort of liquid oozed from her lethal wounds.

Ned stood there for a moment, unsure of what had just happened. He gathered his wits about him and turned around with the machete in his good hand, as ready as he could be. The distinctly calm voice of a woman sought to allay his fears.

“You’re safe, at least for now,” the woman said.

The robed figure drew its blades from the shadow and waved violently them in the air; white droplets of blood sprinkled the promenade’s floorboards. The rest trickled down the flawless blades with ease. Ned realised his heart was beating fast; his hair was standing up.

“Calm down. We need to find the rest of your party; they could be in danger as well.”

“Who are you? What were those things?”

“I’m an ally. Those things were a doppelganger and his assassin pet, a Sidian starfish.”

Ned looked at the fake Lerneia’s dead body and shook his head in disbelief. There were so many things that begged explanation, but it felt like they had to wait. He looked at the woman in robes but was almost too afraid to ask.

“I know you didn’t want me killed, that’s for sure. I probably owe you my life. That kind of an ally shows her face.”

“Not here,” said the robed woman and with a sudden burst of speed, she sprang right next to Ned and hugged him tight as a baby. Ned’s response was to freeze in surprise. So close to him, he saw her cheeks under the limelight and knew she

was grinning. Barely a breath later they were climbing up the giant oak's bark, pulled up in the air by a shiny silvery line, thinner than a strand of hair. Ned would have loved to sound more courteous, but the extraneous circumstances didn't allow for it.

"Just who the hell are you lady?" he shouted through the rush of the night air.

"Just call me Judith," she said huskily as they rose higher and higher. Below them, at the spot of the pretty uneven fight, a cart pulled over and a tall, lank man began loading the bodies. He had some trouble when he came upon the one with the tentacles. "Mack did the smart thing; this job's getting weirder and weirder all the time," said the man, tutted and went back to work.

* * *

“Now try again, Hanul,” said Tej from across the small grove. Theo nodded mostly to himself, took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He began to concentrate. His face at first appeared to be calm, yet there were stern, sharp shadows lining it within a few moments. A vein on his head began to throb; then another down his neck.

Theo started trembling visibly; his whole body shook with mounting tremors. His face became flush-red, his breathing had practically stopped; he gave the impression he was about to explode.

“I can’t!” cried Theo with a feeling of immense relief, panting thoroughly, yet breathing once more.

Tej wasn’t looking at him. He was checking up on some of his bee hives, built on corners and crevices all over the old hollowed-out root system that had been turned into a network of corridors, hallways and storage space for what Tejewel called his “Grotto of Solitude”.

“Believing is everything, Hanul. Try again,” said the bear and licked a paw dripping with glowing honey. Small droplets flew in the air and fell away from Tej and Theo, flying not towards the ground but all along the length of a corridor that led to the void of space. Theo sighed, breathed deeply once more and concentrated again, this time with steely-eyed determination. Tej paused and shot a wary look around him; he had noticed the breeze was blowing in the wrong way. In truth, there was no wrong or right way down there.

Things worked in a very peculiar manner so very near the root of the giant oak, which Tej referred to as the Khidr. Water would sometimes freeze without it being cold. At other times, the heat would turn the small reclusive garden into a steamy jungle and at times everything would float in the air, especially the glowbees. They formed a cloud of light as

they helplessly tried to find which way was up and which was down.

“I just can’t Tejwel,” said Theo panting with bulging eyes, tears welling up in his eyes from the strain of his last effort. No matter how much he tried, the heavy barrel of clay filled with glowhoney hadn’t budged an inch.

“Maybe I’m wrong,” said Tej and licked another honey-laden finger with delight, his enormous face squirming reflexively. Theo was sitting on the grassy floor, his legs crossed in what felt like a knot at first. Exactly in front of him sat a huge, immovable barrel made of clay, filled with last year’s glowhoney. Theo looked morose at best.

“Maybe. I hope you’re not,” said Theo and Tej replied as if he hadn’t been paying attention.

“But I think something is holding you back,” said the bear and stood in front of the beehive, breathing heavily. Theo opened his eyes and saw Tej was very preoccupied with tending to a very particular beehive.

“What could that be?” asked Theo without expecting for an answer that could be immediately understood. A few hours of meditation and friendly talk that made little or no sense had proved that Theo had some sort of natural aptitude in what Tej called Rho. At least, that’s what Tej thought.

“A barrier!” cried the giant bear with dramatic tension in his voice, only to finally give in and have a go at the beehive with both paws, his massive teeth tearing it apart, consuming the glowhoney and the wax without a care. Swarms of bees escaped into neighboring hives, honey splattered the walls and whole hexagonal chunks of wax fell like debris towards space. Theo couldn’t stop staring; it was as if something base had suddenly possessed the usually benevolent and kind ursine creature.

“Pray you find another home, friends,” said Tej and burped loudly. He then sent the small cloud of glowbees hovering about him away with a wave of his paw. He turned around and slowly walked towards Theo with his eyes closed; a perfect serenity covered his face. He sat down on the grassy floor next to Theo and sighed. A couple of minutes passed with nothing but the humming of the ever-present glowbees in the background to fill the silence. Tej simply sat there, breathing heavily.

“Is something wrong?” inquired Theo. He allowed for a few moments; Tej usually took his time to provide what was supposed to be an answer, but Tej made no sound other than a thin, low, rumble. Theo leaned closer to the large mammal; the rumbling sound was coming from Tej’s stomach. On closer inspection, better yet, it seemed like the great bear was snoring heavily, soundly asleep like a disproportionately sized baby. Theo didn’t know what to make of it.

“Are you sleeping?” he got up and asked right into Tej’s ear.

“It was one hive! Just one!” cried out the bear in anguish, shaking as if the nightmares stalked him in his wake still. Theo felt he should allay Tej’s fears.

“That’s fine, Tejewel. I myself would’ve been tempted to eat a whole glowhoney-laden beehive if I were your size. It certainly would appeal to me since it seems to be so easy. And sweet,” said Theo and nodded. Tejewel blinked fast only twice and realised he was awake once more. He felt his belly with both hands and looked at it as if something troubling was going to spew forth. At length he spoke:

“It is my weakness, my burden alone to carry. I sometimes lose control, I must confess. It is one of the reasons I still seek the end to my path.”

“I think a little nap isn’t that bad. It can be good for you, they say. I myself don’t sleep much,” said Theo sounding like a confused, mentally challenged person. Tejewel smiled keenly and looked at the rushing stream of water while he talked.

“I meant the honey, dear Hanul. Once upon a time, I would’ve done anything for honey. Now, it is thankfully a rare thing. But still, when my spirit is troubled, I have this almost unquenchable thirst: a strange, powerful urge overpowers me. I lose myself in a sweet madness,” said Tej, his huge paw covering half of Theo’s backside.

“And the sleep? Is it fretful because of the guilt?”

“No. That’s because I overeat. We shall speak of this another time. I have an inkling about why my spirit is so troubled; it must be the same reason you do not seem able to ride the Rho,” said Tej thoughtfully, his deep voice rumbling more than ever.

“About that Rho, it couldn’t by any chance be plain old magic? I’m supposed to be pretty good at magic, if not awesome by some accounts,” said Theo with a thin grin. Tejewel’s breath felt warm on Theo’s face; it was followed by an austere, disapproving voice that hinted at violence.

“Pride is death!” cried Tej and demanded Theo’s undivided attention before he went on:

“Pride is a sin sweet as many but deadlier than most. Heed my words Hanul, for I have walked the prideful path and it is barbed and full of honey.”

“Everyone loves honey though,” said Theo sounding genuinely disappointed.

“Exactly!”

“But what does that mean?” asked Theo fearing the discussion would soon dissolve into one of Tej’s cryptic mono-

logues.

“You tell me, Hanul. What do you fear most? What is it that haunts you? What is it that makes the Rho flow around you?”

“It’s not honey, is it?” asked Theo knowing it couldn’t possibly be that simple, although it’d be nice for a change.

“Give me your hands, Hanul.”

“I’m afraid I’m rather attached to them,” he said looking at his palms.

“I mean, touch me,” said Tej calmly and extended his paws. Theo sounded a little unsure, a bit worried and rather disappointed.

“That doesn’t sound right Tej.”

“My paws. Touch my paws and free your mind friend.”

“I can do that,” said Theo in a relaxed fashion and did so.

“Now breathe.”

“I am breathing.”

“Breathe slowly. As if air is nothing,” said Tej and lifted his head as if gasping to breathe.

“Isn’t it?” inquired Theo with a troubled brow.

“Listen, Hanul. Listen to the wind blowing through this grove. Listen to the flutter of the winged bees.”

Theo did listen, or at least tried to. Tej’s voice was becoming more shallow with every breath of his.

“Now think of you, a few days before. What do you see with your mind’s eye?”

“Space.”

“What else?”

“Not much. We were travelling in space for two weeks,” said Theo, nodding reassuredly to himself.

“Go back before that. What do you see?”

“My village.. It’s on fire.. My people, are gone.”

The elf's voice had the first faint signs of cracking up.

"You are alone," said Tej as if it were a discovery, not a statement.

"I have some new friends with me."

"Go before that. Were you alone before that?" insisted the bear.

"No. I had the tribe."

"Was the tribe enough?" said Tej, his voice beginning to sound forceful, demanding.

"No," said Theo and shook his head from shoulder to shoulder.

"Who made you feel complete?"

"Bo? It must've been Bo."

"Go back, before meeting Bo. What do you see?"

"Before Bo? I can't remember anything before Bo," said Theo, his voice wavering.

"Don't think, Hanul. Go back. Breathe," Tej urged him.

"I don't remember. It was Bo, and me, and -"

"Yes?" there was urgency and purpose in the bear's gravely voice.

"Father. I remember someone I called *father*," said Theo without being sure of it.

"And Bo?"

"He's not there. There's another boy my age, more or less. But Bo's not there," said Theo agitated, nervous, as if someone had him on the run.

"Look deeper. Stop breathing," said Tej with a commanding voice.

"What?" asked Theo perplexed.

"Stop breathing and listen to your mind's eye!" said Tej with immense authority, his voice not unkind yet terrible to hear.

“That doesn’t make any sense!”

“Listen! See! Feel! Don’t breathe!” cried the bear, and Theo felt compelled to do all that. There was no other way.

“The boy’s long haired. I can only see his back. He’s crying, I think. And.. Blazes! It’s Bo!”

The realization struck Theo like a bolt in the chest. He wasn’t sure if he felt like crying out of happiness or sorrow.

“Yes?” Tej urged him for more.

“He’s turned into a rabbit! We’re brothers! Me and Bo, we’re brothers!”

“And what of the father?”

“For the father, nothing.”

A sudden, powerful vibration shook the grotto. It was as if the whole of Tallyflop shook along with it and changed direction; like a moment in time had been undone; like a huge clock had been set back only for the barest of moments.

“Now, you know,” said Tej with finality.

“I never thought, I.. I hadn’t imagined..”

“Now empty that barrel of honey,” said Tej and pointed the huge barrel of honey standing in the middle of the grove like an unwanted guest.

“What? I don’t think now is the time. I need to find the others. I need to find Bo,” said Theo and got up, started to pace around the grove. Behind him, the whole mass of glowhoney rose up from the barrel and dispersed itself into hundreds of different little streams, each finding its own path through Tej’s small maze and into an empty jar or vase to fill.

“The honey is where it’s supposed to be, Hanul,” said Tej smiling.

“What?” said Theo almost terrified.

“You ask the wrong questions out of fear. Fear not.”

“Why?” asked Theo. It was those sort of comments from Tej that he couldn’t help but try to understand however improbable it seemed.

“Exactly!”

“I don’t understand.”

Tej nodded appreciatively and his whole body shook along.

“Yet, you are more enlightened than ever.”

“Tej, I need to find my friends. I need to find my brother. Even though he is just a rabbit now.”

“A friend in need, is a friend indeed. Finding your friends should not be hard. Follow me,” said Tej and with implausible swiftness got off the grassy ground and set off towards one of many corridors.

“More tests?” asked Theo as he followed closely behind.

“This wasn’t a test, Hanul. This was your rebirth,” said Tej with a measure of triumph. Theo sounded a bit skeptical about rebirths.

“But it’s still me. Isn’t it?”

“It is. Now we’ll take the Elevator,” announced Tej and led Theo into someplace even deeper than he had thought possible.

“What elevator?”

“Capital ‘E’. There’s just the one Elevator in Khidr,” said Tej raising a paw and led Theo through twisting and turning parts of the giant oak, a blemish of light from glowbees guiding them downwards.

“I say we just stick it to ’im,” said one of the two men standing watch over Bo. He was dressed in a tight grey leather uniform of some sort; a number of insignia adorned it. He was wearing a rather large, vermillion cap adorned with a golden drake. He stood taller than the man sitting at the unremarkable table. The other man, in similar attire but with different insignia was quite critical of him:

“The rabbit stays.”

“What for?” said the man in uniform standing up.

“Boss said not to touch it,” insisted the man sitting at the table.

“It’s a flippin’ bunny rabbit! It belongs in a bloody pot!” cried the other one, stabbing a finger at Bo’s directions.

“Orders are orders, Jimbo.”

“I haven’t followed orders since the academy, for crying out loud. Even then, I mostly pretended,” said the man called Jimbo and shrugged.

“Well you better follow these orders. Or we don’t get paid, to say the least,” came the reply.

“Hey Tark, let me ask you. Have you worked before for these, uhm..”

“Aliens?” the man sitting down filled in promptly.

“Isn’t that a bit harsh? We’re all aliens to one another, aren’t we?” said Jimbo with a slight touch for the philosophical.

“Well, they’re not human,” said Tark, sitting at the table while staring at Bo as if the bunny somehow held some sort of truth for him.

“They certainly look human, some of those Ygg do,” commented Jimbo and scratched his head.

“Appearances can oft be deceiving,” Tark told Jimbo and stared at him for just a moment.

“Now there, you sound just like Jameson.”

“Who?”

“You’re telling me you don’t remember Commander Jameson?” asked Jimbo with a grin forming on his face.

“Haven’t even heard of him.”

“Aw, come on! Third flotilla? Navigator on the *Bon Homme Carter*?” insisted Jimbo. The other man shook his head and shrugged.

“No, doesn’t ring a bell.”

“Ah, those were the days. Where were you stationed back then really?” asked Jimbo with invigorated interest.

“If you must know,” said Tark and sighed before adding, “I was in Naval Intelligence.”

“Whizzers! You must be costing them a small fortune, eh?” Jimbo exclaimed with renewed enthusiasm.

“Not really.”

“How come?” asked Jimbo with eyes that begged to be humoured.

“Because I’m not really working for them.”

“Come again?” asked Jimbo looking genuinely puzzled. The next moment, Tark’s hand connected with the back of Jimbo’s head with a violent chop. Jimbo crumbled on the wet, musky floor with a dull thud. Tark didn’t waste a moment; he carried the unconscious Jimbo to a shadowy corner of the impromptu holding cell area. He bound his head and his feet together, and made sure to gag his mouth with a ragged piece of cloth that somehow stood out. He couldn’t help but notice the weaving: it was an Elvish pattern.

As he was about to grab the crystal from the throne and leave, he saw Bo’s eyes flare up. Tark took a step back reflexively.

“Emperor’s bones!” he said surprised. Bo’s eyes then flared up white hot before shooting a thick beam of blinding fire at the bars that held him captive.

A small cloud of evaporated metal rose from the bars and wafted harmlessly towards the exit. The rest of the bars were now a molten pool of metal, sizzling as they cooled off on the oak floor. Tark’s eyes widened with restrained shock; he put one hand to his utility belt and went for an oddly shaped knife.

It was just then that Bo jumped gracefully about four feet in the air as if his feet were nothing more than springs. Bo landed on Tark’s shoulder who had neither the time, nor the capacity to turn the blade in his hand towards Bo.

Without so much as a squawk, Tark was doubly surprised when he felt a thin strand of whiskers, followed by a wet, pink sliver of lips touching his mouth. Bo had kissed him and then conveniently jumped off. Presently, the bunny rabbit sat at the table, eying Tark intently but without the characteristic flames that sprouted from its eyes.

“I’ll be damned!” exclaimed Tark. Little did he care if he attracted the attention of the swarming neophytes, guards and mercenaries of the Ygg, milling about in the labyrinthous, bulk of the giant space-faring oak they had hollowed out and turned into a factory. All that, along with his up to that point successful infiltration felt like another life entirely. The single most important thing in his life at that moment was that a rabbit had kissed him on the lips.

Still stunned in place and unable to comprehend, he heard a sweet melody echoing in his mind. The melody soon cleared up into a young woman’s voice.

“Do not be alarmed, Tark. I’m an ally, of sorts.”

“This place reeks of dark magic!” said Tark ominously

under his breath, for a moment searching for a way to flee as if an unseen foe was after him.

“You’re right about that, but it’s not me,” the voice said and Bo’s nostrils flared up, its whiskers writhing about nervously.

“The bunny? The voice.. That voice is coming from the bunny?”

“I’m afraid so,” said the voice in Tark’s head, while Bo sat down on all her legs and dug her head between her front paws snugly.

“How is that possible?” asked Tark audibly. He had a feeling the bunny was telling the truth, even though he had no idea why that feeling made the least bit of sense to him.

“Well, it is magic. But it’s not dark magic. I’m on your side. I think,” said Bo and scratched the table nervously with one paw for just the barest moment.

“My side? Who do you work for?”

“No-one.”

“I find that even harder to believe,” said Tark stiffly.

“Well you should. I work for myself. And my brother. And some friends.”

“That makes for a preposterous cover story. You must be telling the truth, then,” Tark commented with a feeling of sarcasm while checking the way in and out of the holding area quickly.

“I really am,” Bo voiced in Tark’s mind, somehow managing to sound a bit hurt.

“Well, it’s been really interesting, but I’ve got a job to do.”

“The elves?” she asked bluntly. Tark froze barely for a moment before putting on an opaque facade over his face.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You do know. You just don’t care,” said Bo and fidgeted around the table, the bunny in her trying to have a go at the wooden surface.

“Look here, there’s a lot more at stake than a bunch of slaves. Plus, the place is mostly empty,” said Tark, making sure to keep his voice down.

“It involves the throne and the crystal doesn’t it?” Bo sent in his mind and the whiskers on her nose stood upright as if electrified.

“You do not have the clearance for that kind of information,” retorted Tark and shook his head.

“My father crafted that crystal. I know everything there is to know about it.”

“You’re just too good to be true,” said Tark and grinned in disbelief.

“I’m not bluffing, Tark. We need to team up. At least until I find my friends, that is.”

“I do not team up. I work alone,” said Tark and pointed a stiff thumb at his chest.

“Is that right?” said Bo in his mind and suddenly her eyes flared up with a torrent of fire. Two tiny pulses of fire shot past Tark and landed on the face and chest of a hobgoblin who had just made an appearance at the exit, right behind Tark’s back. Tark looked coolly at the slightly charred body which was lying face-first right beside him.

“Right. I guess you could tag along.”

“I do not tag along. I hop along,” the voice rang in his mind and as if to illustrate the difference, Bo hopped down onto the cave-like wooden floor.

“Semantics. Don’t lag behind,” said Tark and shot a glance outside. The dimly lit corridor hewed into the wood looked clear. Tark nodded to Bo and stepped outside. Try-

ing to look casual, Tark straightened his vermillion cap and picked what seemed to be a familiar direction.

“How did you end up inside a bunny?”

“I’m not inside a bunny. Technically, I am a bunny. Nevermind; it’s a long story,” said Bo in Tark’s head and hopped peacefully behind him.

“So you’re a magical bunny?”

“A sorcerer, actually. A sorceress, even.”

“Makes some bit of sense, if all of it is true,” remarked Tark in a low whisper. He signalled with his palm for a pause at a rough intersection.

“It is. What’s your story?”

“You don’t need to know,” offered Tark as he kept an easy pace.

“Why is that?”

“Better yet, you don’t want to know,” Tark insisted.

“You’re some kind of spy, aren’t you?”

“I am many things.”

“You know things as well?”

“One too many,” Tark agreed and nodded to himself even as he remained watchful while they passed through decrepit corridors and roughly hewn, splintered hallways, with little light to guide them other than a haze the color of the deep blue sea that seemed to linger everywhere.

“What do you know about the crystal and the metal throne?” asked Bo.

“Your friends, that crystal and the throne have certainly spurred quite an interest to the Ygg. That can’t be good,” he whispered, stopped, checked the next intersection and moved along again.

“Those alien monsters you call the Ygg? We’ve faced one of their kind before,” said Bo and hoped alongside Tark fret-

fully. Tark replied while scanning the road ahead. It seemed like he was looking for some sign to find the right path. Somewhere along the corridor they were on, a swath of bright light seemed to emerge. He scoffed and whispered:

“And you survived? I might’ve been impressed if you weren’t covered in fur.”

“I couldn’t care less about your opinion, but the truth is it wasn’t an easy encounter,” Bo admitted as she hopped along.

“It’s not supposed to be easy. Now just be silent. We’re coming up on the vestibule.”

“I am silent. You’re the only one who can hear me. What’s the vestibule?”

“The reason I’m here,” whispered Tark almost inaudibly as they made a left turn on a slightly upwards sloped rough path. Brilliant orange light poured down on them. It didn’t seem to be the usual torch light, roughly dispersed along the maze-like corridors they were walking through.

“And what might that reason be?” Bo asked silently. No answer came until they reached the very end of their path, where a tiny ledge stood. It was so rough and sudden, that Bo nearly leapt off it. Once she stood there though, she really longed for her human body. She needed to gasp. Instead, her nose twitched while the vista filled her rabbit vision. Tark laid low on one knee and simply said:

“This.”

“Stars above! It’s..”

“It’s wonderful, isn’t it?” said Tark and nodded. They were looking at the very core of the giant oak, a sparse, hollowed out expanse wide enough for a small city to fit from one end to another. Through the very center rose a sharp, multi-faceted crystal, shimmering with gold and silver, blue and white trailing lines like strands of heavenly hair wrapped

around it. Concentric rings of pure white light seemed to hover in the air around the crystal; there was no end of them in sight. The crystal itself rose interminably high, lost in a blinding, twirling sea of white and blue, while at its very base a red and orange swarm of pulsating multi-coloured lights frothed inside a hazy, lava-like cloud.

“It’s incredible,” said Bo inside Tark’s mind, the awe transcribed as flawlessly as thought would allow.

“It will have to go,” said Tark, rose up and walked back down the path.

* * *

There was a cluster of eyes overlooking Parcifal as she sat at the bar, pensively withdrawn over a mug filled with a sizzling, steamy liquid. The bartender was apprehensive, at best.

“Ye might wanna..” he didn’t finish his sentence and Parcifal stared at him with a killer’s gaze. He swallowed hard and barely found it in his heart to finish his sentence.

“Ye might wanna finish that lass. At least before the narnog eats through it.”

Parcifal wasted no time; she downed the mug in one go. The wooden bar she was sitting at though in no pristine condition to begin with, was now filled with holes of varying sizes. At some places, there were even small holes through and through, even down on the floor. Around Parcifal, as if there was somehow an area of effect about her nearly three feet wide, sat no-one. In a place as packed as the ‘Long Distance Mariner’, or El-dee-Em as the regulars called it, three feet was quite a wide berth.

Behind her there was a pile of smashed, half-eaten mugs that was almost knee-high. A couple of rowdy fellows were passed out right beside the pile; they had insisted that Parcifal was in need of some ‘good ole barnacle busting’. Feeling gracious, Parcifal had only knocked them unconscious - most of their teeth had already been missing.

After that tiny altercation, she had the El-Dee-Em’s attention. It was a place rife with seadogs, roughnecks, hands-for-hire, pirate wanna-bees and space drifters, shady characters and sultry maids with less honor than a judge. Everyone of them couldn’t help but stare at the feisty redhead clad in armor that seemed to have guts wrought out of iron.

“Keep them coming,” said Parcifal and put some more coin on the bar for the bartender to see. For a moment, he stared at the coin before turning his gaze on Parcifal. He looked the sort of the old, retired pirate who had enough of a mind and a leg left after all the groggin’ and the pillaging to settle down and go for the steady money of a sailor’s bar. He had grey and white strands of long hair tied together and a thick moustache that made drinking beer a waste of good foam. His skin was worn over time and the trepidations of playing one’s life on the line every day; but his eyes were an untouched sapphire blue and a shiny, pristine matter. There was a story going around that he had cried just once in his life, when his parrot died in a freak cuisine accident. This was only the second time then. His voice was an awed, trembling mess.

“Lass.. I’m all outta narnog. Brookladdie’s Oath, I’ve never run outta narnog. Not even when Ridj Van Allen’s fleet looted every cellar in Tallyflop. Not even after Wallie’s Skittoons had a pissing contest right here, on that stand,” he said and pointed with a white-knuckled, shaky finger at a tall

drinking stand which sported a case of weird discolouring. The expression on Parcifal's face remained that of a person wholly unimpressed.

"I asked around and they said the 'Long Distance Mariner' had what I was looking for."

"Lass, my narnog is truly fit for cleaning cogs and brassheads."

"As true as that may be, that's not what I'm looking for."

"I suppose you weren't just thirsty then?"

"It actually doesn't quench the thirst, does it? But that's not the point in question. I was told there are people in here who might know people who know things. Lots of things."

"Wot kind of things?"

"Things that go unspoken. Things that remain hidden. Secrets, lies, stories that could kill a man. Those sort of things," said Parcifal knowingly with eyes filled with menace. The bartender looked at her then and his answer seemed all too clear to him.

"Ah. Those kinds of things."

"I've wasted lots of time. And lots of coin. So I'm not asking twice; I know that you know where Bo and that stupid chair are."

Parcifal let her words sink in like barbs. She seemed to be having immense fun. The bartender didn't seem to share that view, but nevertheless, he was grinning.

"Well, if you're that impatient, I guess you've found what you're looking for."

Parcifal was suddenly glowing with a bright blue light, from her waist up. She looked at Encelados; even through the sheath, it was flaring bright, almost blinding. When she looked back upon the bartender, the same sapphire blue eyes were staring at her; but all the rest about him was a dark-

skinned nightmare, very much like Hobb. A maw lined up with tentacles reached for her neck.

With the serenity of a monk and the speed of a mongoose, Parcifal moved out of the way with her eyes closed, her head drooped down. In one fluid motion, she unsheathed Encelados with her left arm and with an upwards sharp stroke she turned the blade against the tentacles and the creature's head.

Milky-white blood sprouted for the neck of the once perhaps human bartender. Encelados was still filled with violent light, the thick liquid staining its otherwise immaculate surface. She then heard a sound like no-other; it was as if someone was stomping grapes made of glass. Parcifal's face showed some instinct other than self-preservation; it was sudden, primal fear. She knew things would not be easy, but she wasn't prepared for this. Some more commotion; a number of thuds, a few croaks and the sound of flesh being robbed of life.

She turned around in time to see more than half the El-Dee-Em's patrons on their last dying throes. Some were being choked by tentacles, others were already deadly surprised by a stab on the chest and most had found death while passed out drunk with their mugs in hand and their skulls cracked; brain matter oozed like a bag of spilled beans. The rest of the patrons had taken on their true forms; blue-eyed, tentacle-lined maws, dark of skin, devoid of heart or goodness.

"You should've stayed put. We don't take kindly to prying eyes," said one of them as they all approached her with a deliberate, unnervingly slow pace.

"I was raised a princess of the Kingdom of Nomos. I am Parcifal Teletha, princess regent to Lerneia Teletha, Captain of the Gardens, and warmaiden of the Holy Mountain. Who are you?" said Parcifal, pointing the tip of Encelados' blade

at the walking, talking terror that kept inching its way closer.

“We are the Ygg, one and many; children of the void, bringers of The Day!” exclaimed the dark-skinned monster triumphantly. The others of its kind raised their otherworldly voices in a sickening hail:

“Uaaah! Ygg-shub-nab!”

“Save me the ritualistic malarkey,” said Parcifal sharply. She held Encelados menacingly, while her voice rang truly alone: “If you value your life, hand me over Bo the bunny, and the chair. I give you my word as a warmaiden of the Holy Mountain of Nomos, I’ll spare you; by Skrala so it shall be, Svarna be my witness.”

The monsters paused in their stride suddenly, no more than a dozen feet away from Parcifal. The Ygg that seemed to be their self-appointed leader spoke with a slightly trembling, quavery voice, filled with ghostly echoes of a hiss. It sounded like a deranged kind of laughter.

“Value life? You, give us.. Your word?” asked the Ygg, unable to understand.

“Is something wrong with your hearing?”

“There must be something wrong with your mind, human. Perhaps, as you say, that narnog went to your head,” said the head Ygg and wafted uncannily towards Parcifal. She noticed they were all floating now, in varied heights off the floor.

“How much do you know about Nomos?”

“Who cares about an insignificant little piece of rock?”

“Good. Then you haven’t heard of the legend of the dragonborn, have you?”

“Poor choice of last words,” said the Ygg with vehemence as it became poised to assault Parcifal, barely a leap away.

“Strange choice of words yourself,” said Parcifal and a gushing stream of fire flew out of her mouth, engulfing the

Ygg in flames. The creature staggered in agonizing puzzlement as the flames ate at its flesh.

“Thoth ph’tagn! Kill the worm!” it screamed in anguish and rushed Parcifal, flailing its clawed hands wildly. Parcifal was already on the move, her senses helping her mind see her path against the threats all around her. The next moment, two severed clawed hands were still writhing on the murky, white-blooded floor; the Ygg shot its short tentacles in blinded agony. Parcifal leapt gracefully into the air, wielding Encelados with exemplary strictness of form. An eerie shriek filled the ‘Long Distance Mariner’ - it sounded like the death throes of a stillborn sea giant.

“Anyone having a change of mind?”

The Ygg threw their heads back, tentacles writhing like livid fleshy flowers from a nightmare’s seed; they let out a massive hoary shout in unison, a terrible, maddening wail. And then they shot at her at blazing speed with their claws shining under the candlelight, their maws frightfully open, a depthless invitation to madness waiting at the other end.

“Thick-skulled bastards, everyone of them,” whispered Parcifal to herself and stood with Encelados raised, clasped with both hands in a defensive posture. As she saw her whole field of vision being filled with the terrible forms of the Ygg, her back against the El-Dee-Em’s bar, she had a fleeting moment of loneliness. Strangely, a flash of recollection overcame her. The words of Master Sisyphus came to mind: “The outcome of a fight is always precariously balanced; The struggle itself though, should be enough to fill a man’s heart. Now shovel that manure.”

Parcifal’s face shone with a grin, relaxed her grip on Encelados, and prepared for metal to meet the flesh.

“Skrala, lent me strength! Svarna, guide my hand!”, she

cried with a terrible call as her glowing blade cut into livid, dark flesh.

She was dragonborn, not merely a man; she knew that nothing but victory would do.

* * *

Lemmy's was a bar situated at the very top of Tallyflop, built on a giant platform right on the rim of the oak's giant hollow main trunk. Surrounded by lush gardens, art carvings and statuettes, Lemmy's was a synonym for opulence. A stark contrast to the less refined and a lot slummier promenades of Tallyflop, Lemmy's catered to the most expensive tastes and only the wealthiest of people could afford the establishment's fine services. That being said, its clientele consisted mainly of slavers, contraband traders, blockade runners, and the meanest, craziest cutthroats alive.

Little did the establishment's fame mattered to Wince while him and Lernea were going up the last few marble steps to the grandiose copper-lined entrance: all he cared for was getting a drink before collapsing from the exhaustion of travelling through every single step and rope ladder in Tallyflop.

"House! Water!"

Water, though a most readily abundant substance around the known universe, is generally frowned upon in places where alcoholic beverages are mainly on offer. Lemmy's was no exception either, if not the rule.

"I think you're in a very wrong place, my friend," said a tall, thick-set doorman at the entrance, wearing tight leather pants, a loose linen shirt and a wooden, colourful curio around his neck. He was looking at Winceham and Lernea with a consternated, perhaps even constipated look. His voice was a keen whisper. It sounded like the man had a sore throat, if not an outright speech impediment.

"We're exactly where we want to be, sir. Now please, we want to order."

Lernea sounded tired, almost exhausted, but she was trying to be as polite as circumstance would allow. The doorman cocked his head to the left slightly and looked at them with

beady eyes.

“I can’t let you do that.”

Lerne took on her most threatening face. It was plain for all to see and hear, that she was nothing short of royally pissed.

“By Skrala, I’m not in the particular mood right now. And even though as custom would have it, I would be inclined to inquire further on the reasons of your barring us from entering this establishment, I am left with no other recourse than to completely disregard you.”

“You don’t want to do that,” said the doorman who was built much too closely to the actual door’s dimensions. He showed them the palm of his outstretched hand as an indication to stop. Winceham looked at the hand momentarily.

“You’ll live a long and prosperous life. Unless you don’t step out of our way, in which case your lifeline will be cut abruptly short. Like, a minute. Two, tops,” said the halfuin in a deadpan voice. He was looking at the doorman as if searching for an invisible ceiling, or maybe a specific star.

“We don’t serve water,” said the man and for the first time smiled thinly, or at least made an effort to rearrange his face. It was like he had been taught to smile through the use of bad, generic drawings.

“How about beer? Do you serve cold beer?” asked Lerne, putting on a real effort to contain her own irate disposition.

“There is beer served at a certain temperature,” answered the doorman and his head clicked back into its upright position.

“Right then, we’re having beer,” said Winceham and tried to go past the doorman with all the rush of a pig about to hog its way through mud. The doorman blocked his way with an

outstretched leg.

“Not dressed up like that you’re not.”

Lernea had had enough.

“I demand entrance to this.. This..” she was shaking with aggravation and had all but lost her words.

“Pigs’ sty?” offered Winceham with a deep-set frown, eyeing the doormans kneecap with the untold ambition of gnawing at it first chance he got.

“Ignominious excuse for an establishment that would rather have its patronage diminished to a dry husk in case it might dissuade the local fauna from entertaining its use as a urinal!”

The doorman blinked a couple of times, while Lernea near-screech had left her fuming.

“There’s no local fauna, miss. Except for the badgers. And you do know whose fault that is,” said the doorman accusingly and raised an eyebrow for good measure, as if somehow he knew his message, whatever it was, was getting across.

“Less than a minute,” said Winceham mostly to himself as he flexed his palm, itching for his stiletto.

“I am Lernea Teletha, Queen of Nomos in exile, scion of the line of Teletha, hallowed by the Eternal Spring of the Holy Mountain, and you’re telling me I can’t have a beer with my formerly smelly, albeit still short friend?”

“I didn’t realise you were nobility, Your Former Highness. Welcome to Lemmy’s,” he said in a surprisingly apologetic way. He then stood aside and ushered them both in with a tight-lipped, wide smile, before he bowed slightly, his curio jingling like a cheap toy. Lernea sighed, took a deep breath and walked inside, Winceham already somehow a few steps ahead of her.

“I’m glad we got that out of the way,” she said and instantly aware of her surroundings, she straightened her hair somewhat and tried to maintain as much authority of style and etiquette as her leather bodice allowed.

“Still, he needs some stickin’,” the halfuin insisted, looking over his shoulder a couple of times.

“I think there’s been enough sticking for today,” whispered Lernea. It sounded like she was referring to a rather terrifying or perhaps completely embarrassing experience.

“I was only acting according to what is expected of me,” said Winceham and grinned profusely, a regular indicator he had enjoyed something most people in their sane minds would prefer not to remember.

“Antics like starting a fight and bringing a pack mule to a.. I cannot even utter the word!” whispered Lernea as if the shock of what had transpired was still haunting her. Still, she couldn’t pry her gaze off the wonderful chandeliers, the beautifully hand-crafted furniture and the suave atmosphere the light show and melodic, ambient music gave off. Winceham for a moment lost her; he was trying to remember what exactly she was referring to. Then, he had a moment of clarity.

“You mean the brothel?” he shouted with excitement, and an alarming gleam in his eyes.

“Keep your voice down! I thought it was a bath house!” she hissed and became red in the face as if she’d just dipped herself in a pool of dye. Her training in all matters of the court kicked in soon afterwards; she immediately straightened herself and calmly walked towards the bar, as if nothing had happened. She avoided any and all eye contact, especially with a rather burly, hairy man with a six-foot long double-edged sword, wearing nothing but a sheepskin while not being so

picky about which parts of him were covered with it.

“Ah, don’t be such a prude; you’re in your prime time. If I were you, I’d be going for it. You know, they say in space, noone can hear you scream,” said Winceham with a grin that threatened to tear his face apart. Not a moment later, he was twirling like some sort of exotic, drunken dancer before he crashed onto the soft, carpeted floor. His cheek had the print of a palm on it; his head throbbed and ached, but his hearing was fine.

“There will be no more mention of this, now or ever again. Am I being pristine?” said Lernea this time not at all mindful of the many sets of eyes and ears upon them both.

“Too pristine if you ask me, but aye, I can see there are deleterious effects to continuing this sort of discussion,” he said, got up and dusted himself, in effect adding a layer of dust and grit to the previously immaculate carpet.

“All too right; for a change. Let’s get what we came here for. That Rat character.”

“Right. Let’s sit at the bar then. You’re buying though,” said Winceham, still nursing his cheek.

“And how are you planning to do that?” asked Lernea with a sour expression marring her clean, strong characteristics.

“I wasn’t, you’re the one who’s buying. I’m broke. Really, halfuin’s honor and all that, haven’t you heard?”

The feeling of hurt and begging on Winceham’s face begged belief. One could’ve argued he had been in fact slain and these were his last, dying words.

“How do you plan on getting up on that stool?” said Lernea and pointed at the three-foot high stools against the bar, with no handles or the like whatsoever. Winceham turned and looked at Lernea with the eyes of a young boy who has

just realised his little pet is dead and gone forever.

“I was hoping you’d prop me up.”

“Hope is an admirable notion, in general. In your case, it is wholly misguided,” said Lernea and proceeded to sit at one of the stools. Winceham sounded quite displeased about the whole turn of events.

“And what am I supposed to do then? Scale the bloody walls?”

“I’m really not that interested about that right now. Bartender, if you will!”

The bartender turned around; the man under the fancy pressed red-and-black striped suit, was in fact a five-foot rat with a seven-foot tail that not unsurprisingly, wore glasses as well.

“What can I get you for?”

“A bloody beer’d be an awful good idea!” grumbled Winceham without being able to show his bare, gritted teeth since he was trying to climb up the stool, meeting with little success.

“Ventriloquist?” asked the rat bartender, fixing his glasses.

“Pest control, really,” said Lernea and kicked Winceham away with the heel of her boot. By an unfortunate timing of events, what would’ve been a rather forceful nudge, ended up being a kick in Winceham’s private parts, which as is the case with most humanoids, translates to a world of pain. Winceham went out of breath, double over and fell sideways like a dead log, writhing in agony and the near-silence of pained breaths coming through clenched teeth.

“Ah. What will you be having then?”

“Ken sent me,” said Lernea and raised one eyebrow.

“Dunno that one, never heard it before. Does it got bitters or grog innit?”

“Ken sent me?” repeated Lernea, with both eyebrows raised, believing she’d got everything right.

“Wot, just because I work at a fancy place I hafta know every drink some gobbleflopper’s dreamt up?”

“Aren’t you the Rat?”

“Lady, the tag here says Vishjay. Now if you can’t spell it, that’s fine. Can’t pronounce it, even bettah. But I’m a rat, a ratman really, not the Rat.”

Lernea checked on the small brass tag pinned on the suit. It did spell Vishjee, which was probably close enough to be true.

“My apologies, dear sir. Where can I find this Rat you speak of?”

“Well, he’s got weird hours. I’m not sure.”

“It’s really important. It could also be quite profitable.”

“I’m in then.”

“Not for you, for the Rat!”

“Wot’s that gonna git me then?”

“I don’t know! You sort this out between you!”

“Sounds fair. But still, he’s not here right now.”

“And when might he be in?”

A small, tiny bell chimed and a wide door next to the bar slid open to one side. Lernea’s eyes went wide and her jaw dropped to the point where it probably hurt like hell. Then she just pointed a finger at the open door, fainted and landed on Winceham who was only then beginning to breathe again, the pain starting to subside. As luck would have it though, her elbow struck Winceham’s sensitive nether region once more. He let out a cry of anguish and passed out as well. The bartender was at a loss of words.

“He’s not that good-looking, I can tell,” he mumbled to himself and turned around to greet the newcomers from the Elevator.

“Monsieur Rat, what’ll be? Dry gin? And your friends here?”

“Make it an extra dry gin and some ginger ale for these two. We can’t have a nine-foot bear in a toga go on a drunken rampage around here now, can we?” said a wholly unassuming man, dressed in an elegant, yet no-frills, quality silky robe. Rat had the bland, common face of a peasant and a decidedly shiny scalp, but his eyes radiated a shiny, crisp, intelligence. He exchanged knowing, smiling looks with Tej.

“No sir,” said the bartender who seemed to have heard the same joke before. “What about the tall fella?” he asked.

“I dunno. I asked him what he’d like to have and he just started crying for no reason. Tejewel had to hug him like a baby to make it stop. Something about a lost brother or something. And the bloody Ygg are in the middle of this, too. I’m beginning to think it’s time for an early retirement.”

“You will help us, Rat?” said Tej, letting go of Theo who was still wiping away his tears, his back against the rest of Lemmy’s.

“Why not? It’s just another rotten day in my line of business. Speaking of rotten, what’s that smell anyway?”

“Must be coming from the short fella. Stinky, hey? To think people say I’m rotten,” said the bartender disaffectionately.

“Rodent, Vishjay. People say you’re a rodent, and you know what? They’re right.”

* * *

The air was filled with the smell of stew; it rode aloft in the night air like a thick, sweet and sour delight. Ned had offered to cook; it was one of the few things he was familiar with ever since working alongside his father at the Sniggering Pig. As he stirred the broth in the pot, he couldn't help but throw a few glances at Judith's lithe figure sleeping a few feet away.

At first Judith had insisted cooking; she was worried that even up high on the tallest, farthest branches of the oak, under the cover of thick brush and leaf, with noone in sight a mile out, the tiny column of smoke from their campfire would attract unwanted attention. Ned had burst in laughter at Judith's overly paranoid seriousness, even though there was ample reason to be worried, even though she had saved his life. Ned's reaction had a curious effect on her; she had decided that getting some overdue sleep was more important than light discipline.

Just for good measure though, she'd quickly gathered some brush to cover up most of the fire. A small, wet piece of cloth was set up like a tent above the pot, to absorb some of the smoke. There were all sorts of small details she never seemed to stop paying attention to; her mind and body were in constant movement, never idle, always a step ahead. Ned couldn't help but marvel at her for all the right and all the promiscuous reasons. He was grinning like a dolt, mindlessly stirring the soup, his gaze fixed away into the distance, at the very lip of the treetop.

"That's were we're going. That is, if you realize the dangers involved," said Judith without so much as a yawn. She was already up and around, stretching her muscles, taking short, deep breaths. Ned turned his head around to answer and almost fell on his back, as if something had bit him; with

one hand he covered up his eyes while with the other he tried to blindly propel himself back on the small log he had been sitting.

“Seven seas and a swan song parade! Put some clothes on! Please!”

Judith furrowed her brow; she thought Ned was kind of a throwback, a fish out of the water, but still an intriguing young man. Then she realized that for some reason all the other, nudity was frowned upon where Ned came from. She could respect that; she put on the inner, linen suit of hers. It was a one-piece affair that kept the body warm or cool, depending on the need. She looked at the lip of the treetop; Lemmy’s and the Elevator were visible on the large platform, as well as the narrow, three-mile long, corkscrew staircase that hugged the tree’s bark all the way up to the top.

“Are you dressed now?” Ned asked reluctantly, not even thinking of trying to peek through his palm.

“I am,” she replied and without turning to look at Ned she added as an afterthought: “You know, it’s not like the sight of my skin would petrify you.”

Ned sheepishly opened his fingers and peeked at Judith for just a moment before turning his attention back on the stew. He hoped his face wasn’t still flush red.

“Not at all, I never implied that. It’s just that, where I come from at least, it’s not very ladylike to walk around naked around men. And it’s not like a gentleman to peek either.”

Judith turned away from the sight of the treetop. She sat down cross-legged, the pot of stew between her and Ned. She sought his eyes, but still Ned would just stir the pot. She smiled thinly.

“I gathered as much. Where are you from, really? You don’t seem well travelled. None of you do,” she said and

swayed her body sideways just long enough to pick up one of her swords. She swerved the other way and took hold of a small, hefty, brick-like whetstone.

“I’m from a tiny seaside town, down from the Sapphire Seas. It’s almost impossible that you’d know it.”

“I meant, which planet are you from?” asked Judith and started sharpening her sword against the stone. The sound was keen and sharp, not unpleasant at all. It wasn’t the noise one would expect of metal grinding on stone. Ned shrugged and smiled thinly, feeling a bit embarrassed though he’d be loathe to admit it.

“I’m afraid I have no idea. A few days ago I didn’t even know there was a whole other world out here, much less what a planet is. ”

Judith smiled back almost timidly. If one could ignore the fact she was sharpening a sword that shone like a perfect mirror, she had all the qualities of a sweet, innocent, maiden.

“A first timer to spacefaring then,” she said.

“A first timer to nearly everything, actually,” replied Ned and grinned.

“How about the stew? It’s not your first time cooking, I hope,” she said and put away the sword momentarily. She squatted for a moment and rummaged through her knapsack quickly. She produced two tin cups, and offered one to Ned.

“No, it’s not. I tried to do my best with what rations you were carrying, but there are limits to the culinary arts. It’s not magic.”

“From my experience, magic is usually overrated,” she said with a suddenly sombre face. She dipped the stirring ladle in the pot and filled her tin cup. She let the smell waft through her nostrils. Her lip curled in the crescent of a hearty smile. She sipped some of the steaming hot broth.

“It’s fine. Better than anything I’d manage. Even if I went for taste,” she said and raised her cup before sipping some more.

“Isn’t that what food is about?” replied Ned and filled his own cup. Judith shrugged and looked at the stars, as if she had suddenly felt a cloud of rain approaching. She gazed at her cup once more.

“It’s just sustenance. It’s what keeps the body going.”

Ned sipped some of the stew himself. He even picked up a nice little morcel of what small meat he’d scrounged up from Judith’s rations. He licked his fingers.

“They say it’s one of life’s great joys,” he said and looked Judith in the eye.

“Which is?” she asked indifferently.

“Food,” said Ned as if it were only natural of him to say so.

“I have many things in mind, but a joy of food is not one of them,” replied Judith as she held the cup with both hands, peering through the wafting steam at Ned. Her smile was now gone.

“Something must make you happy then,” inquired Ned and sipped some broth with a troubled brow.

Judith stood silent for a while. It wasn’t hard for her to speak her mind though.

“Vengeance,” she said and nodded slightly, as if to reassure herself.

“Is that why you’re here?” asked Ned and put his cup down on the leaf-spread ground.

“Does it sound strange to you?” she retorted, staring at Ned with a sharp, almost intimidating gaze.

“Frankly? No, not at all,” he replied truthfully.

“I would have thought vengeance would be a distasteful notion to someone like you.”

“How do you mean? What’s it like, to be someone like me?” said Ned, sounding amused. Judith misjudged his disposition.

“You sound offended. You’re peculiar. It wasn’t my intention to offend,” she said with just the right amount of respect in her voice.

“I don’t think of myself as someone who takes grave offense easily, Judith. I was simply curious. It’s always interesting to hear other people’s thoughts about you. Sometimes you might learn things you would never have thought possible.”

“I know who I am. I don’t feel that need. But then again, I think anything’s possible.”

“I don’t know what to think about that,” said Ned with a vacant stare.

“Then you’re shooting blind, aren’t you?”

“How so?” asked Ned, really trying to understand.

“What’s your purpose in life, Ned? Why are you here? What do you expect to achieve?” she said with a suddenly austere, diamond-rough voice.

“I’m not sure. I can only see so far into the future, it doesn’t really matter what I want, does it? A couple of weeks back, I was cleaning up tables in my father’s tavern. Now, my father lies buried and people are trying to kill me and my friends left and right. For crying out loud, I’m sitting on a giant oak that’s floating across space,” said Ned earnestly and shrugged. He let out a little laugh, shook his head and looked around him. It was as if he still couldn’t believe half of what was going on. Judith stared at him intently; she was measuring him, judging him, but not unkindly so. At length, she

picked up her other sword and began sharpening it as well. She started to tell a story.

“There was a time, not so long ago, that I wasn’t all that different from you. I was a farmhand, at a far away place. I thought that life was good; a good day out in the fields, and then supper. Sometimes the weather was hot, sometimes the weather grew cold. A roof over my head, and a bed to lie down.”

“Is there something wrong with all that?”

“Not if your purpose in life is to die one day. In a manner of speaking, I count myself lucky that I was forced to open my eyes and my mind to the world at large.”

“How did that happen?”

“One could say it was a rude awakening,” she said and kept sharpening the sword with a slow, persistent rhythm, like it somehow added purposeful sharpness to her words.

“Did it have anything to do with those dark horrors? Those things that tried to kill me?”

“The Ygg? It had everything to do with them. It still does,” she said and looked at her sword’s blade, inch by inch.

“You want revenge?”

“I want justice. I don’t expect you to understand.”

“You’re not the only one who’s suffered, Judith,” said Ned, raising his voice involuntarily, his eyes becoming darker, colder. He hated being treated like a child.

“What did they take away from you, Ned?” she asked him, putting away the sword.

“My father. My home,” he replied, his gaze wandering towards what little fire remained. Judith cracked a smile, a deathly cold smile that did not suit her at all.

“They took everyone from me, Ned. Everyone,” she said with a voice rough as stone.

“Your whole family?” Ned asked flatly.

“Everyone, means everyone Ned. Every living soul on my planet,” she said without smiling.

“I’d have thought you were joking, but I can see you’re not. How is that even possible? A whole planet?”

Ned sounded truly unable to comprehend. Judith tried to explain.

“They have sinister, unfathomable ways. They excel at suffering and misery. The worst thing about them is, they don’t seem to revel in it. They simply do what they do. It’s as if it should be harder for you to hate them.”

“Is it?”

“Not really.”

Silence ensued. They both looked engrossed in thought, as if anything that needed to be said had been said. The fire was dying, casting grotesque, flickering shadows of them on the surrounding growth. Ned broke the silence without warning.

“How did you escape their fate?”

“I’m still not sure I have. Sometimes, I wish I hadn’t been spared. I wish I was still toiling away at their mines, knee deep in silvery sludge. Chipping away crystals, looking at my reflection with disgust.”

“Who spared you?”

“A man named Tark. But in truth, it was blind luck. He could’ve picked anyone; it just happened to be me.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s an intelligence operative. A spy, to put it simply; it so happened that in one of his missions, he had to pose as a slaver. He bought my way out.”

“Just you?”

“Just me,” she said and let her shoulder sag.

“And you’ve been free ever since?”

“I told you. I’m still not sure. Tark saw some potential in me. He trained me. Made me what I am today.”

“What are you, really?” Ned said with undeniable fascination.

“You tell me, Ned. What do you see?”

Out of the blue, Ned spoke his heart and mind.

“I see a beautiful woman.”

Judith’s face became suddenly taugth. Then her face reddened and her lips wavered, trying for a prudish smile. She wouldn’t dare look at Ned; the single, slim path of a tear shone in what little light remained in the fire.

“I meant it as a compliment,” said Ned with worry in his voice.

“I know. It’s just that noone’s said that to me before,” she said, her voice almost a whisper.

“I find that hard to believe,” replied Ned with a sheepish smile.

“I was just a girl when the Ygg took us, Ned. Noone’s ever told me those exact words.”

“Well, they’re true.”

“You do look like the kind of man who’d die defending the truth,” she said and got up. She wiped the tear off her cheek and stood over the edge of the giant leaf that accomodated them.

“Let’s not get carried away. Let’s not die just yet,” said Ned with a wobbly smile.

“You need to be ready for that; I’m not trying to scare you. When we go in there..” Judith said and let her voice trail off. She shook her head before shrugging; it was so vulnerable an expression on her part. Strangely enough, she didn’t seem to have a problem with it.

“That’s where they’re keeping Bo, right?”

“As far as I know. I can’t sent a communique now - Tark’s in deep. We have to wait for his exfiltration signal.”

“What about the others, Judith? Lernea and Winceham, they could be in as much trouble as I was.”

“Don’t you trust your friends?”

“It’s not that. It’s just that I feel I’m letting them down.”

“It’s been a long time since I was in the company of friends. I remember though that you can’t let them down if they’re really friends.”

“You’re saying I should do nothing?” he said and got up himself, somewhat agitated.

“I’m saying there’s a time and place for everything. I should’ve straightened this all out from the start; I didn’t save you because I just happened to walk by. I had my orders.”

“From Tark? Where do we fit in all this? Where’s Theo gone?”

“I’m afraid I’ve really lost track of him, back when the orcs attacked you. But he’s safe from the Ygg, as are all the others. Except Bo. Tark’s got good reason to believe you were the folks who foiled a recent Ygg infestation on its early stages. You don’t know it Ned, but maybe you saved your planet. At least, for the time being.”

“You were there when the orcs attacked us? Why didn’t you help us?”

“It wasn’t something you couldn’t handle. And it wouldn’t be prudent to present myself to them so early.”

“How do you know my friends are safe? Why didn’t you tell me from the start?” Ned said aggravated.

“You have my word that they’re safe. We have our ways as well. Did you notice the circus was in town?”

“I did. So?”

“We’ve contracted them. They’re literally everywhere and they keep a close eye on things. There is, of course, some magic involved in snooping around.”

“You do have your ways, then. But what does Tark want from us? There’s always something, isn’t it?”

“He knows there’s something really precious about that crystal. And about that bunny. Something the Ygg might’ve been looking for a long, long time.”

“Then I guess there’s no other way than to work together. What’s the plan?”

“I’ll show you,” said Judith and walked to her backpack. She reached inside and produced a perfectly flat, mostly unassuming slab of slim-cut stone. She touched it and thin silver and golden strands of metal started running across its surface as if a writhing mass of shiny worms fought on its surface. The bits of metal settled in less frivolous patterns. It was like a living sculpture; cold metal flowed across its surface as if it had a mind of its own.

“What in the black blazes is that?” said Ned with an all too straightforward sense of fear.

“Don’t worry, it’s perfectly safe. It’s a thaumaturgic device, something like that throne you salvaged from the ship you came in.”

“What does it do?”

“All sorts of things. But mostly, it’s a way to note things, communicate, access bits of information and so on.”

“Why would anyone want one?”

“You have to see it to understand. Here,” she said and offered the slab to Ned. He looked at her warily for a moment but took the slab in both hands somewhat reluctantly.

“What am I looking at?” he asked.

“The silvery beads, those are known Ygg infested locations. The red, ember-like bits, those are your friends.”

“So, this bit right here at the center is me?”

“That’s right?”

“And those three red beads in that direction?”

“Where?” said Judith almost losing her calm.

“Right there if I’m reading it correctly,” said Ned and pointed a finger at Lemmy’s.

“That’s it, they’re right over there. See? Perfectly safe. Not an Ygg in sight.”

“You said the Ygg are marked in silver?”

“Right.”

“We need to move!”

“What? Why?”

“There’s another red ember someplace near, and it’s sitting smack in the middle of a silver bead the size of my thumb!” said Ned as he raced to pick up his things.

“I don’t know if we’ll make it in time,” she said while she was suiting up.

“We’ll have to find out then, don’t we?” Ned retorted, having already secured the line they’d come up with through his belt. Judith nodded silently and put on the rest of her leather suit with amazing speed. She picked up her swords, passed the thin, extremely strong line through a special kind of hook and looked at Ned meaningfully. As she was about to push off the ledge and start descending, Ned shot her a worried gaze.

“I just hope it’s not Wince. I don’t think I can stand his bragging if we survive this,” Ned said and Judith pushed them off.

* * *

“I still don’t understand why we’re doing this,” asked Lernea as they took the Elevator down. This time they were looking at the inside of the hollow oak; they were only then beginning to see the giant crystal core at its center. It looked like a massive block of strangely coloured ice, rising up, gorging its way as they travelled to the Heart of the Tree, where the meeting would be taking place.

“We’re doing this so I can snoop around while you’re babbling, get Bo and the crystal and just butt out.”

“That’s the part of the plan I can safely assume everyone is familiar with. I’d like to know what it is we’re supposed to be bargaining with,” asked Lernea and Tej offered the critical detail.

“An offer they can’t refuse; Hanul.”

“Who, me?” asked Theo, surprised but not the least bit alarmed.

“It stands to reason, that whatever it is they hope to gain by using that crystal and holding Bo, they’re missing a vital part. You, Hanul, are that missing part.”

“He is? I thought we were just going to sell those glum-faced rotten horrors a well-crafted piece of baloney,” Winceham said.

“We are,” said Tej and smiled.

“So he’s not really the missing vital part?” asked Lernea.

“Oh, Hanul is vital to their grand design. They just don’t know it yet.”

“I don’t understand Tejewel. Why would we be giving them such an advantage? What if things go wrong?” Lernea said and shook her head with a furrowed brow.

“See? He does that all the time,” said Theo with a feeling of vindication. Tej placed his paws on Theo’s shoulders. From afar, it looked like the huge bear was about to chew

Theo's head off, but this wasn't the case. Light rose from below, hugging Tejewel's thick fur like a warm, reassuring blanket. The sight lent more than credence in his words.

"Hanul, my friend. You must be ready when the time comes."

"What will I have to do?" wondered Theo.

"Let go," Tej said warmly.

"Of what?"

"Of everything that is holding you back."

"I hate it when you do that," Theo said and shook his head.

"I know," replied Tej and nodded to himself.

"Then why do you do it?"

"Because I must. And so shall you. When the time comes."

"You keep saying these things like I understand them already, but I only have the vaguest of ideas. Just like when I touched your behinds."

Lernea and Winceham instinctively sought each other's gaze; they looked like they were about to ask something, but thought better of it. Lernea scrubbed her face with her hands for a mere moment, and decided to pretend she hadn't heard. She closed her eyes and let herself sink in a deep, almost unbreakable concentration. Winceham on the other hand, was looking at Tej, focusing at his behinds. Seeing nothing but fur, he stroked his beard, nodded to himself and thought no more of the matter. Tejewel answered Theo with a rumbling, yet caring and somber voice.

"I've seen the currents of time, Hanul. They'll carry you to brand new shores."

The bear smiled and looked again out through the Elevator's giant glass pane. The whole elevator was the size of a large room in a hexagonal shape. Held tight between

brass and steel rails, it connected the very top of Tallyflop's giant oak to its very bottom and Tejewel's sanctum. No-one but Tejewel and the Rat had the keys that allowed its use.

"What currents of time, exactly? Where?" asked Theo and with an anxious pair of eyes started to search all around him with real purpose.

"Well, I'd say these are more akin to eddies in time, but that would've made things more complicated."

"As I understand it, you have a more thorough understanding of Theo than he does himself," commented Winceham. Lerneia did not care for any of that; she was breathing heavily, meditating, preparing. Even as she stood upright, she looked more and more like a statue. The light from the crystal cast a tall, defiant shadow of her form. Her face was abnormally serene.

"That might be more true than you think, Ham," Tejewel agreed.

"Why do you do that thing with names?" asked Winceham and Tejewel promptly provided an answer of sorts.

"Names, are only names; your name is not what makes you different from the rest of us, Ham."

"Well calling me Ham makes me hungry. Could you not do that right now? I still have a terrible headache."

"Not to mention a bruised groin," said Lerneia suddenly cutting in. She was flexing her muscles; the cracking of air went along with her movements. A rather new sense of preparedness flashed across her face; her eyes shone wildly. Winceham had seen that look before.

"Has anyone told you before that you bear a striking resemblance to your sister?" Winceham told her.

"My mother, actually. I bear a striking resemblance to our mother. Parcifal has our father's looks."

“Tejwel, I can’t seem to even catch a glimpse of those eddies in time. When exactly should I be looking?”

Tejwel looked at Theo with a sorrowful gaze and smiled warmly.

“Always, Hanul. Time never stops.”

“Well, that’s not very helpful.”

“Indeed, it’s not. But that’s only for the time being.”

“I don’t understand,” Theo said and shrugged.

“You will, Hanul. In time.”

“That’s exactly what I don’t understand,” said Theo with a hint of helplessness in his voice.

“I’m all for deep philosophical discussions, especially whenever a glass of fine brandy or the like is to be found near, but let’s walk through the plan one more time, shall we?”

“There’s not much of a plan now, Mr. Abbermouth. Just let me do the talking,” said Lernea and smiled in a conniving, ruthless fashion as she fastened her chainmail gloves.

“I hope by talking, you do refer to exchanging words.”

“Naturally,” said Lernea without flinching.

The Elevator then began to slow down. They were fast approaching a ring of concentric, circular and hexagonal corridors that seemed to float of their own accord. They were connected by strands of thick, multicoloured light, wide enough for a man to walk on. It was as if a clockwork machine had been spilled carelessly in the air, yet still it was possessed of a natural order. At the very center of the rings stood the large, bright crystal; it was imposing, impervious to the eye. Layers of opaque matter glistened through mirror-clean surfaces. Irregular shapes and reflections dodged light and shadow in an equally mystifying way.

At the very first ring that stood strangely still and motionless, one could easily spot four menacing, dark-skinned

figures, wearing plain robes. A shiny gem stood out on each one's forehead; it seemed to change its colour capriciously, like oil does on water.

"We're here," said Tejewel.

"That's an impressive piece of glitter. I wonder how much it's worth," said Winceham, looking at the crystal as if he was mentally calculating how it could fit in his pocket.

"It defies calculation," said Tej with a gritty voice.

"We could still sell it for less and make a profit," grinned Winceham. His comment only made Lernea look at him disapprovingly.

"Even Ned could've done a better job of a joke. At least he has a sense of timing," she said. Theo sported a baffled look; he just had to ask.

"This time bloke, Eddie? Did everyone know about him except me?"

Noone answered. Theo decided that counted as a definitive 'yes'.

* * *

“Long Jack’s bathrobes!” exclaimed Ned, holding his crossbow firmly in hand without anything to point it at. He took a good look around and lowered it in a mesmerized fashion. Parcifal was nowhere to be seen.

“I hope that’s simply a figure of speech around your parts,” said Judith, her blades drawn just in case. They were standing inside what remained of the ‘Long Distance Mariner’. There were bodies strewn all around; some were decidedly human. The others, the charred, mangled ones, belonged to Ygg.

“The place is a wreck. It’s like the joke. An earthquake, a fire and a kraken walk into this bar.”

“Is that really a joke?” she asked with mild surprise.

“Never mind,” said Ned and waved a hand dismissively. “The smell.. I thought Winceham smelled bad,” he added.

“They’re an odd lot, your party.”

“They’re not my party,” said Ned with an offended look drawn across his face.

“Every party has a leader. You’re it,” replied Judith, scanning the wrecked establishment at a deliberate pace.

“I think you’re confused,” said Ned, trying not to step on any grey-white pools of murky Ygg blood, but it was nigh impossible.

“I was about to say the same thing about you. You don’t see it, but you’re their natural leader.”

“There’s no leader. Noone leads us someplace. It’s just that.. We kind of happened to each other, and we’re stuck with each other. For now.”

“The circumstances are of little import. The short fellow, the halfuin; he’s too engrossed in himself. The sisters are a nice match, but they seem finicky. The sorcerer.. He’s just

odd. That leaves you, the bard,” she said and shot him a sharp look, as if he was being assessed.

“What did I ever do that makes me a leader? I can hardly hit anything with this thing,” said Ned and lifted his crossbow in a mock salute.

“There are qualities and skills other than marksmanship that make a leader stand out,” she replied as if answering by rote.

“I tell jokes no-one hardly ever laughs at and I play the drum. Not to mention that my last drum was ruined.”

“I’m not a very humorous person. I wouldn’t know anything about jokes. Or much about music, for that matter. But I know you’ve kept them alive. So far.”

“That’s what leaders do?” Ned asked incredulously.

“For the most part,” she said earnestly and nodded. Her attention though was on something; it looked like she had picked a trail that Ned wasn’t even aware of.

“I thought that was just luck.”

“Luck is just a convenient name for the multitude of uncertainties that affect us.”

“It really is convenient then. Imagine wishing people a good multitude of uncertainties that affect them every time they go fishing,” said Ned and grinned thinly. Judith returned him a vacant stare of ignorant confusion.

“I told you hardly anyone laughs,” Ned told her.

“That was supposed to be a joke?” she said as she sheathed one sword. She began tracing the far wall behind the bar.

“I hope you really aren’t a very humorous person.”

“I’m not. I do mean the things I say,” said Judith and looked at Ned furtively for a moment.

“What are you searching for?” he asked her, seeing how engrossed she had become with a copper panel.

“The trapdoor.”

“What makes you certain there is one?” asked Ned and shrugged. Judith answered without turning to look around, her focus on the wall.

“Because that’s the last place where the eyeslab picked up Parcifal. Her body isn’t here. There must be a trapdoor leading deeper into the tree, where the thauma’s ether is weakest.”

“I would’ve made the same assumption if I knew the workings of that device,” said Ned with feigned indifference.

“I’m sure you would have.”

“At least you do mean the things you say,” commented Ned with a slight grin and Judith shot him a disapproving look.

“There,” she said and the copper panel was pushed back with the loud click of a spring. She then slid it aside to reveal a passage hewn into the tree’s bark, large enough for a tall man to walk unhindered. Faint amber light seeped through the far end.

“Apres vous,” said Ned and Judith looked at him with a furrowed brow.

“Just a fanciful way of saying ‘after you’,” explained Ned.

“Why didn’t you just say that?” she asked and stepped through, her blade always at the ready.

“Wouldn’t any other Ygg show up on that eyeslab of yours?”

“Those silver beads were known positions. Now, we’re entering unknown territory.”

“So anything goes?”

“That’s right. I’d appreciate it if you kept your voice down.”

“Can do. It’s not a good time for a bad joke anyway,” Ned whispered and followed close behind.

They remained silent for a length of time. The hollowed out part of the bark seemed to twist and turn roughly; it was as if whoever had opened the passage couldn’t do so in a straight line. If it wasn’t for the passage’s walls, the faint light at the far end wasn’t enough to guide them.

As they moved forward, the light became more intense. Then Judith stopped abruptly.

“Do you hear that?” she asked Ned.

“Faintly,” he admitted.

“Could it be your friend, Parcifal?”

“I’m not sure. It’s weird, for one thing.”

“What’s weird about it? Is it her voice, or not?”

“I’m not sure. I haven’t heard her sing before.”

“Listen closely then,” Judith advised. The sound grew louder soon as it echoed through the rough passage, and it was indeed the sound of singing.

Our lady, our lady, claimed a warrior’s heart.

Our lady, I tell you, she thought he was lost.

The warrior, the warrior, to Nomos he’d fell.

Believe, believe, from the sky up above.

At the Holy Mountain, his body was found.

Beware, beware, for his breath wasn’t cold.

Our lady, our lady, lent him a fiery kiss.

The warrior, I tell you, he flew high again.

You'll know, you'll know, the Dragonborn's
time.

"Well? Is it her?" asked Judith bluntly. Ned was left speechless.

"It was beautiful!" he shouted excitedly and actually began to clap loudly. Judith looked at him with an exasperated look that meant she must've briefly considered silencing him permanently. She decided though that whatever harm was done, was done.

Moments later, a shady figure appeared in front of the light, wielding a sword.

"Parcifal? Is that you?" asked Ned as if asking was all the assurance he needed.

"If it wasn't me, would I really tell you?" replied Percifal with a feisty mood.

"Wouldn't you?" asked Ned smiling and poked Judith to move on but she wouldn't budge.

"Would she now?" asked Judith and couldn't decide whether to draw both her blades or simply rush at the figure in front of her.

"It was just a joke," whispered Ned.

"You've been tricked before," Judith replied in a low-keyed voice.

"This is no trick. I feel it in my gut; it's her," said Ned nodding convincingly, but not convincingly enough. Judith insisted.

"What makes you so certain this time?"

"You're one of those people that always change their order at the last minute, aren't you?" asked Ned with a bit of aggravation in his voice. Judith had no answer to such a question.

Parcival thought provided an answer to the main question at hand.

“Having a good time with that lady friend of yours? I’m pretty sure she’s better than me. She’s got more swords after all, doesn’t she?” she shouted from a distance. Her demanding tone was a stark contrast to the sweet timbre of her singing voice.

“See? Just as jealous.”

“I find your lack of criteria disturbing,” said Judith with a frown.

“You can be a difficult person, do you know that?”

“Ms. Gracie!” came suddenly a man’s shout.

“Oh, bugger!” said Judith and simply rushed towards the light and Parcival’s figure. Ned followed behind her at a slower pace, but now it was him who felt uneasy about the voice.

“Who’s that?” Ned asked but Judith didn’t reply. She simply shot past Parcival who sidestepped at the last moment. Ned was next; she shot Parcival an uneasy smile to which she replied with a heartfelt mocking grin. They were inside a small opening inside the bark, where a peculiar sort of lantern cast shadows against a man wearing some sort of uniform. A bunny was happily munching away on something that grew out of the floor. Two more passages seemed to lead to what looked like a whole network of corridors, deeper and deeper into the giant tree.

“You failed to check in, Ms. Gracie,” said Tark holding a cup in his hand.

“That won’t happen again,” said Judith with an almost fearful expression, the likes of which Ned had thought impossible for someone with her qualities until that moment.

“I’ve heard that before,” said Tark flatly and added, “Ms. Teletha, this is the bard you were referring to?”

“That’s Ned Larkin,” said Parcifal and shrugged almost indifferently. Yet she shot Ned with a barbed look that made him feel guilty of something completely vague and uncalled for.

“Mr. Larkin,” said Tark and offered his hand. “Tark,” he added and raised his cup.

“That’s Bo, right? Not just some bunny you just happened to find along?”

Bo’s eyes flared up in response.

“She says she could be feeling insulted but she really isn’t.”

“What? You can talk to each other?” asked Ned in disbelief.

“She?” exclaimed Parcifal.

“There’s probably a lot to explain but very little time. There have been developments. Judith, plan C,” said Tark. Judith nodded and began handling her eyeslab.

“What developements? What plan?”

“All you need to know is the elves you came looking for here have been relocated.”

Parcifal and Ned exchanged furtive looks, but said nothing.

“What are you doing here? What is this plan C of yours? What happened to A and B?” asked Ned a bit worried, happily petting Bo’s ears.

“I can see the term ‘comedian’ is a hard-earned one,” said Tark, letting the sarcasm in his voice flow gently, and added as an afterthought:

“She also says she actually hates the way you treat her like an animal.”

* * *

The Elevator came to a stop. The dimmed, darkened glass pane opened sideways, like a hatch. Directly in front of them, down three small steps, stood the Ygg representatives, staring at Tej with cold, machinating, blue-on-blue eyes. Winceham was already plying his trade, unseen.

“Enginseer,” said the Ygg in unison; their combined voices sounded like a nest of insects through a metal reed.

Tej did not return the greeting. He simply walked outside the Elevator slowly, calmly. He did not return the Yggs’ stares. The others followed close behind. Lernea grabbed Theo by one hand, and shoved him forward suddenly, treating him like one would a captive or a prisoner. Theo exclaimed:

“Watch it with that! It’s a long drop and from what I’ve been though you never know where you might end up.”

“Shut it,” Lernea said with vehemence and twisted Theo’s arm just hard enough for him to remain locked in an awkward, sideways position. By the look on his face, he wasn’t sure whether it was something he’d said that had gotten Lernea so mad or if this was just part of some sort of plan he vaguely remembered agreeing to non-verbally.

“Him?” said one of the Ygg and pointed vaguely at Theo with one webbed, clawed hand. Tej simply nodded with an austere look of barely contained anger on his face. One of the other Ygg shot an icy stare at Lernea.

“What of her?” the Ygg asked.

“The elf is mine to sell,” said Lernea with a cold-hearted grin. “Our mutual furry friend over here has a soft spot it seems for the fluffy thing you keep locked up somewhere,” she added, playing her part convincingly.

“The Ygg have no friends. Isn’t that right Enginseer?” said another Ygg and let out a dry cackle.

“It is,” said Tejjwel with a crisp, embittered voice. But his

stare was still hard as stone, set on the Ygg like a hound after its prey.

“What need do we have of this puny elf?” asked the Ygg who hadn’t spoken yet with a measure of impatience.

“That crystal in your possession; it is merely a trinket compared to what it is capable of. This elf is the key. Or so I’m told,” said Lernea and shot a meaningful look at Tej.

“Everything is transpiring according to the Grand Design. Nothing will be allowed to stand in our way.”

“Except this whole damnable thing is missing its primer,” said Tej with a grim face. The Ygg looked at each other momentarily. Lernea held Theo down who looked puzzled, trying to ascertain if he was indeed on sale and for what price.

“To put things in perspective, you have the wrong guy. It’s not the bunny you were really after; it’s this guy.”

“That’s impossible! The thaumaturgic readings on that mammal were off the scale!” blared one of the Ygg. Theo’s eyes darted to and fro the monsters. There was little with which to distinguish them visually.

“That’s great, if you think this hellish apparatus runs purely on thauma.”

“You designed it, Enginseer!”

“I was tricked into designing it and damned be that day!”

“Most of our brethren would frown upon this meeting. But us four have a mind for a good offer, no matter its bearer. Isn’t that so?”

The rest of the Ygg nodded imperceptibly. Except for one.

“There is a human saying that comes to mind,” he said and the tentacles around his maw writhed as if a sudden breeze had touched them.

“Care to enlighten us?” growled Tej. Lernea tried to look the part handling Theo like a slave, but her eyes were already

scanning the horizon for a sign that Winceham had done his part already. She felt like she was coming down with a peculiar nausea.

“Beware of Tej bearing gifts.”

“That’s not how the saying goes.”

“But that is what it means,” he said and another ring platform appeared from below and locked into place behind their own. Two Ygg were standing on it, slightly bigger and uglier in appearance however impossible it seemed. One of them had Winceham tied on a rope; he was completely paralyzed, stiff as a piece of wood. His eyes were stuck wide open in terror.

“Theo, this is going to get really ugly, really soon,” Lernea whispered to Theo, even though in the back of her mind she knew it didn’t matter whether or not they listened to her anymore. She kept her calm and didn’t appear shocked. Not even when the other Ygg dropped the pale, blood-robbed body of Rat at the platform, right behind the Ygg who did not seem to tolerate theatrics for long.

“A doppelganger will take his place. A sense of normalcy about this place will hasten our goals,” said one of the Ygg.

“There’s nothing normal about this place,” said Lernea and let go of Theo who couldn’t help but wriggle his wrists and try to get his blood flowing back.

“So I’m not being sold?”

“That remains to be seen, woodkin,” said one of the Ygg.

“I was talking to my friend,” said Theo and pointed to Lernea. Another one of the Ygg cackled profusely, the same as before.

“Which reminds me,” said the Ygg with a tone of pure malevolence. The Ygg looked at Tej knowingly. Tej looked at Theo and told him with the faint trail of a single tear running

down his furry cheek.

“I’m returning to the light that bears us all, Hanul,” said Tej right before a pulse of white fizzling light tore through his chest, spattering blood and bones in a burst and toppling the giant bear off the platform. Tejewel’s form fell down below, into the whirring machine parts of the huge crystal silently. Reveling in the way his words produced hurt in Theo’s face, one of the Ygg said:

“The larger they are, the easier they fall. Isn’t that another piece of what you call popular wisdom? Such an infantile oxymoron.”

Theo’s face remained still. It looked like he hadn’t really seen what had happened. Lernea had left her bow behind; all that she carried with was her ceremonial dagger. It was a dull little thing, fit for show and tell. But she clenched her teeth and appeared ready to meet whatever fate lay in store. The Ygg approached them like a cat approaches a fanciful toy. Lernea told Theo, in all seriousness:

“I find death at your side suits me well, Hanultheofodor.”

“What did you call me?” he asked flatly, without emotion. He wasn’t looking at her, nor the Ygg. He was still looking at where Tej had been standing moments ago.

“Hanultheofodor. Isn’t that your full name?”

“It’s just a name really,” he said and looked at the Ygg that had come within a single step of him. The Ygg looked back and let an abyssal gleam filter through his eyes; its tentacles writhed expectantly. Abruptly, the writhing stopped. Theo’s eyes were closed, his arms extended. A vein throbbed on his head. He began to tremble. And so did the Ygg; all of them.

Lernea stood motionless. Then she began to shake as well. Theo was floating a few inches above the surface of the platform. His face was drenched in sweat; his dreadlocks

stood up in a bizarre, disconcerting fashion. He looked like a terrible, wrathful figure; not the timid, somewhat kludgy sorcerer other people usually saw.

The Ygg struggled to move, to react; all that remained was a terrible realisation in their eyes. The gems in their foreheads flickered with intensity; slowly their bodies drifted off the platform seemingly of their own accord. But Lernea knew that it was Theo that somehow did all that. She then felt the platform sway and start to gyrate oddly. Another tremor shook the world around her. She heard a terrible raucous of a thunder reverberating from deep below. Winceham, released from the Ygg's embrace fell on the platform's surface hard. It was the third time that day his tenderlies had received unwanted attention from blunt objects.

"This can't be normal," she whispered and was surprised to hear the voice of Theo flood her mind.

"Nothing will ever be again, Lernea," his voice said and the Ygg were flung with blinding speed across the hollowed-out space. It looked as if some being of immense power had pulled a sinister set of strings with all its might. Their bodies had become small affairs on a distant wall, white murky blood smearing it like a blotch of ink on paper, only every colour reversed.

"So that's how it feels," said Theo as he settled himself down, panting not from the exertion, but from a rampaging, burning sensation in his mind; he felt hate for the first time in his life.

"I don't understand what it is that I just saw. But this is not good. At all," said Lernea and wished for a set of wings for the first time in her life instead of her bow.

"It is what is," said Theo brusquely.

"I'm talking about them," she said and pointed at the

hundreds of Ygg pouring out from every recess and crevice around the inner bark. They filled the platform rings and rushed Theo and Lernea. Some were cradling ornate weapons spawned out of nightmares, others simply flew with all their might across the distance, screeching in their nameless voices, a single name:

“Shubb-naur! Shubb-naur!”

The huge crystal formed a crack on its outer layer; the rings had fallen out of sync. Everything appeared to be breaking apart. A terrible grinding noise had risen up from the very depths of the crystal assembly and it wouldn’t die down.

“Theo, I really am honored to die by your side!” she shouted as to be heard. Theo only barely whispered a reply.

“Honor has nothing to do with this. It’s justice.”

“Noone dies!” shouted a voice above the din. Lernea looked behind her and saw Ned sweeping inches above her head only to grab Winceham in his arms a moment or so later. Not too far behind, a comfortable height up, a small, sleek twin-hulled ship floated elegantly amidst the crumbling chaos of the infernal crystal machine. Layers upon layers of crystal began to crack and shatter, giving off blinding amounts of light followed by scalding heat waves at random.

“Throw me a line!” shouted Lernea. Just as she had finished her sentence, she saw a strange-looking thin blunderbuss firing off without ever seeming to be in need of reloading. It cut down the first lines of the Ygg with an outrageous hail of fire. But they would not double back. Even as the world around them became undone, it was as if a higher zeal compelled them to bring ruin to those that dared take the Ygg for fools.

“Hasten thee, sister!” came back a loud answer; it was Parcifal, bending over the ship’s rail and waving as if it wasn’t

clear enough where to look for her.

“Will you drop a line?” shouted back Lernea. Theo looked as if he wasn’t aware of what was actually happening. Then as if he had a sudden moment of enlightenment, he sprang at Lernea without a care, ignoring the bright white shots of deadly light the Ygg were throwing at them. The floating ship wobbled slightly as a series of cannonshot sprayed havoc amongst the ranks of the Ygg. But still, they came.

Theo fell on Lernea and threw her a couple of feet away right when she was just about to catch the line they’d thrown for her. She was about to start shouting obscenities she would have found quite distasteful herself, when a huge piece of rock smashed the ring platform in two, right at the spot where she was standing a moment earlier. Theo held her hand as they both slid off the platform and started falling down into a blazing inferno that seemed to rise with every beating heart.

Ned saw them, as did Parcifal; but they were helpless, frozen in disbelief. Tark shouted by himself, while no-one had asked him:

“We need to fly off now; I can’t risk the ship and the mission any longer!”

Then Bo’s eyes flared up with fire suddenly; the next moment Bo the Bunny leapt off the ship as everything around them began to look like thick grains of sand, sliding away into a sea of fire. The Ygg were lost in vortex of fire and ruin, chanting as they fell into oblivion.

“No!” cried Ned while Parcifal hang by a thread on the ship’s rail. Judith held her back.

“It’s done!” she shouted, while Parcifal couldn’t break free from her grasp. She fell on her knees, and letting go, she began to wail with every drop of her soul.

Tark led the ship on a steep upward course with a speed that no ordinary ship could handle; everyone had to hang onto something. As they shot up and away from the cataclysmic ruin, there was a bright blue flash of light like a broken piece of glass shimmers in the sun. Then every platform, every ring and piece of crystal along with all the Ygg was engulfed in flames. Bursts of lightning flared away and the sound of doom ripped past them like a howling tide. Ned caught a glimpse of that blue flash; all he knew was it looked out of place, even in a mess like that. In his heart, nothing was certain.

Even Tallyflop looked like it was still standing though battered and shaken; all its lights were out and not a merry song could be heard.

Parcifal was sobbing on Judith's shoulder with as much dignity as a princess of Nomos could muster. Judith found the feeling strange; she wanted to comfort Parcifal. She was ashamed to find out she had forgotten how. She simply hugged her and felt the tremors against her chest.

Tark had lit up a pipe, and was sharing it with Winceham who was still in shock, reliving another time entirely.

"I've never felt so much pain in one single day in my life. It's up here, down there; I'm telling you, it's everywhere," Winceham managed to croak dizzily.

"Don't you have the least bit of decency for Parcifal's sake? I don't know you half as good as I'd like you to, Mr. Tark. But not you as well, Wince. Gods below, not you."

"Mr. Larkin, I can't assure you about much of anything that happened, but I can safely assume it's going to be alright," Tark told Ned.

"What makes you say that with that grin on your face?"

"Did you see a bright blue flash down there, when we were outrunning all the shockwaves and debris?"

“I did. What of it?”

“That’s when I got Bo’s message in my mind,” Tark said and smiled thinly.

“Well?”

“I thought it’d be better to pause for dramatic effect. Anyway, she said it worked. I believe she actually shouted it, if that’s at all possible.”

“What did?” asked Ned biting his lip.

“I’m not a mind reader myself, Mr. Larkin. But it’s pretty likely that whatever worked, was in their favor.”

“That was all? *It worked?*” repeated Ned without being able to understand.

“Nah, this bloody pipe isn’t working. Too weak a blend. Where’s my pouch?” said Winceham, shearching the ship’s deck like a drunken, dizzy turtle for a pouch that not long ago had fallen through a bright, blue, blinding flash, and onto a hard, broken shore.

“Judith?” Tark beckoned. Judith nodded and waited knowingly for an order.

“I’ll man the helm for now,” said Tark and took the good ship *Mary Righteous* on a course for the very heart of the Human League.

END OF BOOK II

“There’s a sinister threat lurking in the cosmos. It is dark, sticky as tar and far worse than moldy cheese. It reaches in places you would never believe or feel comfortable with; its livid tendrils are sneakily out to get everything that’s fair and beautiful around us, even unicorns. I must do as my conscience bids me; I must fight to expose their ill-doings and bring them down once and for all. There’s a lot of danger involved which means I’ll probably die or go mad in the process. But I have to do this, for the sake of my children alone. And perhaps all the things I find dear in the world, like Taem berries. And roast veeb. Perhaps, Rovenii mead and Yule beer as well. Just thinking about what is at stake here, makes me ravenous.”

– Athmoor Radaniel, from his personal journal

Lernea felt her face set against something wet and grainy. As if caught in the moment between wakefulness and sleep, her mind felt numb, soft and muddy. A word popped in her head: *Sand*.

Wet sand.

Her face was half-buried in a patch of wet sand. There was a feeling of cold water splashing against her body every now and then. Maybe it was time to go to the latrine, she thought to herself, but she quickly realised it was the feeling of waves embracing her gently.

A beach then, she came to realise and opened her eyes half-expecting everything to be a dream.

There was no silken bedding around her, no morning sun’s glory behind laced curtains; just a misty, fog-laden beach with

low, crumbled rock outcroppings in the hazy distance, which really wasn't much of a distance at all. The sun lay hidden behind a grim overcast sky, dull and undignified. Lazy grey clouds barely seemed to move; a harsh, cold, salty breeze made her face flush.

She saw the white bunny rabbit to her right, the way her head lay; Bo was munching on a small brush of salt-weed when she looked her way as if enabled by some sixth, or perhaps even a seventh sense.

“Good, you’re awake.”

The words rang crystal clear in Lernea’s head; she was instantly confused. It was a woman’s voice, warm and cheerful. Her first thought was she had either bumped her head somewhere along the way or had gone mad. Voices in her head were more than she could cope with - it was indeed the worst time to check her sanity levels.

“It’s alright. It’s me, Bo,” the voice said while Bo munched away, seemingly possessed by a real appetite for destroying salt-weed bushes. Lernea squinted at the bunny with a puzzled, weary look. For all she knew and cared for, a talking bunny made as much sense as a magical, fire-spouting one. What felt weird was that Bo sounded to her like a female. That didn’t register as a life-threatening situation, Lernea knew; she’d just come out of one alive and well. *And quite wet*, she added in her mind as an afterthought. She sighed and suddenly wished for a steamy hot cup of chamoleon: she could almost smell it too.

Lernea raised her head slightly above the wet sand and felt a sudden, awful dizziness. She remembered the drop into that churning nightmarish void fire and the flash; a bright, blinding flash. She remembered Theo falling right behind her, clasping her hand and Bo’s eyes flaring up as as if the small

white bunny was about to explode with a hail of brimstone and fire.

She dug her hands in the sand and propped herself up; her shoulders felt sore. She looked to her left and saw Theo laying there, his back against a patch of damp sand with arms splayed and eyes closed, where the waves would barely lick his body. Her mind flashed with a horrifying thought; she felt her stomach tie itself in a knot. *His hair looks dreadful*, she thought.

“He’s just sleeping. He was actually snoring a little while back,” Bo sent to her.

“You can read minds now as well?” replied Lerneia audibly, with just the right amount of annoyance in her voice.

“No, but it’s not that hard to tell what must’ve crossed your mind,” Bo replied in her thoughts and dug her rabbit body under a rocky ledge where the wind seemed to die down, and sat there snugly. Lerneia replied with an annoyed stare and a scoff.

She drove a hand through her hair reflexively; it was all a ragged mess, pieces of seaweed clinging on like little green, mushy braids. Her leather bodice was soaking wet and her boots made squishy, childish sounds. She felt wet and miserable, her only measure of relief the reassuring weight of her bow still strung against her back.

“Aren’t you cold? At all?” Bo asked her timidly, her little bunny body shivering involuntarily.

“I am the rightful Queen of Nomos, the Kingdom of the North,” Lerneia replied in a stern voice. She felt better just by saying that.

“So, you’re accustomed to this cold, I take it?”

“You know, Theo would need to ask something as obvious as that. Are you two related, by chance?” Lerneia asked as she

took the bow off her back and began to run its curve with a hand.

“Actually, Theo is my brother,” said Bo and in Lernea’s mind, the voice carried an awkward feeling.

Lernea raised an eyebrow and took a long, hard stare at Bo. Then she shook her head and looked at Theo; a silver-haired head with just a touch of blond, the wet, ragged dreadlocks adorning his elven face with all the grace of a mop. She burst out laughing.

“You’re funny! You’re better than Ned!” she said and the bunny replied in her head flatly, “I’m serious.”

Bo’s words nearly made Lernea’s mind feel a bit heavier with all the weight the voice carried suddenly.

Lernea blinked furiously as if something had been caught in her eye. Her face became taut suddenly; she stared back at the sea like a castaway waiting for a ship that’d never sail by.

“Ned. And Parcifal. They’re not here, are they?” she said and walked over to Theo, vague footprints from her boots trailing behind her on the impressionable sand.

“No. Neither is Winceham,” Bo sent. Lernea shot her a frowned look and paused mid-stride. “The weird, short fellow. Don’t you remember?” Bo asked with a hint of worry.

“Halfuin, really. I remember. I’m not really sure what exactly happened, that’s all,” Lernea said and sat down beside Theo, legs crossed. Locks of her hair were glued against her face. She looked to windward, her arms laid back against the sand.

“Do you want the short version, or the long version?” Bo queried in Lernea’s mind.

“I wager we’re not in a hurry. If someone wanted us dead, they’d have done it by now,” she said and shrugged. “Shouldn’t we wake Theo up as well? He might want to hear

all this,” she added as an afterthought. Bo twitched her nose and hopped towards the sea, soaking her bunny feet in some wet, gravelly sand.

“He gets a bit antsy if you wake him up,” she said in Lernea’s mind, cautiously. “He’s kind of groggy and slow-minded for a while afterwards as well,” she added and backed away playfully from a slightly frothing wave. Bo seemed to be having some kind of fun, despite it all.

“For a while? Like what, till the sun sets and the moon rises?” Lernea said with a sneer. Bo turned her bunny head uncannily towards Lernea; her eyes seemed to brighten up, if only just a little - it was a reflex.

“Hey, that’s not nice,” she sent to Lernea’s mind. There was some sadness involved, rather than anger. Lernea looked at Bo for a moment and closed her eyes. Right beside her, Theo could be heard, snoring lightly.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it to sound like that. My apologies,” Lernea said and awkwardly ran a finger in the sand, drawing random curves and shapes. Bo seemed satisfied; the bunny’s eyes lost their glint and she turned to look at the undulating sea once more, her head bobbing slightly as if mesmerized by the waves. “It’s true though, isn’t it?” Lernea said after a while. The bunny looked at her sideways.

“Well, he can be a little daft sometimes. But he did save us,” Bo said and hopped merrily towards Theo and snuggled right beside his head.

“He did? I thought that was your doing,” Lernea replied, genuinely surprised to hear that.

“I tried, but there wasn’t much I could do other than put a shield around us. The wormhole that brought us her in the nick of time, that was Theo, not me,” Bo sent and a little bit of pride had seeped into the thought.

For a while, Lernea stared at Theo as if in shock. The sound of waves dying a few feet away rose easily above the eerie silence. Bo blinked at Lernea without saying a word. Overhead, a sea bird of some kind croaked. It drew Lernea's stare. "I thought he was quite inept at all things magical, especially for a sorcerer" she said.

"Oh, whatever he did, trust me, it wasn't magic," Bo said and wiggled her nose. "Theo is magically inert. Has been ever since I can remember," the bunny said and dug its face in Theo's sand-ridden dreadlocks, before pulling it out again sharply - as if some unruly smell assaulted her nostrils.

"I thought he was a sorcerer," Lernea said. "At least he seemed to perform like one; well, kind of. Sometimes, at any rate," she added with a shrug, sounding clearly confused.

"No, no. I just made it appear so; I'm the sorceress in the family," Bo sent and her bunny eyes flared up with a tinge of red flame that was snuffed out the next instant, just to illustrate her point.

"Just for appearance's sake?" Lernea asked. Bo leapt above Theo's slowly rising and falling chest and perched herself on top of a mass of rocks. She stood straight up and looked around, surveying the misty landscape.

"The woodkin that raised us knew. I have a soft spot for Theo, what can I say? I thought it was a prudent thing to do. Magical bunnies aren't a dime a dozen - if word got out..." Bo let the words echo faintly in Lernea's mind. She gave Bo a weird, squinting look; it was her calculating, thinking look.

"You're both in hiding, aren't you?"

"That's right. Have been for years," Bo sent with a feeling of relief.

"From who? Why?" Lernea said and put her bow down on the sand.

“I have no idea. I only have the words of my father, ringing in my head,” Bo sent to Lernea and paused, sniffing the air. “Hide. That’s all I can remember.”

“I think I can relate to that,” Lernea said with a shallow voice. Her face became taut, remembering how she and Parcial were cast out, humiliated, to be excised from living memory, from history even. As if they never had existed. She bit her lip and her mind turned to the quandary at hand.

“Then how did he manage to pull off whatever it was he did that saved us?” Lernea asked and nodded at Theo’s snoring form, looking baffled.

“The wormhole? I haven’t got the slightest idea,” Bo sent to Lernea’s mind and uncannily shook her head slowly like a human would. “Same goes about the place we’ve ended up at,” she added, her nose twitching faintly.

“It could’ve been worse,” Lernea said and stood up. A cold breeze snapped against her hard, lean face. She felt invigorated.

“We could have been charred to the bone or flash-steamed into space, that’s true,” Bo sent and began scouring the sand and rocks for signs of moss or something generally green and preferably edible. She sniffed profusely, like only some kind of herbivorous hound would.

“I mean, this place could have been worse. Far worse. It however kind of feels... Homely,” she said after pausing for a moment, searching for the right word. She cleaned a bit of the sand off her pants, but the majority of the grains mostly clung on heedless. Bo’s eyes widened and she turned her bunny head around at an impossible angle; anyone passing by would have been horrified by the unnatural movement.

“What’s homely about this cold, wet place? I can barely see what’s out there. And as far as I can tell, there’s nothing

but rocks not even a tint of moss. The sun is hidden there is no way to tell the time. It's moody and grey, suggestive of a rainy afternoon without the rain. It's "

"Kind of like home, indeed," Lernea said and nodded.

"This place reminds you of home?" Bo asked Lernea, the thought echoing with a positively glum quality.

"Reminds me of Thraka; the northwestern reaches. My sister and I spent a whole summer there when we were kids."

"Must've been a lovely summer," Bo sent, the sarcasm lost to Lernea. She dug instinctively in a shadowy cleft where lo and behold a cluster of mushrooms lay. She began nibbling at them after barely affording them a peremptory look. They didn't seem poisonous, and anyone hungry enough would have arrived at the same conclusion.

"It was; we went whale fishing," Lernea replied with a thin smile. Bo was focused on the mushrooms, making sure to eat just the caps; she never did like the stems.

"I was being sarcastic, but never mind. Whale fishing, you say? Just how old were you?"

"Twelve," Lernea said, nodding slightly to herself.

"What kind of kids go whale hunting?"

"We were rarely, if ever, normal kids, even by Nomos standards. We were born to become queens, mind you," Lernea said, looked at the bunny and sighed.

"I was under the vague impression that queens are all about croquet and tea parties," Bo sent and somehow her thoughts conveyed a sense of insatiable hunger, even while the mushrooms were being depleted rapidly. Lernea spent a few moments staring at Theo's rising and falling chest, hypnotized by the waves of the sea chiming in on tune. She was frowning once more, her mind seeking refuge in sweet memories past.

“We’ve met danger together. Narrowly escaped death. I thought you’d think better of me by now,” Lernea said in earnest. She smiled playfully.

“True enough,” said Bo and let out a tiny, nearly insignificant bunny burp that mostly sounded like someone sneezing.

“Bless you,” Lernea said and Bo looked at her sideways, as if she had just said something dangerously provocative.

“What for?” Bo sent and her nose twitched.

“I thought you sneezed.”

“No, I didn’t,” Bo insisted and wagged her tail.

“Well, it sounded like a sneeze,” Lernea said by way of an apology.

“No, I felt full, that’s all.”

Lernea nodded and then frowned scornfully. A lady, even in the guise of an animal, that admitted to making vulgar sounds was a deplorable thing. She was about to begin lecturing Bo when a noise was heard, very much like someone sneezing at a quarter of the speed but ten times as loud.

“Was that you again?”

“I told you, it wasn’t a sneeze. I burped, only ever so slightly. Now this sound.. This is neither a sneeze or a burp,” Bo sent.

The odd sneezing sound grew louder and louder, until it could be heard for what it was: the sound of creaking wood.

“That’s odd. Sounds familiar,” said Lernea and looked around her trying to peer through the ubiquitous, impenetrable mist, to no avail. “It has this wooden quality. Something to do with wood, in any case,” she said and strained herself to hear closely for the source.

“I think it’s coming from the sea,” Bo sent, her tiny upper body turned around, scanning the sea nervously, her ears

jolted rigidly upright like impossibly small, furry, full-blown sails.

“Wood creaking in the sea. That’s bound to be a ship, then,” Lernea said and grinned.

“A ship?” Bo sent, not feeling entirely sure. “A ship,” Lernea replied and put a hand above her eyes, searching for a sail, a mast, a bow, or the smell of cider and mead. The creaking grew louder; it was as if the ship was riding past them. Theo’s light snoring could not have hoped to match it.

“Ahoy! Over here!” Lernea shouted into the mist. No echo was returned, her voice soaked up by the fog.

“What are you doing? You’re exposing our position!” Bo sent, and hopped nervously around Lernea’s feet, looking at her like a lost, desperate puppy.

“To whom? We need to find out where we are, one way or another. What if there won’t be another ship passing our way for years?” she replied in a hushed voice. The creaking sound became clear as day; the waves rising up the beach became jarred, irregular.

“What if they’re bloodthirsty cutthroats like Culliper? What if it is Culliper?” Bo sent in an anguished thought.

“Ned sold him as a slave, remember?” Lernea said flatly.

“You’re being naive! Do you really think someone wouldn’t recognize him? Strike up a deal to use his talents?” Bo sent, angst-ridden and jumpy.

“Who would strike up a deal with a slave? That’s preposterous!”

“Why are you, my dear lady Teletha, screaming to no-one in particular?”, Theo offered drowsily.

“I’m having an argument with your sister!” Lernea retorted, sounding riled up.

“My sister?” Theo asked looking light-headed as ever.

“Bo? The bunny?” Lernea said and stuck out both of her arms in frustration, wild-eyed and nodding intensely.

Then a giant shadow carved itself through the mist with alarming speed. A dark wooden bulk in the shape of a ship’s prow appeared, accompanied by a creaking noise and the sound of foaming, rustling water.

“Move!” Bo managed to sent with a gasping thought to Lernea and Theo both, while the ship ran aground heedlessly, kicking up wet sand violently all around its prow. No-one had time to move, but nevertheless the ship came to a jarring, abrupt halt with a grinding noise reminiscent of millstones and sliding tomb doors. Nobody was hurt, but they nonetheless couldn’t pry their eyes off the ship’s prow; there was a bronze-and-marble statuette of a luscious half-gorgon, half-mermaid decorating it. It was voluptuously sculpted, sexually suggestive and quite terrible to behold.

“Who goes there?” came the grumbling shout of a man. Lernea cleared her throat and assumed a slightly regal pose, the seaweed still cluttering some of her hair.

“My name is Lernea Te-” Lernea uttered before abruptly pausing mid-sentence. A weird pain rose from her feet; her gaze wandered downwards, where Bo was trying to bite her toenail through at least three layers of thick boot leather and skin.

“Don’t tell him your real name! Make something up! Make something up!” she voiced frantically in Lernea’s mind.

“Why, I can’t seem to shake off this terrible dream,” Theo said mostly to himself, looking rather worn. His voice had a touch of befuddled rasping quality about it.

“My name is Lernea Testarossa.. Of the Testarossa family,” Lernea said with a hesitant frown, staring at Bo who in

turn stared at the ship as if it were one giant carrot.

“You’re not a mermaid, are ye?” said a scruffy-looking old man that suddenly appeared at the ship’s railing. He was wearing what appeared to be more than a slightly used horned metal cap on his head and a tattered old shirt with matching pants of an indiscriminate nature and original color. A rather musky old beard hung from his face down to his waist; what looked like tiny barnacles clung on strands of it, as if their life depended on it, which was probably true. There was a wooden parrot that appeared to be physically and permanently attached to his shoulder. It was also quite emphatically dead, judging as it didn’t breathe nor move on its own.

“No good sir, I assure you. I’m not a mermaid,” Lernea replied after clearing her throat.

“What’s he then? Could it be, he be a merman?” the old man said with evident worry in his voice, pointing at Theo with a bony finger.

“No sir. He’s a woodkin elf, a friend. We’re stranded here.”

“Where might ‘here’ be then?” the man asked, twiddling his thumbs.

“I was hoping a gentleman of your caliber and seamanship would be much more knowledgeable in these maritime affairs of navigation and mapping,” Lernea replied, to which the man strained his neck like a turtle and offered with a bland, vacant expression: “Wot?”

Lernea sighed and let her shoulders sag. “I thought you’d know,” she said and waved a hand at the ship at large. The old man who quite closely resembled a rather out-of-luck, struggling old-timer pirate picked at his nose and flicked its output with a bony finger.

“Lady, I’ve been wandering around these parts for eigh-

teen years. I'm still, I'll have to admit, bloody hopelessly lost. I'm Cap'n Van der Breckenrod. Perhaps, if it's worthwhile, at your disposal," he said and smiled showing an array of teeth in all their possible states of decay.

Lernea felt let down. She was hoping there'd be a silver lining in all that mess of a situation. Bo whispered in her mind, even if there was no real need to do so: "Don't tell him anything. Ask him everything."

There was a slight hint of paranoia right there; if the Ygg had reached out wherever this place was, Lernea thought to herself, their agents would've realised who they were talking to by now. More to the point, she reasoned, if that old geezer was working for the Ygg, they were indeed a sad, hopeless, desperate lot.

"Mr. Gunnadeer, you've run us aground. Again," the old pirate turned around and said to someone either invisible, or non-existent. It was quite possible that he was simply driveling, yet Bo was instantly wary. "Where are the others? Why don't they show themselves?" she sent to Lernea, in what resembled a hiss. She was trying to gnaw at her paws, but bunny physiology sadly made that impossible. Theo was still trying to get some sort of bearing with reality at large, sand running through his palms.

"Is this really not a dream?" he asked, with a voice just like one would expect in a dream.

"It's not a dream, Theo," Lernea replied sternly. Theo blinked still trying to understand and got up, whole clumps of wet sand weighing down his dreadlocks.

"We wish to parley," Lernea said aloud to make sure the old pirate would hear her. He looked behind him for a moment, as if someone had tapped him on his shoulder, but there seemed to be no-one there. He nodded to himself, shrugged

and said to no-one in particular:

“Mr. Munsheen, lower the boat. Prepare a landing party. I’m going ashore,” the old man said and coughed profusely, before spitting a globule with a decidedly abnormal mass, the color of emerald sludge. It splashed into the sea audibly with a plop, and lingered for a moment before sinking.

“Let me do the talking. There’s no real danger; he’s old and probably senile. After all, can’t you see his alone?” Lerneia whispered.

“What about the ghosts in that boat then?” Theo said and Lerneia looked at him with a frown that nearly brought her eyebrows in contact, while Bo’s eyes flared up with a spark of orange light.

Parcifal's stare had the quality of solid ice; it was cold and opaque. She stood on the deck like a statue would, Encelados firmly clasped in her hands, the blade's tip resting on the ship's deck. Tark was standing nearby, his back on the ship's railing. He cleared his throat and pointed at the blade.

"Would you mind, not really doing that?"

"Doing what, exactly?" Parcifal replied icily. She was staring vacantly at the rosy-red sky. Thick, puffy clouds passed them by, while below them a green tapestry inched by. There were tiles of brown and gold in there too; farms and villages, the unmistakable signs of civilization. Roads and bridges, the roofs of houses, small and big. Big piles of manure and freshly grazed hillsides.

"I'd prefer it if you'd be so kind not to etch, notch, graze or otherwise damage this ship's deck with that wonderful blade of yours," Tark said trying to smile thinly, his words carefully selected and his voice pitched so as to get the message through in a nice yet slightly irritating manner. Parcifal did not bat an eyelid nor did she budge even by an inch. She simply spared Tark a fleeting glance, to serve as a warning.

"She's moody. You'll be properly compensated for any damages," Ned interjected, seeing the first signs of a discussion evolving into a fight. And Ned knew there had been more than one on their way to Pi Gamma Mu, from what they could gather, a reasonably peaceful planet of the Human League. The fights usually involved Parcifal and Tark, and they were mostly resolved before anyone got physically hurt by either Ned or Judith acting as peacemakers. Winceham was either sleeping, having a smoke, or not having a bath most of the time. His decidedly neutral disposition had earned him a sort of invisible attribute to the rest, slightly ineffectual when the air shifted the wrong way.

“Money is not the issue,” Tark said to Ned with a sigh. “It is a matter of principle, Mr. Larkin,” he added and turned his back on everyone without another word. Parcifal remained silent, unperturbed. Her mind was fixated on what really mattered; the whereabouts and fate of her sister. She knew Lernea was alive, that much she felt as well. But where, and for how long, she couldn’t answer. Those uncertainties gnawed at her soul; it do any good for her manners either. She was in a state of constant ire, angry at everything and everyone. What she wouldn’t freely admit but knew it in her heart, was that she blamed herself, more than anything. After all, she was still a princess of Nomos, the Captain of the Guard. She had failed her queen, putting her in harm’s way, failing to protect her.

Absorbed in thought, it took her a while to realise Judith was watching her intently. Parcifal offered her a grumpy stare and a few words:

“What is it that you require of me?”

“It doesn’t do you any good, you know. I know that stare. I’ve learned to turn that feeling into something useful,” Judith said as she looked Parcifal straight into her eyes.

“What you know, is your own business. I suggest you mind to that,” Parcifal said in a flat voice. Judith stared at her for another moment before she obliged her wishes and walked away in silence. Parcifal’s gaze did not follow her.

Ned was conversing with Tark in a low voice; Winceham was sitting comfortably at a swiveling, puffy chair, his feet resting at the helm proper. The helm moved and rocked as Winceham shuffled his legs, but the ship oddly, stayed on course.

That was because the helm, though operational, didn’t really do much of the handling. The ship was an advanced design; among the many utilities and assorted paraphernalia,

the mysterious thingamajigs and spurious artifacts it carried, it was equipped with an autothaumagator, a device that supposedly served many purposes, but whose primary function was to navigate the ship safely and without any crew assistance whatsoever. The ship, the *Mary Righteous*, basically flew itself. As an added bonus, it could also talk, albeit rather lamely.

“What’s... Five times thirty five?” Winceham said and a puff of smoke left his nostrils. A sweet, lilting female voice answered with sensuous overtones.

“One-hundred and seventy five, Boss.”

“Tip-top. We could do business together, you know; I could use someone who can count and has no pockets,” Winceham said nodding in earnest.

“Inference broken. Stimulate,” the voice retorted with a querying tone.

“I wish I could, but you’re not really my type. Besides, I wouldn’t know where to begin the stimulating,” Winceham said, grinning.

“I am a type-III autothaumagator. User Boss is a user type, provisional. Conflicting types.”

“Yeah, I know. It was never meant to be, but still that voice of yours...” Winceham said, his voice lingering. “It’s like a honey trap,” he added, hands behind his head.

“And you’re the proverbial fly in the ointment, Mr. Higgsbottom,” Tark said with a good measure of disdain.

“No need for name-calling, Mr. Tark. If that’s really your name,” Winceham retorted, grinning like a fool.

“We’re not having that discussion. Stop harassing the ship’s autothaumagator,” Tark said and lowered Winceham’s feet from the helm forcibly.

“It’s not harassment. We’re just talking. Isn’t that true, Mary?”

“Assertion ‘talking’ is true,” the ship said as if it were about to have a chocolate cake all to its own.

“What she said,” Winceham told Tark with a smirk and left the chair in search of friendlier company, which was to say, he headed below for some more sleep.

“Your associates are beginning to get on my nerves,” Tark complained, looking slightly annoyed.

“I’ve realised that. We’ll be on our way just as soon as we land,” Ned said and nodded.

“That won’t work either,” Tark replied and shook his head.

“How do you mean?” Theo asked, frowning.

“Though I am sympathetic to your cause, at least in principle, there are certain technicalities that must be observed.”

“Such as?”

“A debriefing is in order,” Tark said, exhaling, as if he had been keeping that a secret for too long.

“You mean questioning,” Theo sought to correct him.

“It might look like that, depending on who will do the debriefing.”

“Are we prisoners?” Theo asked conversationally.

“Not exactly,” Tark quipped.

“Are we guests then?” Theo said sounding a bit hopeful.

“Not quite, no,” Tark said, squinting.

“What are we then to the Human League?” Theo asked, folding his arms.

“Information assets. For now,” Tark said and shrugged.

“That doesn’t sound very welcoming.”

“It’s not. But it’s not like you’ll be treated like Expendable Information Assets,” Tark said, smiled and nodded meaningfully.

“I see. This Human League of yours, it doesn’t sound like a particularly inviting place. If it wasn’t for the predicament we’ve found ourselves in...” Theo said and let his voice trail conspiratorially.

“The Tallyflop Incident,” Tark added, sounding drawn in to some other kind of conversation.

“Whatever you wish to call it, it was more than just an incident. The whole place nearly got consumed by that, what was it again?”

“A Thaumaturgic Event Displacement. A TED, we call it,” Tark said just to get the technicalities out of the way.

“Do you have a name for everything?” Theo wondered frankly.

“Not for everything. But for everything that matters. That thing mattered a lot. It still does,” Tark reassured him.

“I have a feeling it really only matters to you.”

“The Ygg are growing stronger by the minute. They’re a destabilizing force that needs to be dealt with,” Tark said with a suddenly steely gaze.

“I’ve seen the truth of that. But what is it to you?” Theo asked, his voice needlessly harsh.

“The Human League has a vested interest in a number of worlds. It’d be foolish to have to deal with this later, while we can deal with this now,” Tark said, his face austere.

“I meant, what is it to you personally?” Theo insisted.

“It’s my job, that’s what it is,” Tark replied with a deep-set frown.

“Just a job? Going through all this, just to do your job?” Theo said smiling, and shook his head in disbelief.

“It’s called professionalism. I wouldn’t expect you to understand,” Tark replied and looked away, a show of rejection.

“Why is that?”

“Because you’re amateurs,” Tark replied scornfully.

“You haven’t seen me perform then,” Theo said with some pride in his voice.

“Perform what, exactly?” Tark inquired, sounding confused.

“I do stand-up comedy and play the drums. I know it’s an unusual mix for a bard, but I think it can have its own appeal. You know?” Theo said casually.

“Maybe you really are good at that,” Tark said and perhaps for the first time ever genuinely smiled.

“How can you tell?”

“Wasn’t that a joke? About the drums and all?” Tark asked in all seriousness.

“No, not really,” Theo replied counfounded.

“Well, I wouldn’t really know. I work for Naval Intelligence, after all,” Tark said and shrugged.

“How are the two connected?”

“It’s an utterly drab, humorless job,” Tark replied and nodded to himself.

“Another reason I can’t understand why you’re doing it,” Theo said and shook his head.

“Because someone has to do it,” Tark said and sounded like he genuinely believed that.

“But why does it have to be you?” Theo asked and pointed a stabbing finger to Tark’s chest.

“Why not me?” Tark asked garrulously and let the words sink in.

“That really doesn’t make any sense,” Theo said and threw his hands in the air.

“There’s no sense in intelligence. Just gents,” Tark said and looked thoughtful.

“Was that supposed to be a witty play on words?” Ned asked.

“No,” Tark replied after thinking about it for a while.

“I thought it was funny, anyway.”

“As far as I know, that’s highly unlikely,” Tark said without the least bit of humor.

Judith approached them and nodded to Ned with a slight smile.

“Sir, we’re approaching Rampatur,” she said and stood there, apparently waiting for instructions. Tark nodded and his eyes scanned the horizon momentarily, before his eyes met the city.

Indeed, the white towers and glistening prisms that made up the core of Rampatur City were growing closer. Like a miniature set built with extreme detail in mind, Rampatur City looked nearly perfect and almost fake. Yet it was real enough: stretching across both sides of pristine river, it was a sprawling metropolis graced with a distinctive meld of architecture from many different schools, representing nearly every world of the Human League. A large, tall pyramid-like structure dominated the center of the city, its marble-white and steel-grey impeccable surface glistening softly.

Ned sat there wide-eyed, wonderfully fascinated at the rich white, grey and golden hues reflecting the mellow green and brown countryside surrounding the city. He was transfixed; he couldn’t stop staring, his lips curled in a grin. The sight of the approaching city even managed to attract Parcifal’s parsimonious stare, but she didn’t break her silence. She simply stood there, unable to contain the fact that her interest was indeed piqued. Ned, on the other hand sounded openly

ecstatic: “What a sight! It’s so grandiose. So majestic!”

Tark sighed. “It’s just a backwater planet’s capital. It’s quite rustic, really,” he said, scoffing. He then turned and faced the helm abruptly.

“Ship, send a hail message to the Directorate Office. Be sure to include the word ‘pumpkin’, capitalized. Negotiate a mooring with Rampatur Aerial and bring us in for landing. What was that nice place on Rampatur Central?” he asked.

“An index of three hundred and nineteen topographical entities in the vicinity of the Rampatur District labeled as ‘nice’ exists. Stimulate,” the female voice demanded softly; the words carried a hypnotizing feel.

“The one where they put olives in that drink,” Tark said with some mild annoyance. “Stimulate,” the ship repeated.

“Never mind. Find an exorbitantly-priced restaurant. Book a table for five. Make sure to ask for privacy. And put it on the expenses list,” Tark said raising a finger.

“Thaumaturgizing your request,” voiced the ship in mellifluous tones. Tark turned to face Ned once more.

“Excellent. We’ll be landing shortly, Mr. Larkin.”

“You made dinner reservations?” Ned asked him. Tark stared at him for a moment before ceding an answer with a slightly confused look.

“Yes?” said Tark, his answer sounding a lot like a puzzling question.

“Well, you reserved a table for five. Does that mean you’re offering us a night out? Like a welcoming gift?” Ned said smiling a bit awkwardly, always wearing a polite smile on his lips. He could see Parcifal fidgeting uncomfortably near the ship’s prow, as if itching to get off the *Mary Righteous* and hack something to bits.

“Good gracious, no!” Tark exclaimed with a polite lit-

tle laugh. "That would've been impertinent to say the least. Quite frankly, whatever gave you that idea?" Tark was looking at Ned from head to toe; what Ned implied sounded almost absurd to Tark. "I've been in the field for months. I'm having a blast tonight. All sorts of debauchery in mind, if you must know," Tark said and made eyes at Ned.

"I wasn't asking for details, but what about us?" Ned demanded with a sharp frown.

"Judith will handle your lot."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you need to co-operate and everything will be fine," Tark said and squinted as he gazed towards the city, a hand over his eyes. From the right point of view, the setting sun wasn't blinding but rather painted the round-topped towers with a rosy, pinkish sheen. Ned's answer came with a heavy, slow nod of his head.

"I'll co-operate alright. Just as long as we're treated fair and proper," he said and made sure to stress the last word.

"What about her?" Tark said and pointed at Parcifal, looking at her sideways.

"Parcifal is strong-willed and proud. She's like a hurt, caged animal right now. You never know when she might lash out," Ned said and shrugged. Tark took him by one shoulder and nearly whispered in his ear: "As a word of advice, don't act the fool with Intelligence. You're not Human League citizens; you'll only be granted a provisional status upon landing. And that halfuin friend of yours, he'll be in trouble."

"How do you mean? What kind of trouble?" Ned said, sounding alarmed.

"You see he's humanoid, not human standard. He will be considered an illegal alien," Tark said and raised an eyebrow.

“Winceham? He might be old and smell bad because he never takes a bath, but he’s not an alien!”

“That’s not the official take on the matter,” Tark said and turned slightly around to check on Parcifal. He noticed Judith was busy making last minute checks to her inventory, all neatly stacked and tied down to the deck. Ned’s voice was filled with sudden angst: “Why didn’t you say so before?”

“It would have been pointless, really. There was no place to drop him off,” Tark replied with a smug little grin.

“And now there is? Treating halfuins like aliens. Aren’t there any short people in the Human League?”

“That’s an entirely different subject. I don’t make policy,” Tark said and squatted, reaching for a metal box near the helm. “We’re on the clock. I’m doing you a great favor just by letting you know. This could get me into a lot of trouble. Lose my job, get shot. I’m talking that kind of trouble,” he said and sounded positively serious even though the grin would not disappear from his face.

“You won’t buy us dinner, but you’re willing to risk getting shot?”

“Let’s not get all chummy all of a sudden,” Tark said and raised one finger with one hand while he rummaged inside the metal box with the other. “Dinner is one thing; getting shot is a professional perk anyway. I like to think of this warning as extending a little bit of professional courtesy,” he said, looking up to Ned with a smile. In his hands he held what looked like a small backpack or rather a large bag, riddled with straps and whatnot.

“But I’m a performer. You’re a... Spy, right?” Ned asked, a good measure of uncertainty lingering in his voice. To his knowledge, spies were vermin-like people, all cloak and dagger that you’d never guess in a million years what they did

for a living. In this case, Tark was practically shouting out the fact from the tree tops.

“Things seldom are the way they appear to,” Tark said and perfunctorily gave the bag a look all around.

“You’re not a spy?” Theo asked with disbelief.

“Are you seriously expecting me to answer that?” Tark said while wearing the bag on his back. It was black and somewhat rotund. A pair of red lines made of stitches ran its length; they were made in the shape of a lightning symbol.

“What is this stuff you’re putting on?”

“It’s a F.U.L.L. Retar.D., mark two,” Tark said grinning.

“It doesn’t look tailor-made,” Ned said and made a sour face. Tark replied without hinting at any sort of annoyance.

“It stands for Flight Updraft Linear Linen Retardation Device.”

“Why does everything have to have a stupid name?”

Tark paused for a moment and gave the question some thought.

“I wouldn’t know about that. I’m not the one making up the names.”

“Well, what does it do?” Ned asked, voicing some genuine interest in what appeared to be little more than a bag with a strange colour scheme.

“Keeps you from hitting the ground when falling out of the sky.”

“Nifty. What if the magic fails?” Ned asked conversationally, and vaguely shrugged with a pondering finger resting on his chin.

“Oh, there’s no magic involved. It’s a simple aetheric device.”

“You mean like, involving aether science?”

“That’s what the big-heads in VV-section told me, yes,” Tark replied, fastening a pair of straps around his waist. Ned’s gaze seemed drawn to the retardation device. After a couple of moments of scrutiny, Ned asked poignantly, one hand resting under his chin in a knuckle:

“What if that fails?”

Tark blinked thoughtfully in silence before staring at Ned with a very particular, unsettling stare.

“There’s always religion, I’m told,” Tark said and walked past Ned.

“Where are you going?” Ned asked him with a tint of curiosity.

“I need to jump,” Tark said and made a jumping gesture with both hands.

“I thought you were coming along,” Ned said and took a few steps closer to Tark, hands crossed over his chest. He was pouting slightly.

“Oh, no. I’m not even supposed to be on this ship,” Tark said, grinning profusely.

“So, you’re hiding as well?”

“Hiding is a harsh term. Obfuscating one’s whereabouts is much more preferable a phrase,” Tark said smiling.

“It still means you’re hiding. Wincham will be forced to go into hiding as well,” Ned commented.

“Look, I really need to jump. I’d hate to get skewered on a one of those towers if the wind changes all of a sudden,” Tark said nodding down below.

“I need you to do me a favor,” Ned said and touched Tark on the shoulder gently, smiling lightly. Tark noticed the gesture and sighed.

“This is strictly business. Nothing personal to all of this, do you understand?” Tark said and turned his back on Ned.

He grasped the railing and was preparing to actually jump overboard.

“I wouldn’t jump just yet if I were you,” Ned said, tapping Tark’s shoulder profusely.

“Sweetness of a maiden’s tit! What is it now?” Tark yelled with indignation.

“Winceham jumped in that glorified parachute of yours a little while ago.”

“He did? Then what is it that am I wearing exactly?” Tark asked in cautious disbelief.

“His backpack,” Ned said with a beaming smile.

“Why didn’t I notice?” Tark asked, looking at the backpack’s straps mundanely.

“Misdirection, mostly,” Ned said as if it should have been obvious. Tark stepped away from the railing and took off the backpack. He opened it hastily and found nothing but a half-eaten mushroom-salad sandwich along with a note that read: *Couldn’t resist meself - Wince.*

“Well played,” Tark said looking at Ned with a surprisingly sharp, gleaming eye. “Did you know about this?” Tark said and his stare turned sour when he pointed a finger at Judith who was about to try and say something, when Ned interjected:

“It’s not her fault, Tark.”

“I know, I know. It’s my lack of oversight. Now I’ll have to find a good deal of excuses. A damn good deal,” Tark said and sighed. “There’s the debriefing. I dread debriefings. They bore me to death,” he said looking suddenly morose.

“You could hurry things up, couldn’t you?” Ned said and ran his tongue across his lips.

“I might be able to,” Tark admitted, raising an eyebrow.

“As an added incentive, Winceham’s got your money pouch,” Ned added, grinning.

“I see,” Tark said and his lip stiffened.

“No need to worry; he has enough sense to leave some of that money for dinner.”

“I wildly misjudged you Ned. You can be quite resourceful,” Tark said looking up to Ned, seeing him under a new light.

“Beats being remorseful!” chimed Ned with a smile.

“Was that... Was that meant to be witty?” Tark asked Ned with some hesitation.

“Yes, it was. Wasn’t it?” Ned asked him with a worrisome voice.

“I’m not sure if you’re in the right line of business,” Tark said and sighed, steadying himself as the ship tilted itself gracefully and began a slightly curved descend to Rampatur Central.

And all this time, Parcifal was still staring at the sun, wholly uninterested in Ned’s little plot. All she hoped for was to see a glimpse of her sister, if only with her mind’s eye.

The ship was the *Mary Drunkard*; a twelve-gun fast runner, light and deadly as a hawk when it was first put to sea. Three hundred and twenty three years later though, it was a small miracle or perhaps even a feat of magic that vessel still remained afloat. Anyone who could afford a bit of common sense would have bet an arm and a leg that a ship filled with gaping holes and made out of maggot-infested, rotten wood would happily sink to the bottom like a shapely rock. The few unlucky souls who made those kinds of bets gave a small bump in the always-in-demand, but never-really-breaking-it-big, prosthetics industry.

The original owner, a rich eccentric drunkard that liked to spend his vast wealth in pointless exotic travels and self-inflicted adventures, had indeed named the ship in one of his drunken binges. If one were to judge by the way it teeter-tottered ungainly as it tried to navigate the unbudging fog, it was a very fitting name indeed.

Lerneia looked skeptical, while Theo sported a withdrawn expression, thoughtful to the point of weariness. It had everything to do with the game-board he was glued to, its multi-colored tiles and numerous pieces too much for the untrained eye to handle.

“What if...” Lerneia suggested at one point and inched a finger closer to one of the pieces. Theo stopped her in her tracks with a single, wild-eyed glance. She drew her hand back onto her lap where Bo sat, her bunny eyes going back and forth between Theo and the captain, as if a tiny spark was all that was needed to ignite a deadly silence into a veritable mayhem, even though all they were doing was sitting comfortably around a table, sipping some tea and playing Po.

“No. If he moves his Guardian onto an Assailant’s tile then all the outbound Runners will be cut to pieces. I’ll never

be able to summon another Army like that. And it looks like this will be one of *those* games,” Theo said nibbling at one of his fingernails.

“What kind of game would that be, lad?” Captain Van der Breckenrod asked with an abruptly aroused suspicion, holding his chin up; the pipe in his mouth followed suit and remained stuck upwards as it glowed, ember-red after he drew heavily on it.

“Po,” replied Theo without skipping a beat or breaking his concentration. The Captain looked around him for a moment, then looked at the table and let the smoke out of his nostrils. A small cloud hovered between him and Theo before he finally rolled his eyes and as if waking from a dream, fluttered his eyelids and said, “Of course, Po!”.

Bo fidgeted in Lernea’s lap; she couldn’t sit still. She had been growing more and more nervous by the minute. She voiced to Lernea and Theo, for their minds alone to hear: “He suspects something. He knows. He’s hatching a plan, we’re in grave danger!”

Lernea tried to control her breathing; her face jerked slightly, involuntarily, as if something had bitten her. She picked up Bo and looked her in the eyes, those wonderful red-hued bunny eyes with the propensity to spout fiery wrath when provoked. Bo looked rather adorable in her fluffy white bunny form, and Lernea was a young woman of noble heart, scion to a kingdom and very lady-like, good and proper in her manners, just and swift with her bow. But she was an inch away from actually breaking the bunny’s neck, and Bo could feel she was at the edge of a chasm.

“Let’s just say, for the sake of argument, you were afraid, for some reason well-founded or not that a particular set of events might occur in the future. Like taking an arrow to your

knee that would prevent you from living the life of an adventurer. Or some stranger you just met was awfully weird and had really bad bladder control on top of a drinking problem that made you suspicious of him. That man would not constitute a let's say, clear and present danger against your person, without showing overt aggressiveness in the form of killing you outright, in your sleep, or at least trying to throw you overboard to the killer whales, now. In which case I would be more than happy to do something about it to the best of my ability. Seeing though, as there isn't any evidence to support such a claim, I would be remiss to not point out that going on and on about a hypothetical situation without any basis on reality bent as it may be under certain circumstances can drive a person mad. It would thus be, by any account, not unlikely for a person under duress to be driven into acts of temporary insanity as can be proven under law, to which extent said person might not be held liable for his actions and be set free, even after killing said person with the imaginary fears. Wouldn't you agree, overall, gentlemen?" Lernea said without tearing her eyes away from Bo who remained perfectly still, soaking in what was mostly intended for her ears.

Captain Van der Breckenrod looked at Lernea sideways for a moment and then looked at the glass in his hand. There was a little tiny piece of handicraft floating in it, an umbrella or some would argue, a parasol and it was slowly sinking in the dark, cherry red mixture of unidentifiable alcohol and rum. He downed the glass in one go, frowned heavily for a while, checked the bottom of the glass for signs of more liquor and then looked at her and told Lernea, the tiny umbrella still stuck on his beard:

"I, for one, Miss Testarossa, am agreed. I am quite agreeable a person, after all," he said and threw away the tiny um-

rella with the intention of sending it overboard. Instead, it somehow stopped in the air and flew around in circles and settled on Theo's hair, who was too preoccupied with planning his next move to afford the most perfunctory of looks. He did nod though, but only to himself in relation to a possible move he was contemplating.

"That's quite alright, Mr. Van der Breckenrod. Silence is after all, a common indicator of approval. Isn't it?" Lerne said and Bo seemed to nod imperceptibly. She remained silent indeed, and almost managed to look prudish somehow.

"Well, if my crew is any indication, you are spot on," the old pirate said and raised his glass. It was pretty soon floating mid-air in the direction of the ramshackle captain's cabin. Lerne had noticed a lot of that was going on around the ship; sails hoisting themselves, ropes being tied up as if by way of magic, giant waterproof holes in the hull. Yet it had nothing to do with magic, or else Bo would have at least found a real possible threat to take into account. It had something to do with ghosts and Theo was the only one who could see them, but talk to them as well. It was all about Rho, the ever-present life force of sorts that exists in everything living, according to what Theo had been taught. Somehow, that even involved the undead.

"Still, a skeleton crew; no pun intended. How do you manage?" Lerne asked and put Bo down on the deck. Her voice was weary, but noticeably calm.

"How do you mean?" the captain said while scanning the board of Po with a squinted gaze.

"I mean, it's just you and what was it, three ghosts?" she said and Theo nodded reassuringly to her. He had made his move and thus was now aware of what it was that Lerne was talking about. "You've been lost at sea for fifteen years. Don't

you find it, taxing? I mean, isn't there a home you'd like to get back to? At some point?"

"Ah. I've turned the sea into my wife and mistress; this ship is my home, and the bottom will be my grave if all goes well," the captain said nodding to himself. "Sometimes though, I do wake up and see what's for breakfast and I wish I were dead, yes. But then I'm reminded I might end up as ghost crew in a ghost ship and I just know the kind of heartless bastards that run those ships," he said and gave the main mast an angry, crazed stare. "That brings me back to my senses," he said and took a swig from his pipe before moving a pawn shaped like an extravagantly built windmill to a blue tile on the Po board.

"Interesting," said Theo and reshuffled himself in his seat. He was rather more quiet and thoughtful than his usual self. He hadn't raised many questions since he had woken up, and he had made no mention of Tejewel, the bear involved in whatever that thing they blew up in Tallyflop was. Theo must've thought him a real friend indeed though, judging by the way he so easily and quite impressively killed the Ygg as if they were nothing more than monstrous dolls at play. It had certainly had some effect on him; he sometimes appeared grim and boring, all grown-up. Even the game they had been playing seemed utterly drab, and he seemed to be enthralled in it.

"What is it that's interesting exactly? I haven't heard of this game before. All I see is a mosaic of tiles painted on an irregularly shaped board, and lots of different pieces made out of all sorts of things. Not to mention you've been playing for four hours straight," Lernea said and sat up straight in the utilitarian stool. She produced a comb out of a small pocket of her vest, and began combing her hair. Apart from not doing

much to rectify the sad affair that her hair had been reduced to, the combing had the deleterious effect of grains of sand falling onto the game-board with a rasping, clattering sound.

“Could you do that someplace else?” Theo said while the captain extended a hand blindly to receive his flying, re-filled glass of the cocktail he was drinking, complete with a tiny umbrella and everything, up to and including a slice of pineapple. Lerneia looked at Theo and noticed his stare wasn’t the usual bland-eyed stare he seemed to confront the world at large with; it had a purpose and a hint of ire this time. She stopped combing her hair and apologized, though she hadn’t expected anyone to notice.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realise a little sand was that much of a problem.”

“This is a game of Po. Sand is definitely a real problem.”

“What’s so special about this game?”

“Everything!” the captain roared, and Theo nodded, intently fixed on the game-board.

“It is just a game, isn’t it?”

“You do realize games are simulations, don’t you?” the captain said, and the dead stuffed parrot hanging onto his shoulder seemed to nod the way the old pirate made a vibrant gesture with his hands, roughly shaping up a sphere in the air.

“I thought games were supposed to be fun,” Lerneia said and noticed Bo was looking at the pirate intently, ears standing tall and upright like antennae. Though she remained silent, Lerneia felt she was ready to absorb everything the captain was saying. Theo, on the other hand, was looking at the game-board with a heavy frown, too absorbed in planning his strategy.

“They have to be fun, so people will want to play them. Do keep in mind, people’s idea of fun differs greatly. For

instance, Mr. Gunnadeer, my navigator, while he was still alive, thought it'd be fun to throw away all the navigating equipment."

Lernea nodded with a frown, while the captain let the barbed comment sink in. After seemingly observing a moment of silence, the captain spoke again:

"We're not having that discussion, again, Mr. Gunnadeer," he said flatly and drew on the pipe. "You see, Ms. Testarossa, fun and games can be quite productive past-times. The risk-taking, the strategy involved, the planning, the logistics of the thing, your opponent and his idea of you, your idea of him..." he said and straightened the dead parrot on his shoulder. "If that's detailed enough, it's like war and all that fighting that goes on and on everywhere. But if you play it out first, in something as innocuous looking as this little board of Po, it might show you an advantageous situation, a way out of trouble or a way into it. You might learn a winning strategy, or the cost of defeat. It's more of a tool, Po. It has the added benefit it's pretty hard to injure yourself with. Unlike sword-fighting and full-scale war."

"So in essence, it's like Zatrik," Lernea said nodding. Both the captain and Theo were instantly adamant in their rebuttal.

"It's nothing like Zatrik!" they said in one voice and glowered at her for a moment.

"No need to get excited. I'll take your word for it," Lernea said and noticed Bo was nowhere to be seen. Which was quite unsettling knowing she could flame her eyes up in a split second and start fire-balling everything for no apparent reason. Adding her latest streak of paranoia did not help either. "Theo, have you seen the bunny?"

"What?"

“Bo, the bunny. The white magical bunny?”

“No. But she must be aboard the ship. I can sense her aura.”

“It’s good to know you’re keeping tabs,” Lernea said and went off to find Bo. Perhaps she just wanted to converse with Lernea in a slightly more secluded spot - the ship offered plenty of those.

“I’m not doing that; I’m playing Po,” he said long after Lernea had left the table. Stringing words together rather than someone talking, his eyebrows raised in a wide arch, the captain asked Theo: “Whose turn is it?”

“Turn? I thought we were playing real-time.”

“If we’d been playing real-time, this would’ve been over in a few minutes,” the captain said in disbelief.

“Then why haven’t you overrun me already?”

“I’m too drunk to play real-time Po in real time. So I take turns with myself, in-between drinks, mostly,” the captain admitted.

“You do not sound inebriated,” Theo said, coounting with one hand silently.

“No, I don’t slur. But I’m so drunk right now, I couldn’t put my finger to my nose without losing an eye.”

“Why would you want to put your finger to your nose?” Theo asked, counting tiles on the board.

“Why should I know? I’m drunk, remember?”

“That sounds more like an excuse, actually,” Theo commented, lazily.

“Well even if it is, I don’t care, because... I’m drunk! It’s a beaut, isn’t it?” the captain exclaimed enthusiastically.

“Land ho!” came a shout suddenly. It was Lernea and she sounded positively enthused as well.

“What? That’s impossible!” the captain said with an unnervingly confused, drunken grin, spilling a good portion of his drink onto the deck.

“I don’t think it is,” Theo said and looked around him, the tiny umbrella still stuck in his dreadlocks. The fog was clearing up; the first purely golden rays of sun shafted through from above. It was as if someone had delineated an invisible line on some grandiose map, where one side was all grey and bland and the other side was shiny, green and sported cute depictions of butterflies and cupids. It looked like the ship had just passed it and emerged on the fancy, nice side of the map.

“So, it worked,” Bo sent to Lernea’s mind happily. She was standing precariously on the ship’s prow, like a living figurehead, eyes slightly glowing orange, not unlike tiny beacons.

“What did you do?” Lernea said with a wide, appreciative smile.

“Not much, really,” Bo sent to Lernea’s mind with a sigh. It seemed like the perfect answer to Lernea for a moment; her mind was indeed elsewhere.

Her gaze wandered up and down the coastline that unfurled itself graciously. The sun was almost noon-high, shining with all its might. Its warmth was a pleasant contrast to the fresh, icy breeze; they were still someplace cold but at least there was warmth to be found in the daylight. At the farthest reaches, Lernea could still make out large rocky cliffs and islets. A spatter of snow and ice hugged their topsides. But the way the ship was pointed, they were sailing straight for a small bay, surrounded by golden-brown thickets. In the distance beyond, a hilly terrain formed, slightly sloping into a grey phantom vision of a mountain ridge. What was more

telling, she could see thin columns of smoke rising up from the bay.

“Look! Civilization! Village people! We’re saved!” Lernea exclaimed with a beaming smile, managing to not throw up her arms in the air in a childish fashion at the last instant. “What did you do?” she said and helped up Bo like one would a furry trophy or a lovable pet. She restrained herself from squeezing in a damaging way.

“Nothing out of the ordinary. I just unlocked the rudder,” Bo sent to her mind. It felt like she was mildly confused herself.

“By using magic?”

“No, with my paw,” Bo sent and as if to illustrate the point, nudged Lernea with a paw in a cat-like manner.

“That’s all it took?”

“Pretty much,” she sent and her bunny eyes blinked in a sort of animal way.

“So we were going in circles all this time?”

“From what I can gather,” Bo sent and Lernea put the bunny down on the deck again. She put a finger to her lips and raised an eyebrow. It was a deeply concerned expression, the one usually associated with decisions that put men at the gallows and condemned young women to unhappy wedlocks.

“That would mean it was either done on purpose or that this man hasn’t been near a ship before in his life,” Lernea whispered to herself.

“That’s a fair assessment,” Bo sent and felt uneasy. It was either the feeling of hungering for some fresh lemon-grass or the wary look on Lernea’s face.

“It means... You were right all along,” Lernea whispered so as not to be overheard.

“About what?” Bo sent, scurrying around, sniffing the air which was filled with the currents of a salty breeze and completely lacked the pleasant brusqueness and faint bitterness of lemon.

“You were right to distrust this man,” Lernea said in a hushed voice, leaning towards the bunny, nodding slightly over her shoulder. “We’re in terrible danger,” she hissed and her hands slowly began reaching for her bow and arrow.

“We are? Why?” Bo sent, looking up to Lernea uncan-nily.

“Because, he’s lied to us,” came Lernea’s hissed answer.

“But, we’re clearly out of the fog. We’re heading for a harbor. It looks safe enough now,” Bo sent. The bunny made a grumbling, slightly disquieting stomach noise; Bo’s hunger was now audible.

“It could be a trap. There could be armed men waiting for us. Or assassins might try and have a go at us while we least expect it. I’m not waiting around for that to happen,” Lernea mumbled under her breath, the lines on her face taut with determination.

“Right now?” Bo asked with a gleamy haze in the bunny’s eyes. One of her bunny ears dropped suddenly, dejectedly.

“In our sleep. Murderous, cantankerous bastard that he is, he’ll slit our throats and leave our blood to dry on his deck before skinning us alive, parading us like animals to his alien masters,” she said and turned around to face the pair of Theo and the captain, still engrossed in their game of Po. Her face was darker somehow, seething with a devout sense of anger, liable to explode at any moment.

“Oh, there’s that, I guess,” Bo sent, before realizing the import of Lernea’s words. “We’re in terrible danger!” she sent to Lernea and Theo as she realized it, but her brother

barely acknowledged the message, rolling his eyes for a moment and sparing a glimpse at the sky, as if he half-expected death from above. The next instant he shrugged and went back to the board of Po and his game.

“Reveal thyself for what you truly are, you whitened sepulcher of a man!” Lerneia shouted with an arrow strung in her bow, ready to let it fly. It was squarely aimed at the captain, who turned to face her with a blank stare.

“But it’s me, Theo! That’s my natural hair color!” Theo proclaimed, showing his silver-white dreadlocks with a confused, consternated smile.

“Not you, by Svarena’s calling! Him!” Lerneia nodded and slightly rocked her bow towards the captain.

“The ghost?” Theo asked with a furrowed brow and pointed with his left thumb to thin air next to him. Lerneia closed her eyes for the barest moment and allowed herself a sigh of frustration.

“Him! The captain!” Lerneia yelled and purposefully took a few steps toward the two of them. “Stand still! Do or say nothing! Explain yourself! Why was the helm locked into a turn?” she yelled and Bo’s eyes flared up. Bo made a slow, rumbling noise; it was her stomach, literally dying for some grub.

“I never was partial to maritime affairs, that’s true. But these are hard times,” the pirate captain said with some weariness in his voice. He stood up and looked Lerneia in the eye, before averting his gaze and bowing ever so slightly.

“I said, don’t say anything! Your beguiling charms and spells have been swept away! Explain yourself!” she demanded authoritatively once more, without really taking into account it was impossible for most people to speak without uttering audible words. She was a bit nervous, it seemed.

“I don’t think he can explain himself without talking,” Theo said and nodded reassuringly, mostly to himself. Lernea squinted a bit, and seemed to give the notion some thought. The captain remained still; she could discern the early signs of a grin forming on the old man’s mouth. Bo’s eyes had the touch of a flame about them, ready to sparkle up to fire-spraying level at the flick of an eyelid.

“Forgive me, Mistress Lernea, but I do prefer to speak. Words can have a taste of their own, don’t you agree?”

“Keep still. Frozen like a statue would be preferable,” Lernea said and nodded. “Speak, and make it worthwhile lest I sent you down oblivion’s path.”

“No Skrala to welcome me to the heavenly abode? No Svarna to guide my soul to the Eternal Light?”

“You tempt me, malfeasant. Speak not of my Godly Forefathers with your foul, perfidious mouth,” Lernea said and her voice sizzled. A tense moment passed, everyone resting in silence except Bo whose grumbling stomach defiantly asked for sustenance. “How did you know I pay my respects to the Holy Mountain?” Lernea asked the man with a raised eyebrow, the bow in her hands unwaveringly taut and aimed at the captain’s forehead.

“Let me ask you: Why does the eagle soar higher than the peaks?” the captain asked in turn. Lernea was taken by surprise; she blinked rapidly and nearly lost her focus; her breathing became shallow. “That’s a question, isn’t it? How can anyone answer a question with another question?” Theo asked himself. Bo’s eyes flicked back and forth between the captain and Lernea.

“Because of the clouds. Why does the turtle hide in its shell?” Lernea asked with a wavering voice.

“Because it is soft and squishy in the eyes of an eagle,”

came a confident, smiling reply from the captain.

“It can’t be... Master Sisypheus! You’re alive!” Lernea yelled with relief and dropped her bow and arrow on the deck before she ran with open arms to meet the embrace of the old captain whose face was slowly changing to that of another, even older-looking man.

“I take it that is someone important, isn’t it?” Theo asked and received no answer, other than Bo’s growling stomach.

“I can’t believe this! Master Sisypheus, I thought you were dead! We saw the carriage go up in flames!”, Lernea shouted with a mix of giddy excitement and barely-held tears.

“Appearances can oft be deceiving. Apart from my crew of course, which has really passed on to the great beyond, I’m afraid,” said the elderly man smiling gently. His hazel eyes gleamed with intelligence and his face beamed with mirth. It was a joyous occasion for the two of them.

“But, how? Why this charade?” Lernea asked of him with a wary look.

“Desperate times, my queen. I had to be sure. Deceitful foes abound.”

“Where is this place? And however did you end up here?”

“This place?” Master Sisypheus repeated incredulously and began laughing merrily, before getting hold of himself. “My dear Lernea, you never were good in geography,” he said and pointed at the faint mountainside behind the fishing village they were bound for. “That is the north-eastern face of Mount Ytamos, itself the first great mountaintop of the Sacred Ridge.”

“You mean to say...” Lernea managed to reply in a whisper before her voice trailed off into a gasp.

“We’re in Nomos, my queen. You’re home,” Master Sisypheus told her and a tear left her eye like the overflow from the

lip of a dam.

The walls of the Marvelously Rotund and Equivocally Re-assuring Grandiose Official Hall of Endearment were basically rotund and ostensibly too large for the common eye to perceive fully. Yet it was simply one of many similar halls if not in name certainly in capacity dotted around the Naval Intelligence Bureau building in Rampatur City, itself one of many government buildings of varied shape and uniformly huge size to be found in the very center of the city. From the outside, the Naval Intelligence building looked like an even, totally opaque block of granite from which a huge flag of the Human League was unfurled, drooping over the north face, above the diminutive revolving door entrance. It was identical to any other government building and no-one in Rampatur seemed to pay it the least amount of notice, even if everything it shadowed was made cooler. As in, the temperature dropped because of the huge shadow it cast.

The hall boasted some soft lighting in the form of a couple of hidden spotlights of dubious nature; Ned, Tark, Judith and Parcifal were standing under guard. Four men in full body armor, boasting elaborately ornate halberds that sported some sort of exotic machinery on them were keeping an eye on all of them. The ridiculously colored suit came with a number of silly-looking hats being worn one on top of another, as well as any number of a variety of feathers adorning them. There were also a number of medals and bones hanging from the guards' breastplate armor. If anything at all, they looked like some sort of very state-of-the-art laughable jokers armed with nonetheless sharp, really bleeding-edge, instruments of death.

Parcifal stood emotionless, her face stuck in a cold, calculating gaze. Ned was wary; he felt the whole situation was akin to a very tight balancing rope act, without a safety net, with razor sharp spikes waiting on either side of the definitely

terminal drop. Tark was looking smug and confident in a very stylish, simple yet exotic suit of black cloth with matching smart pants and soft, spongy shoulder pads that made him look pretty suave. Judith was looking worn out, red-eyed, fidgeting in her tight leather suit.

In front of them, at what was probably judged to be a safe but not too impractical distance sat the Impromptu Intelligent Committee on Matters of Intelligence Missions Gathering Intelligence and Whatnot. There was even a wooden sign carved with those exact words sitting on a bleak, wooden desk where the members of the Committee rested their crossed hands. They were all dressed in nondescript white robes. Only the older man among them wore a fine-wrought silver chain around his neck from where a small curio hang. Their desk was filled with all manner of scrolls, maps, and papers which were being scrutinized seemingly at random. The sound of shuffling papers reverberated across the gigantic empty space of the hall which appeared to have, oddly enough, excellent acoustics.

“They’re a bland-looking lot, I have to say,” Ned whispered to Tark, careful not to appear to do so. Unfortunately, the aforementioned acoustics betrayed him.

“There will be order! Will the familiar alien, citizen status provisional, by the name of...” said one particularly high-browed member of the committee and paused for a moment. “... Ned Larkin, was it?” he asked himself, shuffling through a stack of papers expertly, his voice high-pitched and uncomfortably nasal. “...Remain silent?” he concluded and looked up to Ned with an indifference bordering on contempt.

“You will be found in contempt if you keep this up,” said another member of the committee, his voice gruff and bellicose. He cleared his throat and a third member, a woman with

a saggy, old leathery face added with a snobbish, accentuating falsetto:

“You should know that this is highly irregular,” said another woman sitting next to the old woman. She was rather younger and firm of face, her voice gentle in comparison:

“Please, Mr. Larkin, be patient. Your matter is... Strange, to say the least,” she said after finding the right word.

“Indubitably so!” said the old man who had asked Ned to shut up. “You will be found in contempt if you keep this up” said the man with the gruff voice and the old woman added in what almost sounded impossibly very much so like a chirp, “A highly irregular matter indeed!”

Tark turned to look at Ned with a smug grin and rolled his eyes, nodding ever so slightly in a comforting manner. Ned simply remained silent; he looked at Judith who appeared deadly bored and tired of the proceedings, even though they hadn’t even officially started. Parcifal stared back at Ned and he could only see the kind of look that meant this was all his fault to begin with.

“The Impromptu Intelligent Committee on Matters of Intelligence Missions Gathering Intelligence and Whatnot is now in session!” said the older man with a voice infused with authority. “Mr. Maroon will now make his opening statement,” he said and nodded to his colleague, sitting to his left.

“Thank you, Mr. Prussian Blue,” said the man, shuffling a bunch of papers before clearing his throat. He was the man with the gruff voice.

“Insofar as it has been deduced from the preliminary report of field agent codenamed See-see-do..”

“That’s a sharp ‘C’, Mr. Maroon,” interrupted the old woman, her eyes firmly fixed on Tark with a cold stare.

“Right. Indeed it is so, Mrs. Razzmatazz. According to

the data perturbations collected after a summary final exposition to the unary tentative bifurcation matrix, it is our analysis that the mission, codenamed Shining Ogre, was a marginal failure.”

“Ludicrous!” Tark said erupting in a fit of laughter that seemed quite inappropriate. Judging by the lack of smiles from the committee, they did not seem to share his opinion.

“The Office of Naval Intelligence had set out specific tasks for operation Shining Ogre, agent. Though according to the *Mary Righteous* autothaumagator, a great deal of hostile combatants perished and a significant blow was dealt to the infrastructure of the foreign party involved, one cannot simply do away with the fact that the main objectives for this mission were not met. As such, your standing here before this committee has been deemed necessary to explain yourself more fully as to the nature of the difficulties and circumstances that prevented you and your associate to complete your mission to the letter,” said the man identified as Mr. Maroon and cleared his throat, the loud noise amplified by the hall’s acoustics.

“Indeed,” added Mrs. Razzmatazz coldly.

“If I’ve learned anything in all my years of service in the Human League, it is that field agents somehow always choose the most reckless course of action and consequences be damned. I would not find it at all strange if your explanation includes these two alien humans in one way or another. I’m also willing to bet a large sum of timeshares that somehow you will try to impress upon the members of this committee that you were acting in accordance to your oaths, for the betterment and guaranteed safety of the citizens of the Human League.”

“Hear, hear!” intoned Mr. Maroon and Mr. Prussian Blue

continued: "While I'm willing to recognize as do my fellow colleagues if our previous meetings are to be of any measure that you have indeed offered a great number of valuable services to the Bureau of Naval Intelligence and the Human League in general, that fact alone does not constitute presupposition for a lenient eye in the evaluation of this case."

"Indeed, it does not," said Mrs. Razzmatazz with a voice trailing with venom. Tark seemed largely unperturbed by what the committee at large was implying. He had the look of someone who had heard similar things in the past too many times to be bothered and was largely bored, though he did try to look humbled and civil about everything. Ned on the other hand was wearing a giant frown: although he felt like no expert in lawyer lingo, the whole thing looked suspiciously like a trial and it looked like that before anything was even going to be mentioned about him and Parcifal, Tark was in deep trouble.

"If I may," Ned ventured hesitantly and was instantly overruled by Mr. Prussian Blue.

"You may not address this committee unless spoken to, Ned Larkin. Failure to comply will result in finding you in contempt, with all due legal penalties applied instantly."

"You will be found in contempt if you keep this up," Mr. Maroon repeated, nodding profusely. Ned resorted to silence once more.

"Indeed, you will," Mrs. Razzmatazz said and shot Ned a look that felt like steel needles piercing his eyes. He felt he had to avert his gaze; it was uncanny.

"Mr. Prussian Blue, may we proceed and let the agent speak?"

"Indeed we shall, Ms. Rose. You may begin," the old man said and motioned Tark to speak.

“What do you want me to say?” Tark said and sighed, looking rather nonchalant and cool about everything. Judith was looking at Tark expectantly, while Parcifal had locked gazes with Mrs. Razzmatazz.

“Why wasn’t the thaumaturgic containment device mentioned in your report retrieved?”

“Because it probably blew up.”

“I see. Why wasn’t the aetheric crystal formation retrieved for analysis?”

“Because it probably blew up as well.”

“I see. Why are there an additional eight hundred and ninety-seven timeshares accrued in your expenses account?”

“It’s what expense accounts do. They accrue expenses, it’s what they’re there for,” Tark replied unfazed.

“I see. Why did you let those human aliens interfere with carrying out your mission?”

“If I may, we’re hardly aliens. I mean, we’re not monsters or anything,” Ned said with a lackluster smile intended to look friendly. Instead it looked jarred, disjointed and out of place with the rest of his face. It wasn’t that he was scared of them or that they looked intimidating; it was their officiousness that made Ned feel utterly uncomfortable. Their stuck-up body pose and their intentionally obfuscated language, that was the problem for Ned. Parcifal, on the other hand, seemed to have no problem whatsoever; she looked grim and determined to take on anyone who would try and force something beyond her will. She also seemed to pay no attention to anyone, other than the old woman.

“That’s it, you’re found to be in contempt of this committee! Mrs. Razzmatazz, please take note that Ned Larkin has been found to be in contempt. The fine is two hundred timeshares, irrespective.”

“Duly noted, Mr. Maroon,” said the old woman icily and made a scribble on a piece of paper without bothering to take her eyes off Parcifal.

“Ned feels a bit mixed up about the word ‘alien’. He’s never been to a Human League world before. He doesn’t know. Neither does Lady Teletha, for that matter,” Judith interjected on her own, trying to sound appeasing. Tark shot her a disapproving look and the committee would still have none of that.

“Ignorance in the face of the law cannot be supported in any case, assistant agent,” Mr. Maroon commented.

“Neither can malfeasance a priori, your lordship,” Tark commented.

“We are settling matters a posteriori, agent CiCiDo!” exclaimed Mr. Prussian Blue while Tark scoffed “Could we drop the silly code-names?”

“Wait, wait. Did he just say ‘posterior’?” Ned asked, feeling a bit shocked.

“A posteriori, Mr. Larkin. After the facts,” said the younger woman identified as Ms. Rose. She sounded rather nice and civil, in contrast to her colleagues.

“Ms. Rose, you may not address the alien as a ‘mister’. You will be found in contempt as well,” blabbed Mr. Maroon.

“This isn’t a tribunal, Lord Trixiparson. You have no sway on me. I suggest we move on to the heart of the issue at hand,” replied Ms. Rose. A couple of gasps echoed in the large hall.

“I thought this was a hearing,” Ned said eying Tark suspiciously. “Isn’t this a hearing?” he repeated to the members of the Committee.

“Will the alien please be advised to remain silent until further notice?” said the old man, Mr. Prussian Blue, while

Mr. Maroon added, "The fine has been doubled to four hundred timeshares. And you Ms. Rose! Using proper names! Unheard of!"

"I find this whole debacle rather antiquated and needless. There are real issues at hand and we're being obsessive with etiquette!" she retorted.

"Consider what would happen to the Human League if etiquette was to be disregarded as merely going through the motions!" exclaimed Lord Trixiparson and Mrs. Razzmatazz added flatly, "Indeed. Consider that."

"We're wasting valuable time. Lord Kennelsey, please. If you must, consider this a special, extreme case."

"We definitely are special. I mean, wait till you meet the rest," Ned said and laughed a bit on his own. "It was a joke," he added with a shrug of his shoulders and Tark advised him with a whisper: "They're dry humorless husks. They're hardly real people," he said and Lord Kennelsey addressed Lord Trixiparson without the least bit of emotion in his voice: "Please note agent Cicido has been found in contempt."

"Damn acoustics! The name is Augustus! Augustus Tark!"

"Add a five hundred timeshare fine for violation of the Currathers Apocrypha and Alimentary Act to Mr. Tark," Lord Kennelsey said calmly while Lord Trixiparson nodded profusely, the pen in his hand flying.

"You can put it in my expenses tab," Tark said with a grin. Lord Kennelsey pointed a very calm finger vaguely in Tark's direction. His inflection and the slight bump in his voice were very telling; he was actually stark raving mad even though he did a pretty fine job at appearing relatively disinterested in the whole affair.

"Now listen old chap. You've wasted hundreds of thou-

sands of Bureau timeshares, gallivanting across the galaxy with dubious results, harbouring a smug attitude against real and proper authority. Your missions always end up in some kind of blunder or shameless explosion. You're hardly making inroads as it is in what has been deemed to be the biggest threat to Human League sovereignty since the Bourne-Again Shell incident. And you have the audacity, rather, the gall, to make light-hearted attempts at humor at the expense of this Committee?" he said with a deadpan, flat voice.

"No, really, just put it in my expenses tab," Tark insisted and Lord Kennelsey's eyelids flickered in aggravation. He even cocked his head sideways.

"This is highly irregular, even for a field agent!" Lord Trixiparson yelled, his red hot temper showing in the stuck-up veins on his neck.

"Indeed it is," said Mrs. Razzmatazz who was now smiling at Parcifal surreptitiously.

"Please gentlemen, the enemy is out there!" shouted Ms. Rose and pointed a finger in a vague outwards direction. The guards sprang into action with a loud assortment of clattering sounds, aiming their halberds at a phantom target.

"I was being figurative!" yelled Ms. Rose and buried her face in her palms.

"Guard! Stand at attention!" yelled Lord Trixiparson with practiced familiarity and the guards assumed their previous, mute position with a machine-like speed and precision.

"Can they play dead as well?" Ned said with a bright smile. Lord Trixiparson looked at him through a half-opened eye.

"What are you now, a comedian?" asked Lord Kennelsey without the least bit of sarcasm.

"Actually, he claims he is, though he's rather bad at it,"

Tark said out of turn. Ned looked at him with a furrowed brow full of hurt.

“Now that’s just too harsh a critique,” Ned said, shaking his head in disappointment, before turning to face the committee. “Listen to this: A dwarf, an elf and twelve monkeys go into a barber’s shop...”

“By Skrala you will hear me now!” Parcifal shouted on the top of her lungs, demanding everyone’s attention. The echo of her cry had not died down when she spoke again, all the eyes and especially those of Mrs. Razzmatazz for some peculiar reason firmly fixed on her.

“I am Parcifal Teletha, scion of the Teletha House, Princess Regent and Captain of the Gardens of the Kingdom of Nomos. I am human by birthright and noble by way of my standing among the men and women of my kingdom. I believe in goodness and fairness in all things, and I find you lacking. My sister is missing and she has perhaps passed on.”

“Now, this is highly irregular ”

“I am not finished, you overrated teller,” Parcifal said and gasps filled the hall, yet everyone seemed too shocked to so much as cough up an answer, especially Ned.

“The horrible Ygg are a scourge and a menace to free beings everyone, and perhaps their machinations have already claimed hundreds of woodkin, two dear friends and my loving sister. I was witness to the power they can tap into, and I know first-hand their death-defying commitment to whatever sick and twisted cause they serve. They’re dangerous fanatics that need to be put down. And here you are, safe and sound, a million miles away, bickering about form, without substance. I find you repulsive, and weak.”

The committee fell into a shocked silence, gasping without a sound at Parcifal’s brusque calling out.

“That’s a fair assessment,” Tark said filling in the awkward silence.

“You speak a fair truth, Lady Parcifal. I wish I could have been so straightforward to begin with. It is always good to be reminded of one’s fallacies and wrongs,” said Ms. Rose and raised herself before she gave Parcifal a curt nod and a slight bow.

“Preposterous!” cried Lord Trixiparson and Mrs. Razzmatazz added through flaring nostrils, “Indeed!”

“Bowing to an alien, Ms. Rose! I would have never ” said Lord Kennelsey before being interrupted stiffly by Ms. Rose.

“These aliens you speak of lent the Human League an invaluable hand in precarious times. Instead of being so detached and uppity about this debacle we should seize the opportunity and make them honorable allies in pursuit of common goals.”

“Allies?” asked Mr. Trixiparson with a deeply furrowed brow, as if he had never heard the word before. The same kind of confused wonder was in Lord Kennelsey’s voice as well. “Goals?” he said and waved a pondering hand.

“Weak vocabulary?” Ned said out of turn and everyone afforded him a disapproving glance. The humor was if not that bad, entirely badly timed.

“I’m willing to forgo the insult to my person and my entourage if you’re willing to aid us in our quest,” Parcifal said sternly but not unkindly to Ms. Rose, who replied without hesitation and a curt nod: “I hope our aid will be forthcoming and beneficial to both parties. May it be fruitful,” she said and Parcifal nodded and bowed in kind.

“Entourage? Now we’re her entourage?” Ned asked pointing a finger at Parcifal while Judith suggested, “Let her handle this, Ned. She seems to be swinging this your way.”

“What about my way?” Tark demanded with a somewhat hurt voice. Lord Trixiparson’s voice boomed:

“There will be order!”

“There has been too much of that lately, I’m afraid. The Ygg don’t play a fair, orderly game, Lord Trixiparson,” Ms. Rose retorted.

“There was a point in appointing this committee, which through your frantic disregard for etiquette and proper security guidelines has turned this prestigious intelligence committee into a facade!”

Lord Kennelsey had exploded; he was acting quite out of character, seething with anger, a flush red color taking over his leathery old face.

“Ah, nuts! Hell, she’s right,” shouted Tark and pointed a finger at Ms. Rose. Ned didn’t like the way the old man Lord Kennelsey seemed to be taking everything.

“This is most irregular,” repeated Lord Trixiparson, looking severely heart-stricken while Mrs. Razzmatazz averted her gaze away from Parcifal and in a dramatic fashion stared outwards, as if terribly disappointed at everyone, and especially Parcifal.

“Indeed. I motion for all charges to be dropped and these people to be given citizen status, provisional, as well as a special dispensation as Naval Intelligence contracted personnel, for an unknown amount of time to be extended or made permanent by a Tactical Hearing of the Intelligence Bureau, a Lord Superior’s Constabulary Notice or a Lord Privy’s Ruling,” Ms. Rose announced to everyone in an officious tone that indicated she meant every word.

“Lord Privy? Seriously? As in, a john?” Ned asked and Tark thought about it before answering with a nod, “Well, not exactly but you’re quite close. Funny, isn’t it?”

“I knew you were just being the hard audience type,” replied Ned with a casual, borderline smug attitude while Tark suggested with a wave of his hand, “I was talking about this committee thing, actually.”

“There will be order on the floor!” shouted Lord Trixiparson, the words reverberating across the hall with a stentorian quality. Lord Kennelsey seemed to be frozen for a few moments, hardly breathing. He contained himself and against his feelings on the matter, obliged to due process.

“Lady Govida has put forth a motion,” said Lord Kennelsey with a clear, loud voice. “This committee is now hereby officially dissolved,” he said with a feeling of disappointed guilt creeping in his voice.

“Dissolved?” asked Lord Trixiparson in disbelief, his eyes searching for Lord Kennelsey’s eyes in vain. The old lady known only as Mrs. Razzmatazz nodded, gave Parcifal a last look of feeling lost, and sighed before getting up and taking her leave. “Indeed, what a shame,” she said with disdain.

“What? This is it? No vote, no decision-making, no time-squandering? No never-ending debates and what not?” Ned asked, and looking around he saw Parcifal was looking just as befuddled, even though one couldn’t easily tell from just her furrowed brow and sharp gaze. Tark and Judith on the other hand seemed quite lacking in surprise, as if the sudden helpful outcome was no surprise to them.

“This isn’t politics,” Tark said and walked over to where Lady Govida stood. Lord Kennelsey and Lord Trixiparson took their leave as well, their faces shadowed in a grim look of defeat and irritation. Lord Kennelsey wouldn’t take his eyes off Lord Govida his gaze rather unbecoming in a revengeful way and Lord Trixiparson pointed a finger at Ned and told him sternly: “You’re still paying up those timeshares.”

Lord Kennelsey told Lady Govida with a raspy voice that was as if another, broken, hateful man had suddenly taken his place: “This will not stand. I have friends in higher places than yours, Madame Chancellor.”

“You don’t strike me as the social type, Lord Kennelsey.”

“I’ve been playing this game a lot longer than you think, Madame Chancellor.”

“It’s not a game, really, Lord Kennelsey.”

“But there will be a loser,” he said vehemently and Lady Govida retorted with an infuriating smile, “The place is yours for the taking.”

“Oh, trash talking each other, aren’t we?” Tark interjected putting himself between Lord Kennelsey and Lady Govida. The old man had to move his head slightly, trying to maintain eye contact. Tark would shadow his motions, not very much unlike a juvenile child.

“Field agents! Bah! There’ll come a day your ilk will be the laughing stock of the intelligence world,” he said pointing an exacerbad finger at both Tark and Lady Govida, before turning about and leaving briskly.

“Wouldn’t want to upstage your kind too soon, old chap,” Tark retorted, smiling to Lord Kennelsey’s back. Pretty soon, the other members of the committee had faded away in the deep, encrusting shadows of the hall.

“Now that was a nice comeback line, Tark,” Ned said. Tark grinned and replied, “I know. It’s actually older than him,” he said and clicked a phantom trigger in the direction of Lord Kennelsey in a playful, childish fashion.

“Oh, Augustus, I missed that flippant manner... Those boyish charming looks,” Lady Govida said with a sigh and a blinding smile, her chest heaving up and down with every breath. She and Tark exchanged a fleeting look of discovery,

before engaging in a passionate kiss, hands twirling through each other's hair, their bodies colliding almost awkwardly.

"Wow. That's pretty slick," Ned whispered to himself mostly, genuinely impressed and a bit jealous. Judith cleared her throat beside him.

"You seem impressed," she said and Parcifal added with a slight snort, "He's an impressionable young lad. Aren't you, Ned?" she said raising a brow.

"Well, it was rather smooth, turning the tables like that. I mean, we're off whatever hook we might've ended up on. That was some level-headed diplomacy, right there, Parcifal."

"You're good at changing the subject, I'll give you that. And that wasn't diplomacy, Ned. That was the bare truth," she said grimly.

"Which is a pretty uncertain, quite intangible notion, be mindful of that," Lady Godiva said, still wallowing in Tark's arms like a woman madly in love.

"I'm aware of that, my Lady. I sincerely hope that your interference is rightly justified, and not simply part of an elaborate show, or just a favor to a loved one," Parcifal said and nodded to Tark.

"Oh, never mind about Auggie, we can keep it professional when we need to. Can't we Auggie?" she said and looked at Tark with a sweetly intoxicating gaze. He simply nodded, as if mesmerized.

"Auggie?" Ned asked in a whisper, to which Judith simply sighed and shrugged. She shook her head and tried to say something, but she was at a loss for words as well.

"Right, then," Lady Govida said and pushed Tark away gently with one hand. "No, I meant every word. I think this is a great opportunity to uncover ways to strike at the heart of the Ygg and end that threat before it grows beyond con-

tainment into a full-scale war,” she said in a professional, dry manner.

“Ah, she’s so... Ebullient, isn’t she?” Tark said with a gleam around his eyes and a smile that easily betrayed his emotions for Lady Govida.

“You two are an item, then?” Ned asked and Tark nodded thoroughly before replying, “Oh, we go back. We do.”

“Mr. Tark, please. Focus,” Lady Govida told him sternly. “I love it when she bosses me around,” Tark whispered and Ned furrowed his brow, the picture of Tark as the hard-boiled intelligence operative in his mind slowly turning into a dreamy, soft-spoken, love-stricken fool. Something which Ned disapproved off, at least in principle. But there was much more serious talk going on.

“We need the approval of the House of Commons, as well as a sponsor in the Lord Privy’s Office before we get anything serious done,” Lady Govida said.

“Excuse me, is that a real thing?” Ned asked with a bit of hesitation. “What, the Lord Privy’s Office?” she asked Ned.

“Does that have anything at all to do with an outhouse or something similar?”

“In a manner of speaking that would be true, but not specifically so. It’s politics, basically.”

“Time is of the essence here. We need to find my sister, Lady Govida,” Parcifal asked with a gentle, almost pleading tone.

“As well as the magical bunny and the elf, I’m sure. They seem to be in possession of information that could prove pivotal,” Tark added.

“What of the woodkin?” Judith interjected and Tark replied brusquely. “That is an entirely different matter.”

“You’re saying they’re not important, it’s what you’re saying,” Ned said with a sudden fluster.

“I’m only saying it’s a different thing. What matters, is the crystal,” Tark said, emphasizing his last phrase.

“You say that crystal was in the possession of the elf, originally?” Lady Govida said with a thoughtful look on her face.

“His name is Theo. Well, Hanultheofodor, but we call him Theo. What’s so important about that crystal anyway?”

“The Ygg were drooling over it. They said it could have advanced their designs by decades. Good thing it’s probably blown up in that catastrophe.”

“Designs like that crystal mechanism in Tallyflop?” Lady Govida said and Tark nodded. “Your report was vague. What was your assessment of that thing?” she asked him.

“Well it was huge, and made mostly of crystal. It was built with something bad in mind, that’s for sure,” Tark replied. Ned commented with evident sarcasm, “That’s really insightful,” his head bobbing up and down slightly. “Thank you,” Tark replied, the sarcasm lost on him.

“That wasn’t the only one; we’re getting similar reports from other places,” said Lady Govida with a wary expression. She addressed Parcifal:

“Lady Teletha, I take it you are a noblewoman from the Kingdom of Nomos.”

“Princess Regent in exile,” she corrected her.

“I stand corrected. That sounds awfully convenient. We just received word from Laertia; your home-planet in fact, that is. The Ygg are building one of those crystal machines right there.”

“Where, exactly?” Ned asked while Parcifal shook her head, not wanting to believe what she was hearing.

“Nomos, I’m afraid. That’s up north, isn’t it?” Lady Govida said, turning to point at Ned who in turn nodded affirmatively.

“How is that possible? This has to take precedence over everything. I will not see my people enslaved by these monsters!” Parcifal said angrily, real emotion pouring out from her voice.

“Calm down now, Lady Teletha. You’re not mistaken; in the morning, we’ll have to secure the funding and means for a full-scale assault on the Ygg at Laertia,” Lady Govida said flatly, before adding with a weighty measure of confidence, “We need to show them our hand; make them understand we do not take ill behavior lightly.”

“What if you show your hand too early? I’m no expert at cards, but I’ve seen many a folk lose every piece of coin on them when they least expected to.”

“There’s always a risk involved, Mr. Larkin. Isn’t that right, Tark,” Lady Govida said with a mesmerizing stare.

“Right,” Tark replied, nodding with a stupid grin on his face.

“I approve of this course of action, but every minute spent talking instead of acting could prove disastrous!” Parcifal urged.

“My dear Lady Teletha, I assure you, this thing is unraveling with lightning speed for Human League standards. Could you put some trust into my efforts?”

“I do not believe there is much of a choice there, Lady Govida,” Ned said out of turn and Parcifal nodded.

“A perceptive young man. Judith, will you be able to accommodate Mr. Larkin and Lady Teletha as your guests?” Lady Govida said before bowing to both Ned and Parcifal.

“Certainly, Lady Govida,” Judith said following a curt

nod. "If you'll excuse us," Lady Govida said and beckoned to Tark with a surreptitious finger, her oddly lithe and supple figure for a woman of her age and authority gracefully hidden under her robes.

"Should I use the expenses account?" Judith asked Tark, to which he replied:

"By all means, go crazy!"

"Well, that's actually a good idea. With all the stress, and the weariness. We should take advantage of this. Tark certainly will be," Ned offered. Parcifal shook her head reproachfully.

"Are you proposing we engage in festivities at this hour? That certainly is a frivolous suggestion. I wouldn't expect more of you, to be frank."

"I'm not frivolous. I'm only suggesting there's nothing better to do than wind down a bit. Plus, we've got a dinner reservation for five, and we need to meet with Winceham as well."

"Some good food would be welcome," Parcifal finally ceded with some reluctance in her voice.

"And maybe Judith could bring a friend, if she'd like to. I mean, if there's someone important you'd like to bring along," Ned offered with some hesitation.

"I've got nothing planned for tonight," said one of the guards behind them, his voice oddly metallic through his helmet's visor.

Everyone just looked at him with a blank stare, as if realizing for the first time he could speak, his fellow guards included.

"Wot? A man's got a right to eat. Right?" he said and he really meant it.

They left the ghost ship with its skeleton crew in a nearby alcove, protected from view by the steep, sharp mossy cliffs. From then on the walk to the village was an easy, refreshing trip which they began as soon as they set foot on land. Lernea offered thanks and praise to Svarna for guiding her home, and kissed the ground, quickly realizing the picture in her mind did not match the taste.

The salty breeze mingled with the smells of green grass and mushy, wet ground. It brought a heartfelt smile to Lernea's face to be back home, even under the very unusual circumstances. And it was a true wonder in itself that her mentor, friend and caretaker, the man who had been to her more than the grandfather she had never met, was alive and well, despite what she had thought she had seen with her very eyes.

Theo felt the cold climate bite through his linen robes. The southern seas were warm, and space had been generously temperate and comfortable when not threatening their lives. But the northern reaches of Nomos offered a cold, harsh climate, suitable for the hardy locals, but not so friendly to anyone else. Except Bo who was comfortably covered in fur and was quite excited at the prospect of munching on northern, exotic grass; brushes were rare and flowers even rarer, but they provided a challenge with interesting, mouth-filling rewards. She delightfully hopped along, sampling what freshness the outdoors of Nomos had to offer.

Lernea was decidedly not asking Sisyphus a lot of questions; she was content knowing that there was time enough to get up to date on matters of importance. And there were quite a lot of those, Master Sisyphus had told her, but his philosophy was that the slow, careful approach, always offered more time to think and analyze things through. That way of think-

ing, in turn, offered more choices of action, and considerably more ways of egress out of nasty situations. Which was exactly the manner he had by a combination of good fortune and clever planning avoided turning into a crisp.

“Am I the only one who is cold?” Theo said, shivering slightly, to which Lernea simply nodded and Master Sisyphus replied: “You’re quite the exotic type around these parts. It’s quite reasonable to feel cold.”

“Well you don’t seem to be wearing much. And Lernea’s leather can’t be that warm inside,” Theo wondered.

“You’d be surprised how much heat the body generates. It’s all a matter of insulation, really. Though I disapprove of Lady Teletha’s outfit, it is practical and efficient,” Sisyphus said nodding.

“Then why do you disapprove, Master? You always taught us utility is essential,” Lernea asked, puzzled.

“It doesn’t need to be enticing to the senses. Not in that way,” the old man said and winked.

“Master!” Lernea gasped with a tiny shock of guilty joy written across her face.

“You might be my queen, and I might have taught you since your childhood, but I am not blind. I actually think you’ve grown into more of a woman somehow over these past few weeks. And I don’t mean you’re fat or anything,” Sisyphus added as an afterthought.

“I haven’t thought about it, but there’s a shred of truth in that,” Lernea admitted.

“You can tell me all about it when we rest properly. I have my share of stories as well. A lot has happened, and not much of it is any good,” Sisyphus commented grumpily.

“I’m afraid what stories I have to tell are in the same vein as well, Master. It’s been a wild ride since we left Nomos.

But I think I've met some good friends," she said and looked at Theo and Bo knowingly.

"She means us," Theo said and pointed awkwardly at Bo and him, before adding "And then there's Ned, and Winceham too."

"Winceham? That's an interesting name. Somehow makes me feel hungry," mused Master Sisypus. Lernea added with a soft voice:

"Parcifal is with them. Only Svarna knows where they are now. At least, I think they're safe. Last I saw them, they were flying away in a ship, trying to flee a terrible place of destruction. It was nothing like I had ever thought possible, Master. You should have seen it, you would know what to make of it."

"Flying away in a ship, you say?"

"I know it sounds crazy, Master. But there's so many new, strange things we've come across. Things that seem to defy logic," Lernea said grimly and shrugged disarmingly.

"I wouldn't go so far. Logic is a pretty difficult thing to break," Sisypus said, stroking his trimmed beard.

"Still, I'm glad you taught us to be open-minded, Master. We couldn't have hoped to cope with so much."

"You were raised to be queens, my dear Lernea," he replied earnestly.

"I was raised to be the tribe's doctor. Can't speak for Bo, I don't think there's much of a career choice for bunnies," Theo said out of turn.

"I was referring to the Teletha sisters," Master Sisypus said, eying Theo with a powerful frown that made the elf shy away. Master Sisypus whispered to Lernea then: "Is he really a sorcerer?"

"No, his sister, the bunny, is the sorcerer."

“The bunny is a sorcerer?”

“It did come as a surprise to me as well. But you’d be surprised at what she’s capable of. Her prowess with wielding fire reminds me of Parcifal, really.”

“She’s not... She’s not dragonborn, is she?” he asked in a worried whisper.

“I wouldn’t know. She’s stuck in that bunny form,” Lernea replied and Master Sisyphus face became contorted as if the world weighed upon it. “We need to know more about her. Can she talk?”

“Only if you kiss her.”

“Very demanding, for a small animal.”

“I meant, she has to kiss you before she can talk to you in your head. It’s disconcerting at first, but it has certain advantages,” Lernea said approvingly.

“That’s easy for you to say,” Bo sent in her mind even as her nose wrinkled in search of a damp spot of a certain kind of grass.

“Sounds capricious,” Master Sisyphus said dismissively.

“Tell the old man I wouldn’t kiss him in a million years,” Bo sent and Lernea simply nodded smiling awkwardly.

“I bet she’s telling you something right now, isn’t she?” Master Sisyphus asked, but before Lernea had time to make up an answer, he provided one himself: “I’m sure she’s impressed by me,” he said smugly.

“I wouldn’t think so,” Theo offered. “She just told me she hasn’t had a laugh like this in ages,” he added with an innocent smile, while Lernea stabbed him with a frantic look.

“Oh, really? I find her lack of taste disturbing,” Master Sisyphus said flatly and promptly greeted a passing fisherman.

“By Skrala, it’s a joyous day, isn’t it?” Sisyphus said and tipped his hat.

“Svarna’s light guide your way, Geronimo. How was the harvest?”

“Rich and plentiful. I’ll be making a batch of potion as soon as my visiting niece and her husband settle in,” Sisyphus said and gestured at Theo and Lernea.

“Greetings, friends. Your uncle’s been a real boon to the village,” the fisherman said, eying them intently.

“I can only imagine,” Lernea said, her gaze alternating between a glower at Master Sisyphus and a frantic sign at Theo. Both of them were equally impervious to signals.

“I didn’t know marriage could be that simple,” Theo said with what amounted to a lopsided grin. The fisherman looked at him with a squinting frown and Master Sisyphus tried to allay any qualms about the elf: “He’s foreign. Hardly speaks the language,” he whispered while the villager made a motion with his head and asked in a whisper, as not to sound overtly offending: “What about the hair, and those ears? Gods, that hair.”

“Accident of birth. My niece is such a soft-hearted girl,” Sisyphus said smiling in a condescending manner.

“That birth accident part could be true,” Theo said nodding, and walked past without care, looking at the sky, as if waiting for the weather to change. Right beside him, Bo hopped and skipped along, soaking up the moss-laden scenery with a gluttonous gleam in her eyes.

“Svarna guide your path, bookkeeper,” the fisherman said and nodded perfunctorily before walking away, gazing over his shoulder with a wrinkled forehead.

“Thy hooks be sharp, fisherman,” Master Sisyphus called out to him before Lernea said with some introspective hurt in

her voice:

“A queen of Nomos reduced to a bookkeeper’s niece. Why so, Master?”

“As it is the norm these days, secrecy, deceit and counterfeit is essential for survival. Plus, a bookkeeper has unfettered access to all public records, libraries and the like. One is also expected to be rather parsimonious in social dealings, lead a solitary, isolated existence and keep to his books.”

“Which is a facade for...” Lerneia said with a hint of expectation and a keen gaze across her eyes.

“The Resistance, my lady,” Sisyphus replied in a whisper and motioned with a hand for Lerneia to lead the way. She stood there for a moment, transfixed as if the words sounded suddenly all too strange.

“Resistance? Against who?”

“Well, the Jangdrivals, naturally,” he replied sotto voce, indeed confused that she should ask such a thing.

“Master, my wedding was to bring the old lines together. The Jangdrivals had other ideas; their House usurped the Throne, but still...”

“Whatever do you mean to say, my lady? The Jangdrivals are dirty, lying traitors, the kind that draw no lines except death marks.”

“But still, they treated me and my sister with a modicum of respect; they spared our lives and the lives of our banner-men. Isn’t that so?”

“That might be true. But throwing a fist, be it gloved in soft silk or in bare white knuckles, is still a punch to the face.”

“But a Resistance, you say... To fight among brothers and sisters, to fight amongst ourselves... It must be wrong; I have no other word for it.”

“The Jangdrivals are a plight to the people; they’ve tripled the amount of labor levy and have placed a firm grip on free trade and the crafts. A great good deal of artisans have been sequestered to the Royal Grounds, to work on a huge monument of some sort. A gift to the land, they’ve called it.”

“And the people can take no more of this? They find their rule abhorrent? An affront to the Gods?” she said with a rush of expectant despair.

“Not quite. The consensus among the people is it was high time someone built something grandiose and memorable, a true testament to the spirit of Nomos and its people.”

“But what need is there for something to gape at when there is no use for it?”

“The people’s mandate, they have called it. A deplorable bid to wrench the memory of the Teletha House from the peoples’ mind, my queen.”

“I’m not comfortable with the reasoning of the people. But I will not condone a bloodbath in the name of my reign or my bloodline. Perhaps, this resistance you speak of might hearken to my words and grow strong without baring fangs to strike against our brothers; Nomos can only lose from such a senseless endeavor. How many strong are you?”

“There’s six of us, my lady,” Sisyphus said with misplaced pride.

“Six thousand strong, then. If only I could speak to them, turn their minds. There has to be a bloodless solution. A third House might even need to come into play,” she said mostly to herself, thoughtfully scratching her chin.

“My lady, you’ve misheard. There’s six of us; maybe seven, counting the bunny.”

“Six of us? As in, six people?”

“That is you, your exotic friend and the bunny sorceress, and my two assistants.”

“Master Sisyphus, in my years under your guidance I would never thought I would say this, but I fear I cannot, in good conscience, pretend this isn’t folly. I would actually go as far to say that you must be going out of your mind to consider this a resistance. We could hardly form an Upskalla team.”

“This isn’t a game though, my lady. Great things have been accomplished by few men.”

“You do need to consider the scale of things, Master.”

“And it would be prudent to consider the timing of the matter. Events move at a maddening pace!” he urged her.

“I’m not even sure this resistance should take place. If the Jangdrivals are what the people want, then ”

“Nuts to the Jangdrivals!” Master Sisyphus said and everyone around them had no choice but to give him an apprehensive, studious look.

“Or fruit. We could send them fruit. A fruit basket would be nice,” Theo said beaming with a smile and Bo’s ears flopped to the ground.

“We’re new here,” Lerneia said and the locals went back to minding their own business. “I thought we were trying to keep a low profile, Master,” Lerneia said with just a smidgen of aggravation. Master Sisyphus took a few deep breaths before replying:

“I can’t help getting worked up about it all. They did try to kill me,” he said and looked Lerneia in the eyes.

“It is the sentimental fool that lets passion cloud his reasoning,” Lerneia said, reciting from memory. Master Sisyphus nodded and complemented: “And however entertaining fools might be, no-one wants their job,” he said nodding reassur-

ingly.

“Is it because of the silly costume?” Theo asked eagerly, only to receive puzzled looks from Sisyphus and Lernea.

“Let’s go inside. I could use some lunch,” Master Sisyphus said and unlocked the door to his rather plain-looking house. He ushered Lernea in, and they all followed close behind.

The moment she stepped into the house, the smell of roast fish assaulted her nostrils, and she felt a pinching on her neck. Then another one, and another one in quick succession. Her head started spinning and she became oddly aware that the house was being lifted into the sky, as if it was made out of gum. In fact, she slumped onto the floor with a strange smile on her face and lay there, peacefully unconscious.

“Did you see that?” said a shrilly voice with excitement, and a similar one replied in the same vein of enthusiasm, “Pow! All three in the neck! Wait till Master learns about this! We might actually get some cake this time!”

Sisyphus calmly appeared through the door, stepping over Lernea casually. He put his palm on his face, and stood there with eyes closed, trying to control his breathing. He said nothing, because he couldn’t think of anything that would capture the essence of his feelings at the time.

“Master! Did you see that?” said the same shrilly, child-like voice. The other voice added in a scoffing manner, “Of course he saw that, dummy! He was right behind her.”

“We got her good, didn’t we Master?” said one of the voices, the slightly more enthusiastic one. Both seemed to be coming from somewhere in the roof without a ceiling, the persons they belonged to obscured in the woodwork’s shadowy clefts and crevices.

“Weren’t we supposed to have lunch first, and then a

nap?" Theo asked, right behind Sisyphus. "Now, I'm confused. Is this some kind of custom?" he inquired, and a double-shot of tiny globes of fire flew right past his hair, singing it slightly, to strike at patches of darkness at the roof. Cries of agony were heard before the reassuring thud of bodies hitting the floor. Bo appeared through the door, eyes flaring, ears pointed straight up, ready for a second burst of flames. Sisyphus made a hand gesture to the bunny. Bo raised her head and looked at him in an uncannily human fashion.

"I'll handle this," he said while Lernea's attackers were lying on the floor, groaning slightly, trying to recover from their fall. They were small-framed, rather short and actually looked a lot like boys in their pre-teens. Bits and pieces of them were still on fire, like tiny candles going out. The smell of burnt cloth filled the room.

"You are idiots," Sisyphus said.

"Yes, Master Sisyphus," they both intoned in unison, having difficulty as they tried to get up.

"Total buffoons," Sisyphus continued.

"Yes, Master Sisyphus," they repeated with downcast voices. They were now standing as upright as they could, their heads downcast. They knew something was amiss but they didn't dare ask what it was exactly that they had done wrong.

"Incredibly stupid and profoundly inept at the simplest of tasks," Sisyphus said with mounting ire in his voice.

"Yes, Master Sisyphus," they droned on, as if they had heard the same words a thousand times over.

"I'm right here, not down there!" Sisyphus shouted, pointing at the floor. The two kids jolted into attention, looking straight at Master Sisyphus, their faces flushed red and their plain clothes charred, sooty and filled with crumbling

holes.

“What were your orders when I left?”

“To make sure that no intruder enters the house,” said one of the boys, while the other one added, “and roast some fish for lunch.”

“Clean up the laboratory,” the first one continued and the other one complemented him, “but be careful not to touch the Polythauma.. Polythamarga..”

“Polythamaturgator!” Sisypus exploded.

“That a one,” one of the boys said nodding, the one still clutching a reed of some sort in one hand.

“Have I not trained you in all manners of science, history, and the arts?” Sisypus asked of them in a strangely appealing and calm voice.

“You have Master,” said the boy whose reed was lying on the floor, and the other one asked raising a hand with trepidation.

“Are we having a pop-quiz?”

Sisypus closed his eyes and sighed, biting his lips before asking the boys in a calm, conversational tone:

“Haven’t we already covered the history and lore of the Kingdom’s rulers?”

“Oh! Oh! I know! I know! We’re terribly sorry!” said the boy with the reed clutched in his hand. Sisypus took a deep breath and ran his tongue across his old, creaky lips, nodding to himself in a show of relief.

“It’s the twenty-fifth of Thargilio! It’s the Crowning Day of King Menidas of House Pygmalio,” the boy said and ventured into a hopeful smile. Sisypus’s face froze in a shocked look of surprise.

“That may be correct, Damon, but you’re missing the greater picture,” Sisypus said and rubbed the root of his nose

patiently.

“It’s not a fish day, then?” the other boy pitched in half-heartedly. Sisyphus made a sudden reflexive motion; he very nearly leapt at them but managed to contain himself at the last moment.

“The woman lying on the floor.. The woman you managed to drug into a senseless sleep.. Do you recognize her, at all?”

The boys peered at Lernea from a distance, squinting slightly. They both shook their heads with worried faces, realizing their answer would not make Sisyphus happy.

“Doesn’t ring a bell? Never seen her before? Not in one of the many sketches and drawings amongst the books, or the letters in my study, my personal effects, the bloody drawing in my room?”

“She does kind of look like her, Master,” one of the boys said timidly, and the other one added, “One of those sisters you talk about all the time.”

“Fidias,” Sisyphus asked the other boy, “would you happen to recall their name?”

“Tele.. Telemar.. Teledar..”

“Teletha! The Teletha sisters! This is Lernea Teletha, the queen of Nomos in exile, you imbeciles!” Sisyphus erupted into a frenzy and stormed past the boys and straight into his study, slamming the door behind him.

“I would’ve thought a queen would be more popular,” Theo said and smiled awkwardly, while the boys exchanged horrified looks.

“We’re dead,” Damon said and dropped the reed on the floor, while Fidias nodded and added plainly, “deader than a dodo.”

Theo laughed suddenly. “Don’t be silly, dodo’s aren’t dead.”

The boys looked at him with puzzled, worried frowns.

“They are?” Theo asked, and put a finger to his lip, looking confused.

“Will someone bring the queen in here!” Sisyphus shouted from within his study. The boys sprang into action as if pronged with something sharp, while Bo was happily munching some dried fungi that happened to be lying around on a small table. Pretty soon, Lernea was being dragged into Sisyphus study without much decorum, and Bo was cowering in a corner, her eyes glazed and ready to pop-out.

“What do you mean? There’s no elephant in this room, and it’s definitely not pink. No, I’m not morphing into a flying cactus,” Theo said to Bo, and sparing a look at his hands, he added, “As far as I can tell, that is.”

The large auditorium was filled with all kinds of people, dressed in all sorts of garments ranging from the skimpy, adventurously revealing outfits of the Far Negus Arm of colonies and dominions, to the extravagantly posh and stylish attire of the Ritz, the metropolitan heartland of the Human League. For what it was worth, the Ex-temporal Local Authority Council Issue Docket No. 8933 Dash Five had attracted a lot of attention, most of it unwanted.

As the sizzling crowd hummed a collective tune of uneasy expectancy in the air, the same raw feeling of being slightly nervous had Ned nearly sweating. Winceham was sitting to his left; his jump from the *Mary Righteous* had been a resounding success. After they'd met for dinner, he was loathe to disclose details of his exact whereabouts, but he very eagerly went on to consume copious amounts of everything consumable, including beer, spirits and medical alcohol. As such, it was no wonder he was grumpy, feeling sick with a splitting headache and itching for a smoke, a small luxury that was denied to him until after the vote was cast.

Winceham toyed with his empty pipe wearing a sour expression on his face. Next to him sat Parcifal; her silent manner and grim face afforded her an awe-inspiring, deadly-looking gaze. Her eyes scanned the auditorium piecemeal, looking for danger without success. Her gaze though did lock on to the form of the Council members, once they entered the auditorium's stage: they were dressed in elaborate, ornate, red and black robes, wearing plush velvet hats that looked like furry bloated versions of dead skunk-like creatures, strangely colored but thankfully odorless. They looked rather silly to everyone except for the crowd in the auditorium; the noise died down to a few careless whispers suddenly. Ned turned his head and asked Judith in a whisper:

“Are these things on their heads real?”

She shot him a look of troubled puzzlement before answering plaintively, “Yes.”

Winceham nudged Ned with his elbow, to get his attention. “I’m having a terrible case of gas. Did you have any of that special du jour?”

“What was the special du jour?”

“That slightly poached crab-like thing that moved and you had to whack it with a hammer.”

“That was some kind of vermin that attacked us on our way to Judith’s house,” he whispered and suddenly remembered he owed Judith an apology. Winceham furrowed his brow and began counting with his fingers.

“I’m really sorry about last night,” Ned told Judith and he was being downright sincere.

“I’m used to much worse. I rarely spent time there - I considered it as much as home as any of you. Still though, how could he do so much... So much damage in one night? I mean, he’s so diminutive,” Judith said, referring to Winceham.

“It’s a good thing the fire brigade was so fast to respond,” Ned offered and Judith needed a moment to understand who he was referring to.

“Those people where a passing circus troupe,” she finally said.

“It could’ve been a great night, though,” Ned ventured with some trepidation, silently ignoring his own failed attempt at recognition.

“Maybe,” she replied and shrugged before smiling thinly.

“Now is not the time for meaningless chatter!” Parcifal hissed suddenly and her eyes met with Ned’s in a strange, awkwardly cold fashion. She was evidently upset; she hadn’t

been herself ever since Lernea had been drawn in that cataclysmic hole, possibly to become lost forever. They knew Lernea, Theo and Bo were alive, but where they had ended up was beyond them. There was little they could do, and there were more pressing issues at hand; their home planet was in danger and this was their chance to make a whole lot of difference. It was disconcerting for Ned though not to be able to read through Parcifal's opaqueness; he didn't know whether she was so tightened up because she might never see her sister again or because of a whole world being at stake. Still, he was worried about her, and especially that temper of hers.

Ned felt surprisingly calm and reassured. It was as if he knew that everything was somehow going to work out itself. He felt that his new friends were able to hold on their own. And even if they never met again, just knowing they were alive somewhere made him breathe more easily. His mind went to Judith suddenly, without cause; there too, was a newly found friend. He smiled thinly as he ventured a sideways look to the young woman who had saved his life back on Tallyflop; he was about to say something to her when he felt Winceham's elbow poking him through his ribs:

"Did we have any of those things?" the halfuin said, pointing to the council members' silly, furry, hats.

"No, we didn't. That's a furry hat," Ned said somewhat abrasively, which wasn't typical of him. "At least, I think I would've remembered," he added and straightened his back on the plush chair.

"Fancy the lass?" Winceham suggested with a drunken grin, nudging Ned in a childish, playful manner, eyes fluttering.

"Keep your voice down, they're about to start!" Parci-

fal interjected sternly while Ned's eyes widened and his face became flustered. He found the courage to take a peek at Judith; she was shuffling through a stack of papers, completely oblivious to Ned's embarrassment.

"Hear ye, hear ye!" said a man dressed in colorful silken stockings and a frilly, ridiculous costume. His voice was an officious baritone that swept every inch of the auditorium as if a mysterious gale carried it forcefully.

"Docket no. 8933 dash five of the Ex-temporal Authority Council of Rampatur is now under discussion!"

A pair of loud metallic thuds echoed around the vast chamber of the auditorium - it was like sounding a gong, just without all of the brass pizazz.

"The Most Honorable Lord of Mardichoia, Lord Privy to the Seat and Excellent All-Around Protector, Bane of the Grasshopper Swarm, Member of the Order of the Lone Wolf and Herald of Most Excellent Ambassadors, Viscount Fyodor Rabastropotov presiding!" the announcer's voice rumbled throughout the hall and there was a slight commotion as everyone stood up while the form of a short little man, rather unimposing and quite plain-looking entered the hall and slowly walked up to a long table where various stern-looking figures of authority were already seated.

"Is that the guy?" Ned whispered to Judith. She gave him a slight nod before she went wide-eyed, nodding at Winceham who was but for a breath sound asleep, slumped in his chair. Before Ned had time to do anything about it, Parcifal picked him up from his jacket and propped him straight up without a moment's hesitation. Winceham seemed hardly surprised; his face quickly settled into a bland look of boredom and one hand went to his pipe reflexively.

"Now sit!" Parcifal hissed the next moment, in line with

what everyone else was doing as the Viscount Rabastropotov settled quietly into his chair. He wore short, white, thinning hair and a bright set of blue eyes that seemed to shine with a strange shimmer at times. His only mark of office was a silver pin adorning his chest; it was the symbol of the Human League, an open human palm inside a heptagon, adorned with a golden bar and three thin stripes of glistening diamonds.

“Please, let’s get on with this. I have to pickup my grand-daughters in an hour or so,” the viscount said with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. The announcer nodded and began reciting from what appeared to be an endless roll of paper: “Hear ye, hear ye, on the sixty-seventh arc of the Tripunarian Calendar, ether-adjusted to the ninety-seventh of the League Year plus three thousand, one hundred and seventy eight, by all accounts a Monday, the case of the humanoid aliens identified to wit as originating from the world of Laertia, Meniere’s Catalog No. 341-5, northwestern helix, Droidae Sector, came to the attention of the Naval Intelligence Bureau as related in scroll-file ZYE-0944 where the-”

“For humanity’s sake, we’ll never get over this before the sun turns into a cube of ice. Skip the details,” the viscount said, rolling his eyes. Lord Trixiparton, seated a couple of seats to the viscount’s left cleared his throat and correcting him, said, “Sphere of ice, Lord Privy.”

“If I may,” he added as an afterthought and ran his tongue across his lips.

“It’s a figure of speech, it’s not really an issue of geometry,” the viscount replied with an almost apologetic manner. Lord Kennelsey, seated somewhat afar to his right leaned across the long table and spoke: “Lord Privy, we are tarrying here ineffectually. We haven’t even qualified these people as human and here they are, parading across the city, feast-

ing and gallivanting like honored guests at the expenses of the Naval Intelligence Bureau whose dealings remain obumbrated and opaque at best. These people,” he said with an evident touch of scorn and perhaps some disgust in his voice, “have not been properly debriefed, vetted, approved or even tested to be properly human as per the standing standard operating procedure dictates. And it is all at the behest of Lady Govida who has time and again proved to the members of this council the precarious, practically borderline treacherous at times, nature of her actions as Head of the Naval Intelligence Bureau. Not to mention her blatant disregard for mere appearance’s sake.”

Winceham’s face twisted into a bizarre grimace of pained disbelief:

“Is he calling us aliens?” he said audibly. “I think he’s referring to you particularly,” Ned said in a misplaced effort to appease the halfuin’s worries and added, “though I wouldn’t take it to heart. I mean, technically ”

Lady Godiva spoke out of turn, attracting everyone’s attention.

“Lord Kennelsey does have the propensity to steer the discussion to his opponents’ personalities and not the real issues at hand. We are on a war footing, whether we like it or not, and my personal life is no-one’s concern. If that ever came to be of import, what of our liberties, our civility? What of the common people we have sworn to protect? Our responsibilities leave no room for the discussion of frivolous issues. What needs to be addressed here is not a council members personal life, but the Ygg, who have become a credible, rising threat to the well-being of the citizen of the Human League.”

“I haven’t tried my wiles on her yet, and still I’ve stirred up quite some turmoil. My irresistible charm has worked its

magic, I see. Again,” Winceham said with a grin, clutching the pipe in his teeth and looking smugly suave. “It’s not you, it’s Tark,” Ned said shaking his head. “This is serious. It has nothing to do with you,” Parcifal said dryly and Judith voiced her concern: “Will you please stay silent? I’m liable for all of you. This is serious business, I could get in serious trouble if you keep this up.”

“Just do that, please,” Ned said in a pleading whisper to Winceham and Parcifal.

“I can’t help it if I’m simply irresistible to women,” Winceham apologized in earnest, and right before Parcifal was about to employ physical means, Lord Kennelsey’s voice boomed around the huge hall: “Trust! Trust, fellow council members and citizens, is the real issue. Lady Godiva cannot be entrusted with those responsibilities she so vividly claims to be her top priority. How can we trust someone so frivolous with her public image, a person of wild and unseemly behavior, who struts around the City of Rampatur like an infatuated child, all glitter and smiles, spending her time in the arms of an agent of the Bureau, for everyone to see. How can we trust that woman to take decisions that affect the lives of millions of Human League citizens, when she’s obviously partial to Augustus Tark!”

Lady Govida wasted no time in replying: “The good Lord Kennelsey obviously has no real facts to present to this assembly, and instead tries to smear the efforts of the men and women of the Naval Intelligence Bureau that have consistently provided the Human League with invaluable insight into this new-fangled threat. I will not go into the depth and breadth of the threat that Lord Kennelsey’s fixation with what happens in people’s bedrooms might entail for the safety of the Human League at large. It is perhaps of paramount im-

portance in his own mind, but I have yet to see an army of lovers amassing their forces against us. We do have proof of the Ygg and their sinister plot though, to covertly infiltrate known habitable worlds and insidiously turn their populations into mindless thralls.”

Lord Kennelsey’s retort came fast, barbed and poised like a spear’s tip.

“It is no wonder Lady Govida so shamelessly admits her malfeasance to appear impervious to scrutiny. It is of course a sure sign of growing increasingly power-hungry and arrogant, which are indeed dangerous traits for a person entailed with such sensitive responsibilities. She keeps on purveying all about this Ygg threat without one solid piece of evidence. What we do have to go on is hearsay and imaginary reports from the man who is shamefully intimate with the Head of the Bureau here in Rampatur. Isn’t it beautifully convenient that this so-called threat has been identified by the man this woman is bedding?”

A hubbub rose up from the crowd. The last words of Lord Kennelsey seemed to have shocked quite a lot of people.

“Seriously, this attack on my credibility is Lord Kennelsey’s futile and desperately embarrassing effort to sway this council and the public towards his own election bid in the coming months. If there is one thing Lord Kennelsey is known for, it is his long-standing service to the Human League as chancellor and treasurer, secretary to the various bureaucratic offices and highly profitable government positions which have time and again proved vicariously indispensable to emptying our coffers in order to shuffle cartloads of paper off-world,” Lady Govida replied, wearing a slight grin.

Lord Kennelsey peered at her through slit-like eyes but

did not lose his calm, and replied in kind: “Isn’t it satisfying to hear Lady Govida use the same line of reasoning against me? It is said, imitation is the most sincere form of compliment, and I thank her for that. But it is not I who seeks to spread lies and disinformation to befuddle and daze the public, wary of my pompous ways. My service to the Human League is a matter of public record; and if I were as arrogant and self-aggrandizing as Lady Govida, I would consider myself proud to have served fully and to the best of my ability the Human League through means rather less glittery and awe-inspiring than Naval Intelligence hearkens to be, but every bit as important to the cohesion of our confederacy, if not more so.”

The crowd seemed to approve of this statement, as the people seemed to nod and murmur in hushed silence. Lady Govida chose her timing well, and said: “Lord Kennelsey, this jabber of ours is of no real interest and importance. It is not a political debate but a public hearing where decisions need to be taken and approved before the public, which we all are here to serve dutifully. As it stands, I shall forgo further answering to your fantasies as if they were credible enough; Lord Privy, I now wish for the humans returned from the Tal-lyflop mission to present their case.”

“Surely Lord Privy, this is highly irregular. We assume these people, if we could frankly call all of them so, to be humans but ”

“I said, I need to pick up my granddaughters. It’s been kind of boring, really. Will the folks from, Laertia was it, stand up and be heard?” the Lord Privy said without making much of a fuss about it.

“All of us?” Ned stood up from his chair shyly and asked the Lord Privy in a shallow voice that was barely heard.

“Wasn’t there three of you?” the Lord Privy asked counting with a finger. “I’m right here,” Winceham said grumpily, barely visible from where the Lord Privy sat.

“Right. The short fellow.”

“Is that a problem?” Winceham asked looking for trouble.

“Not really. I mean, I can imagine it might be tough at times reaching for cupboards and such, but we do have stools,” the Lord Privy replied casually.

“They’re practically mocking this deliberation!” Lord Kennelsey interjected, pointing at Winceham irately.

“When strangers meet, great allowance should be made for differences of custom and training,” Lady Govida offered in a reconciliatory manner.

“I’ve heard that before. Seems just about right in my book,” Winceham replied and bowed slightly to her. “Thank you, Mr. Abberbottom,” Lady Govida said and nodded slightly while Winceham added, “The Third, milady”.

“This is a travesty! Lady Govida, before our very eyes is exchanging niceties with people who have hardly identified themselves, for which we have nothing to go on other than their word.”

It was at that point that Parcifal took to the stage in a blatant breach of conduct. Another rush of whispers rose from the crowd.

“I am Parcifal Teletha, of the Teletha Clan, scion of Phedra Teletha and Helios of the Teletha family of Nomos, princess successor and adjutant to the Throne, in exile. Now that my lineage is made known, speak of yours or insult and anger me at your peril,” she said for everyone in the audience hall to hear.

“She’s really serious about that stuff, isn’t she?” Winceham told Ned, looking a bit worried Parcifal might actually

go off in a sudden rampage at any moment.

“She is,” Ned said and looked at Judith who was at a complete loss for words, looking positively unable to try and contain the situation. Before anyone in the council had time to demand an explanation, a team of guards that had remained motionless like statues appeared, cradling their halberds in a defensive stance, surrounding the large table where the council sat.

Parcifal addressed them: “Stay your hand, soldiers of the Human League. I have no quarrel with you or the council, and I offer no threat. Hear me out, citizens of the Human League, before you take it upon yourselves to cast me down,” she offered loudly, standing proudly with Encelados firmly in its hilt, her arms wide open.

“As any man or woman would care to admit, I take pride in my heritage, my people and my world, which I have only recently come to realise is one of many. But I am no fool to demand of you that I be treated like nobility, or in any special way. I replied as any of you would if insulted; for a person who does not stand up for himself is someone dangerous to everyone else as well. For if it came to that, would he stand up for his brethren? Would he stand up for what is right and fair?”

People in the crowd nodded. The council remained silent and Lord Kennelsey made a move as if he was about to begin an outcry, but the Lord Privy motioned with a flick of his wrist for him to just leave Parcifal be and hear her out. He studiously complied, even though it was plainly obvious he was seething inside.

“My home is in danger. My people are at the mercy of these insidious monsters. My sister is missing along with our trusted comrades because of the Ygg. Their insipid de-

signs are grandiose and their fanaticism is unrivaled. They will stop at nothing and they will go on forever, until the time they are wiped out, broken to the last one. They have the means and the dedication to see their nightmarish dreams come to fruition. They want to control and enslave every living, breathing, thinking creature across the stars. I have seen their ice-cold eyes stare back at me with the maddening shine of abyssal evil; they have no regard for life, nor are they capable of compassion. They are the embodiment of mindless terror, and soon they will come for you as well. As it is, they might very well be right here, among you, watching, listening, waiting,” Parcifal said and the crowd’s eyes and ears were fixed on her.

Those last few words raised a sudden throbbing noise of surprised disbelief. The uproar was too much for Lord Kennelsey.

“Fear, uncertainty and doubt! This alien, who we know nothing about, wants you good people in disarray, chasing after shadows! She is nothing but an insidious instrument in a well-contrived ploy of Lady Govida’s making! It is preposterous to hear such lies spewed forth and expect us to believe them based on nothing but good faith!”

“If you do not trust your own people that have gone in great lengths to uncover as much as possible about the scourge of the Ygg, then I find it no surprise that you’re so eagerly willing to disregard our warning as mere lies. But I am offended that you seek to besmirch me in front of your citizens instead of listening to the harsh, unsettling truth, which that my homeland is in danger. And yours as well.”

“Evidence! Where is the evidence of that? A thousand words cannot move a greased-up wheel!” Lord Kennelsey demand in fury.

“A sad choice of words, Lord Kennelsey,” interjected Lady Govida and beckoned into the shadows. Augustus Tark appeared shortly thereafter, dressed in an all-leather suit, similar to the suit Judith wore, holding a slightly over-sized satchel. A pair of robed men appeared, pushing a weird contraption on wheels, all sorts of bizarre machinery and brass fittings cobbled together in an eye-jarring fashion.

“This is highly irregular!” pointed out Lord Trixiparson as if remembering to add something of zero importance to the proceedings. Everyone ignored him, their eyes set on the strange machine.

“This is a Thaumaturgic Neural Correlator. It is a highly experimental device that has been secretly under development for quite some time now. Even though revealing it to the public poses a certain security risk, it is deemed appropriate that we uncover it in the eyes, and ears, of the public.”

“You have gone to great lengths to deceive the public, Lady Govida,” Lord Kennelsey said and addressed the crowd: “These sort of spurious devices are nothing but elaborate ways to leech funding for other, much more mundane yet luxurious personal purposes. What sort of evidence can this machine hope to provide, other than fizzling sounds and blinding, obnoxious lights?”

“This,” Tark said and opened the satchel, letting the head of an Ygg drop to the floor boisterously.

The crowd gasped and the hall reverberated with panicked cries of abject horror, drowning out Lord Kennelsey’s attempts to laugh off the machine.

“It is merely a prop!” he said but noone seemed to think so.

“Looks authentic to me,” Winceham told Ned who nodded affirmatively with a furrowed brow, looking over his

shoulder to the now restless crowd.

“Order please! There will be order! I need to pickup my granddaughter soon, and I’ll have none of that!” the Lord Privy boomed in a surprising fashion. Lady Govida shot Tark a slightly reprimanding look and explained to everyone in the auditorium: “Please, do not worry. This is a mostly harmless and quite crucial procedure. Mr. Tark, if you please,” she said and nodded while the crowd was still in an uproar.

Tark picked up the Ygg head with a total lack of good taste and etiquette when it comes to severed dead things and place it on a small pedestal on the strange machine. The crowd reacted with a sudden silence. The two male assistants fiddled with some obscure controls and the machine came to life with a buzzing, ominous, reverberating sound. The crowd physically recoiled in their seats, but their eyes were glued to the machine. A few sparks and rivulets of lightning flew in the air around some parts of the machine and in the next moment, the head opened its eyes, revealing their deep blue-in-blue color.

“Humans!” it cried, the tendrils around its maw writhing with spasms.

The crowd was shocked into a frozen silence. Lady Govida rose and addressed the Ygg head in an officious, stern manner.

“Who are you?”

“We are Ygg. We are all and one,” it said in a bizarre, jarred fashion, as if trying to breath through a no longer existent throat.

“What is your purpose? Why did you attack and threaten to kill one of our own? What was your purpose on Tallyflop?”

“Kill. Enslave. The will of the mind. The purpose of all life is to end,” the Ygg said throatily.

“What are you plans?” she asked of it.

“End all life. Usher in the eternal void.”

“We wish to parley. We do not wish you harm. We are willing to leave you be if you reciprocate,” Lady Govida said, sounding firm and fair.

“Parley? Leave us be? Reciprocate?” the Ygg said in a puzzled, drowsy, voice that crackled.

“We wish to negotiate.”

“There is no meaning. We are legion. We are one and many. Resist and be obliterated. Obey and your husks will be celebrated as vessels of the void. Your mewling, pathetic voices will praise the void and the will of the Mind. The Ygg are chosen. Your dying breaths will serve as vibrant chords in the symphony that is to come. Your ”

The voice died down as soon as the head’s eyes flickered wildly before it sagged into being consistently lifeless once more. Tark had pulled the plug on that machine.

“What kind of trickery is this?”

“It’s thaumaturgy, highly advanced in fact. Notably indistinguishable from trickery for someone so profoundly lacking in the understanding of science such as yourself Lord Ken-nelsey. This is your proof. Straight from the Ygg’s mouth, as well, if you’ll excuse the pun,” Tark said, grinning wildly, making sure that it was apparent to everyone he was enjoying himself immensely.

“I propose that a small strike team is dispatched to the world of Laertia, currently under immediate threat from an Ygg cell that is threatening to turn the world into one huge slave camp to further increase their capacity to wreak havoc. It is in the interest of the Human League that we deal with this threat efficiently,” Lady Govida announced.

“Efficiently, you say? Well if this threat is supposedly real, and these creatures are as populous as you lead us to

surmise, dear Lady Govida, isn't it a mockery to ask this of us? A small strike team? Just one ship and your beloved Tark? These aliens you have so willingly accepted into our fold without good and just cause? Ridiculous!"

"Your point being, Lord Kennelsey?"

"My point, Lady Govida," Lord Kennelsey said with cold mocking undertones, "is that we know nothing of their disposition, their forces or their capabilities. And if it is one thing we should not let ourselves fall for, is your machinations in using up resources for a wild goose chase, just so that your enamored agent Tark can have one of his many holidays. Such matters must be dealt with decisively, in full force and with the care and organization that the Human League has strove for over the thousand of years of its existence. Several scout vessels would be needed to collect information on this imaginary enemy of yours, as well as support vessels, at least a legion of armed men with their matching troop transports, pickets and destroyers to provide cover for such a fleet and last but not least, a flotilla of battle-cruisers to provide field support and be able to engage such a supposedly powerful enemy with more than just an upper hand."

"I motion for Lord Kennelsey's petition to be approved!" Lady Govida said, and the crowd unanimously sent the walls chiming with a resounding "Aye!". The council members hesitantly raised their hands in approval, and the Lord Privy said in a loud, officious voice: "The motion is approved."

He then whispered to Lady Govida, "I really need to pickup my granddaughter, or I'll never hear the end of it."

"This is preposterous! I was merely suggesting that the foul thinking that "

"This is politics, Lord Kennelsey," Lady Govida said with a thin smile, interrupting him, and Winceham couldn't help

but ask Ned: “Does this mean I can have a smoke now? I’m bloody well ready to explode.”

Master Sisyphus and Lernea were sharing some mead together, enjoying some cuts of smoked fish on the side. The smell was overpoweringly homely to Lernea. She felt the rough wooden table with her hands; it was almost alive to her touch. A few negligent rays of sun shafted down from what little cracks and holes lay in the roof, warming up the make-shift laboratory just the right amount to make it feel welcoming despite all the strange apparatus lying about, looking menacingly unfathomable and uncomfortably pointy.

“You’ve had some interesting times by the sound of it,” Sisyphus said and picked a hefty slice of fish. “More than I could hope for, I’m afraid,” she replied with half a smile.

“And you say your sister is probably a million miles away, out there, somewhere among the stars?” Sisyphus intoned, examining the slice of fish as if looking for some sort of defect.

“Along with the others, yes. Literally though, they’re really somewhere out there, plowing through the stars,” she said, her gaze reaching for a slither of sky visible through the patched, thatched roof.

“Must have been a wonderful surprise, traveling in space,” Sisyphus said and began nibbling on the morsel of smoked fish, treating it as a rare delicacy.

“At first it felt exciting, but then it became rather dull. And then it was exciting again, but only because I thought we were going to die,” Lernea replied in earnest and drank from her cup; the strong mead made her body shiver and her face twitch. Sisyphus swallowed his bite and offered Lernea an explanation: “Such is the way of riding the waves of life, Lernea. You’ve just embarked on the Dromos, life’s great boat, that’s why it can feel jarring at times. Might give you sea-sickness as well, somewhere along the journey.”

“It’s all happening so fast. I rarely have Svarna’s guiding light with me,” she said and looked up into his eyes, searching for an answer there as well. “It’s as if I’m shooting blind, Master,” she said and shook her head ever so slightly.

“Life is short, considering what we mortals wish to leave behind. But do not search for the Gods in vain when it is your own heart and mind that can find the way. Can you imagine what would happen if Svarna had to guide everyone? Gods, we wouldn’t be able to take a piss in the middle of the night without divine intervention!” Sisyphus said with a glowing face full of mirth. His words made Lernea smile genuinely; she nearly felt like a child once more. “And don’t call me Master; I’m not your Master anymore, my Queen,” Sisyphus said grinning before his face turned a bit sour: “Besides, I do have new apprentices.”

“Damon and Fidias?” Lernea asked, her hand reaching for her neck reflexively, where the darts had left a few barely noticeable marks, like large insect bites.

“Them. Orphans, naturally. Capable, eager and willing, skilled and showing great promise. But not the sharpest tools in the box,” Sisyphus replied, shaking an authoritative finger.

“I’m sure you’ll work on them,” Lernea said nodding.

“I’m afraid they’ll have to grow wits as well as a feet or so in height before long,” Sisyphus said and waved a dismissive hand.

“I still think this revolt is ill advised,” Lernea said and reached for her cup, shaking her head in a sombre fashion.

“There’s things you don’t know about the Jangdrivals. Things that only recently have come to my attention. Like this,” Sisyphus said and produced Theo’s crystal from a pocket in his robes. It looked every bit as perfect as the last time Lernea had laid eyes upon it; there was a faint cloud

of lights dancing in its very heart, casting rays filled with an arcane glow, forming intricate geometrical patterns. Lernea was instantly awestruck and nearly drowned as her mouthful of mead had suddenly found an unseemly route out her nose.

“By Skrala’s might!” she sputtered while coughing and spitting the rest of the mouthful. “Where did you find that crystal?” she asked with terrible urgency in her voice, wiping her lips as she did so.

“Fished it out of the water. It was what guided me to you and that small island. I didn’t want your friends to see this,” Sisyphus said shaking his head slightly, a meditating look on his age-worn face. “I know you have bonded with them in the fires of battle, but they seem... Strange,” he added, the last word rolling in his mouth as if it had an entirely new meaning.

“I know the feeling, master, and it’s entirely understandable. In fact, strange doesn’t even begin to describe those two,” Lernea said with an involuntary smirk. Sisyphus put the crystal on the table and laid his hands on his knees, his gaze wandering at the door of his study, as if peering through it.

“I’m afraid I have perhaps become somewhat jaded when it comes to people now-days; I can’t speak for the bunny, but animals aren’t behaving like they used to either. Svarna’s light might still shine true and bright, but I can feel it on my skin and in my bones; this crystal here is much more than it looks like,” he said and furrowed his brow, taking a deep, pensive breath.

“I know it’s of great import, Master. The Ygg went to great lengths to get their...” Lernea’s mind clashed with her tongue before she could find the word. “Hands?” Sisyphus suggested and Lernea countered, “Hands, claws, tendrils...”

and shrugged.

“These Ygg. They are evil beyond measure, you say?”

“Skrala would not rest until the last of their kind was but a memory; Svarna would not sleep and she would keep the light of day burning, if only to fend off the darkness of their ways,” Lerneia said shyly, her face grim and demanding.

“Then we need to know what this crystal is exactly. It certainly made me go out there and search for it once my tatar device spotted it. And it did lead me to you.”

“The what?” Lerneia asked, vaguely reminiscent of some cryptic devices that were always off-limits to her and her sister as children.

“The thaumaturgic attunement and radiance device. I thought we had covered its use extensively when I was tutoring you, my queen,” Sisyphus said with a rather friendly smile that looked like it could still turn into teacher-gone-mad in a second.

“Ah, yes. Well, naturally, of course,” Lerneia said, feigning that she’d come to remember every little bit about it.

“Never mind, learning is a on-going process in any case,” Sisyphus said before shouting, “Damon! Fidias!”

A few moments of silence ensued; nothing but the sounds of birds chirping outside could be heard. Then the door to Sisyphus study swung open wildly, the two boys breaking a sweat and panting, very nearly standing on top of one another.

“You called us, master?” Damon said, wearing a worried frown that looked like it was regularly worn.

“Do I need to dignify that with an answer? Had I not called you, would you be standing here, asking stupid questions?” Sisyphus said sternly.

“One stupid question, then,” Fidias said as if to correct his master, his eyes searching for a place to hide, awaiting the

impending scolding. Sisyphus said nothing for an awkward moment and then flung his cup against Fidias with a flick of his wrist. Fidias dodged the cup expertly and remarked in a quizzical, rather than an impertinent manner:

“What was that for?”

“That was for testing your reflexes, as well as making you ask another stupid question, thus proving me right and you wrong. Again. You have to think smart, not just sound like it. Now, start up the Tellerator machine,” Sisyphus said with a sigh.

“The Tellerator?” Damon asked hesitantly, looking exactly like someone who wished he had misheard. Much to the boys disappointment, evident in their miserable faces, Sisyphus remained adamant.

“The Tellerator machine. And hop to it,” he insisted while the boys sprang into action, raising the lid of a hatch on the wooden floor and lowering a small ladder. Soon, they disappeared down in the basement, sounding busy. Lernea offered quietly: “Don’t you think you’re running the boys a bit too harshly, master? They’re so... Young,” she finally said after searching for the word and it sounded a bit peculiar to her as her last word rang back to her ears. It felt so long ago that she and Parcifal were in their place, yet it now seemed to her like another life entirely.

“They’re brimming with vigor and energy, their minds are like a sponge - somewhat dry though, I’ll admit - and their heart is still pure. It’s the best time to run them hard and harsh. From then on, living through life will seem to them like riding a horse; it will feel only natural. Hasn’t it been that way with you?”

Lernea considered that for a bit. She raised a brow and replied earnestly:

“I can’t really tell. I mean, I’m still learning and I’ve seen thing I can’t even recall I had ever dreamt off. I sometimes shudder to think that I was the Queen of Nomos, even for just one day, and knew so little about everything. It makes me doubtful, uneasy,” she said looking troubled. “But I plow on, nonetheless. With a little help from Parcifal, and my friends,” she said and shrugged, suddenly aware that she hadn’t heard or seen Theo and Bo ever since she’d woken up.

“Doubtful and uneasy; that’s what keeps us on our feet!” Sisyphus said enthusiastically. “I’ve done a great job, don’t mind me saying,” he said with bright, smiling eyes and added, “I’m sure Parcifal’s turned out just as fine a woman as you have in the past few weeks.”

“She sure can handle her sword well,” Lernea said smiling warmly.

“And who can argue with a blade of steel such as Encelados, eh?” Sisyphus said laughing, only to be interrupted by the voice of Damon, his head barely popping out of the hatch: “Master, the Tellerator machine is working,” the boy said.

The disgruntled voice of Fidias was heard as well, muffled as it came from further inside the basement: “Easy for you to say, you don’t have to keep pedaling now, do you?”

“Well it was your turn, wasn’t it?” Damon yelled turning his head around.

“I told you, I don’t remember!” came the muffled answer.

“Idiots! Work the extra pedals Damon! I’m going to need as much power as possible!” Sisyphus said decisively and picked up the crystal before he himself stood up briskly and walked over to the hatch.

“Aren’t you coming, my lady? There’s a great deal of findings to be made,” Sisyphus said but Lernea was already heading for the door.

“I think I need to catch up with Theo and Bo. They tend to get lost a lot. After all, I’m typically their host here, aren’t I?” Lerneia said with a half-hearted smile, thinking of how many ways there were for things to go wrong with Theo and a magical bunny capable of burning the whole village down.

“As you wish my lady. I’ll send word when I’m done,” Sisyphus said and bowed slightly.

“I’ll volunteer!” said Fidias, his voice echoing faintly, before Sisyphus began his descent to the basement, closing the hatch behind him and making sure he was heard.

“Oh, you’ll wish you hadn’t. Pedals! Pedals!” he demanded while Lerneia closed the door behind her and headed outside, where a cold, sunny afternoon so much like the ones from her childhood seemed to beckon her.

Winceham was craning his neck upwards, trying to fit the whole length of the ship in his field of vision, but that wasn't possible. It wasn't possible for any of them from that close to see the HLS Magnometriton in its full glory. Judith had been assigned to be their liaison with the ship's commander, the ship also happening to be the flotilla's flagship, but so far, they'd seen no-one to liaise with and they were simply waiting, sitting down at the docks of Navy Spire Thirty-Seven where the fleet had mostly assembled.

Ned seemed to be in high spirits, and Parcifal was absorbed in watching over the lively preparations; it seemed like anything that had to do with battle, even its dull preparations, somehow made her day. Winceham was having another idle smoke, while Judith looked weary, even glum. The whole ordeal felt rushed, amateurish to her. It made her feel uneasy, but she kept her feelings to herself, mostly.

Below them lay more than a thousand feet of drop right down to the streets and shops of Rampatur City Central, while all around the horizon the peaceful countryside with its low-rolling hills and golden-brown farmlands lay inviting, yet unbearably so in stark contrast to all the tedious activity around them.

There were hundreds of men and women loading up the ships with provisions of many kinds, some of which were fairly basic like dried food; for the most part though, it was the cannon-shot and all sorts of strange colourful pellets and cannonballs of some sort that seemed to demand the utmost care. There was understandably quite a hubbub from all the people going back and forth or sometimes in circles, but it wasn't overbearing. The sound of buffeting winds rushed by them from time to time, as the gales were rather strong this high up.

“What are those?” Ned asked Judith pointing a finger at the strange pellets, more so in order to start up a conversation. Judith breathed deeply before answering with a slight feeling of guilt: “I cannot tell you that.”

“Come on lass, it’s not like you’d have to kill us if you told us,” Winceham said in an off-beat way, getting ready to light up his pipe with a local variety he was eager to taste, more doubly so since he had acquired the particular pouch of tobacco by virtue of his trade skills; namely, he’d stolen it from an unsuspecting, though evidently quite well-off man in the streets of Rampatur City who also happened to be Lord Kennelsey.

Judith turned her head and looked at the halfuin with a seriously bland expression. A slight shake of her head and a minuscule shrug of her shoulders only meant that she had no comment on that; which only meant it was true and she would have to kill them if she told them. Ned appeared to be hurt, rather than shocked.

“I thought we were in this together. I thought you trusted us,” Ned said with a taut face before turning his head away from Judith in a childlike manner. “I thought you trusted me,” he said in what amounted to little more than a whisper.

It was Parcifal, and not Judith that spoke next. “This isn’t about you, Ned. Or us, even. It’s about her. She’s getting cold feet, that’s all,” she said with a condescending frown. “I can only hope you realise what’s at stake here,” Parcifal told Judith, in an almost scolding tone. Judith’s eyes flashed not with anger, but with the glimmer of an innocent, hurt pride.

“I realise much more than you think you do, lady Teletha. Bear in mind I’m still an agent of the Human League, sworn and dedicated to serve under its laws and edicts. I’m merely following orders; I have no quarrel nor wish for one with you

and your friends. And although I can sympathize with you and your cause, I have to maintain a level-headed attitude. I cannot be anything other than dutiful and impartial; otherwise I might hurt you without it being my intention, I assure you," Judith replied, turning her stare at Ned and seeking his eyes which were locked on dead ahead at the Magnometriton's hull, trying to look unassuming.

"You're saying you, helping us, might cause us trouble?" Winceham pondered, his face twisting in a sour grimace; the quality of the tobacco he had sequestered so tactfully was being put into serious question now.

"That's right. I wish I could answer all your questions, and I wish I could help you more. I sometimes wish I had nothing to do with any of this but for me now, there is no other way. Try to understand; I wish there was time enough and the freedom for me to explain, but I can't do that right now. We will be going into battle soon, and that is no time to question and wonder," Judith said, mostly for Ned to hear. "I will protect you to the best of my ability, but I have orders I need to follow. Don't make me choose, Ned," she said and looked at the others with a truly sad pair of eyes. "Or any of you. My loyalty defines me, it's what makes me useful. It's what keeps me going," she added, trying to sound apologetic, in a sense.

"What if you ever needed our protection?" Ned told her rather coldly.

"Then I wish you'd lend it heartily," she said and shot Ned an honest, proud look. It was Parcifal who stood before Judith, the wind ruffling her short hair, her face unperturbed in any way, and told her: "I can't speak for the others, but I understand a soldier's loyalties cannot be divided. It would mean her ruin one way or the other. I appreciate your candid

manner; it is more than most would offer though less than I would wish. Be it so, I shall stand my ground next to you, sword in hand, to face the common enemy as long as it is your wish as well.”

Judith nodded solemnly to Parcifal, while Ned shook his head slowly. Winceham shrugged before coughing wildly, his body shaking; he roared and grumbled for a few moments, before clearing up his lungs and throat. A hearty glob of mucus and spit left his lips and landed a couple of feet away, and onto a pair of nice, shiny boots.

The boots belonged to a tall, almost gaunt man with a smart beard and mustache, who looked rather prim and elegant in his suit, full of decorations and shiny bars and medals, without threatening his chest to collapse. He was wearing a Navy Captain’s cap skull and anchor sigil and owned a set of piercing black eyes; by his side, Winceham saw an attache of some kind, a rather short fellow with a face seemingly built for smiling, which was what he was doing even as he reached for the captain’s boots with a piece of cloth.

“Captain Elsenior Jones?” Judith asked briskly, to which the captain replied while still eying Winceham as if he were an impossible curiosity.

“Why, yes. I presume you are agent Judith of Naval Intelligence. And this is the infamous Alien Trio?” he said, nodding ever so slightly, not looking the least bit offended about the boots.

“I speak for all when I say that calling us aliens is an insult, captain,” Ned said out of turn, looking stern but not angry. The captain replied in kind, even as his attache seemed to have cleaned up the glob of spit; realizing the piece of cloth had been rendered useless, he tossed it expertly without the captain noticing. Winceham offered a slight bow of apology

and the attache just shrugged it off with a grin and a thumbs-up, which only served to confuse the halfuin.

"I wouldn't know, sir; it's in the Navy's line of business to insult each other. We find it endearing," the captain said and smiled warmly. "Of course, rank does have its privileges. Sailors and officer's alike face corporal punishment if they trash-talk to the higher ranks. Unless it's 'Keelhaul' day when anything goes," the captain said in a flat, uninteresting voice. "Enough of Naval tradition. I have orders that consider you, Mr. Larkin," the captain continued pointing at Ned with a playful finger, "as vice-admiral in-commission, to lead this fleet in victory. Here's the sealed envelope containing the fleet disposition, rules of engagement and the like. All the boring bits nobody reads anyway," the captain said and smiled brightly.

"What?" Ned asked as if he hadn't heard clearly. Him and Judith were wearing the same look of stunned surprise, except Winceham who was focused on the short, uncannily familiar attache who was making all kinds of funny faces.

"The Human League has offered you a war-time, temporary commission as vice-admiral, Mr. Larkin. It would be really rude to question that."

"But, on whose authority? I wasn't briefed on this!" Judith complained brusquely.

"Lord Kennelsey has signed the commision, madamme," the captain replied.

Ned was at a loss for words for a moment, before he turned and looked the captain in the eye, assuming a very proffesional voice.

"Very well, captain. How soon can we cast off?" Ned asked as if he'd been doing this for years.

"I'd say a couple of hours at the earliest," the captain

replied nodding.

“Make that an hour at most. Leave behind anything non-essential. Round the last of your men. If that means leaving men behind, so be it,” Ned ordered decisively.

“Ned, what are you doing? You haven’t got a clue about these things!” Judith insisted, speaking her mind freely now.

“What’s to know? It’s all about following orders. Isn’t that right, captain Elsenior?” Ned asked of the tall, perhaps a bit too tall captain.

“Of course, sir. If I may be so bold, sir?” the captain asked.

“Go on,” Ned said, wearing the new-found authority of a vice-admiral admirably well.

“What ship will you be boarding, sir?”

“Which one is the largest, most powerful ship available in this fleet?” Ned asked squinting simply for dramatic effect.

“That would be the HLS Bellerephon’s Quagmire, sir. But we’ll meet with it shortly before nethersailing, in space.”

“Please escort agent Judith on board Bellerephon’s Quagmire once we rendezvous with it. She is to relieve the captain and assume command as soon as possible. Make that in writing as well, if you need to,”

“Very well, sir,” the captain replied, sounding very approving of taking important orders from a complete stranger.

“What is this Ned? What do you think you’re doing?” Judith urged him.

“I’m giving you a chance to watch after our backs. I’m trusting you, perhaps with too much. But I don’t look worried now, do I?” Ned said, and licked his lips nervously.

“Sir? Will you be boarding the Magnometriton?” the captain inquired.

“Is there a ship called Mary in the fleet?” Ned wondered.

“Yes, sir. The HLS *Maryland*. It’s a Gadfly-class picket. Mighty fast ship, sir; she’s one of our best scouts.”

“Is her captain any good?” Ned asked captain Elsenior who remained silent for a while, looking for the right combination of words.

“To an extend. By certain definitions. He is known to be rather reckless. He does have a history of insubordination. He has lost three spots for promotion; but he has won a number of combat merits.”

“Insubordination?” Ned said thoughtfully before he let a thin grin grow on his face. “Excellent choice then. Captain, I believe that’s all I need for know. Thank you and bon voyage.”

“Thank you, sir. But if I may so bold once again, may I make a suggestion?”

“I’m always open to suggestions.”

“You might want to cuss more around the crew. Makes them feel everything’s normal,” he said and nodded briefly before saluting with an open palm, fingers strung together in a vee shape.

“Right. Carry on, captain,” Ned said and added with a suggestive frown, “damn you, you worthless mussel-bag of vomit?”

“Excellent, sir!” the captain said enthusiastically, turned about and headed for the boarding stairs. The short guy hanging around the captain followed behind, giving Winceham a knowing, mischievous look.

“I wish I could remember, but I swear I’ve seen this fella before,” Winceham said while Judith looked at Ned with a deeply furrowed brow, hands crossed against her chest irately.

“You can’t do that,” she insisted.

“I just did,” he replied grinning.

“This isn’t some game,” she said sounding deadly serious.

“I take matters very seriously. I am, after all, the vice-admiral.”

“I don’t know who decided to make you leader of the fleet, but we’ll be lucky if this just doesn’t turn into a catastrophe faster than ever.”

“Why don’t you worry about yourself first. You seem to be good at that,” Ned said with evident disdain.

“Is this something personal? You’re not taking things into perspective here Ned. There are countless lives at risk and you’re acting all high and mighty all of a sudden,” Judith said, looking sincerely worried.

“Is that a problem?” Ned asked flatly.

“Does it matter if I think of this as one?”

“No. You have your orders. Take the Bellerophon’s Quagmire. Await instructions. That’s all you need to know for now,” Ned said and Judith simply shot him a wild-eyed look and went up the wooden plank stairs to the Magnometriton amidst a heavy, hurt silence. Parcifal was looking at her, wearing an earnest look of bewildered confusion. She leaned on Ned’s shoulder and whispered, even though it was impossible for someone to overhear in all the hubbub.

“What exactly, are you doing?”

“I haven’t got the slightest idea,” Ned admitted freely.

“It was all an act?”

Ned shrugged and nodded, sighing.

“Pretty convincing. You’re not half as bad as I thought. At least when you’re not telling jokes.”

“It’s kind of a difficult time to work on my comedy.”

“If you think about it, this is starting to look like a joke. They hardly thought of us as humans, and now they’re en-

trusting you with a whole fleet of ships? Don't you find that strange, Ned?"

"I find it horrifying. But whatever's going on, there's a job to be done. And an act someone wants me to put on," Ned said, a deep frown creasing his forehead.

"Lord Kennelsey," Parcifal said, the name coming out of her mouth unpleasantly. "What about Judith?" she asked him.

"She'll be safer in that big ship. And if she really means it, she'll be best suited to help us if the need arises."

"You've really thought this through, haven't you?" Parcifal said, her eyes fixated on the afternoon sun.

"Not by an inch," he replied smiling uneasily. "But I play on instinct, anyhow," he added.

"I can't remember if we've been dead piss-drunk together or not. I keep getting these strange flashbacks but everything's fuzzy," Winceham said mostly to himself.

"What are you talking about?"

"That short fella," Winceham replied.

"What short fellow?" Ned asked again.

"That captain's attache!" Winceham said, vaguely pointing to nothing in particular.

"What attache?" Parcifal wondered as well

"The short fella who cleaned up his boots. The guy who was doing the hand-stands?"

"Wince, are you eating some of those mushrooms again?" Ned asked the halfuin feeling genuinely worried for his well-being.

Master Sisyphus was juggling a number of dials and levers of an arcane design, intricately arranged. His controlled, delicate yet swift motions revealed him to be an expert. Whirring sounds and the occasional clanging noise reverberated throughout the bizarre machine as he handled it with attention to every detail, feeling his way to the mysteries of the crystal under scrutiny as it revolved slowly in a receptacle which glowed with a multitude of strange, faint lights.

The two boys, Damon and Fidias were both pedaling hard on a doohickey made of leather belts and iron-cast wheels connected in a complex way to the tatar device. Sweat ran down their foreheads in a torrent, their faces flush-red from the exertion.

“Are we done yet, Master?” Damon ventured, panting.

“Be silent. This is delicate work! Keep pedaling!” Sisyphus replied hastily without turning his focus away from the machine. “This is fantastic. The thaumaturgic levels are nothing like I have ever seen,” he murmured audibly.

“So much for being an expert,” Fidias said under his breath. To his dismay, Sisyphus overheard the comment, even though he was evidently enthralled by the study of the crystal.

“Haven’t I been definitive about being a smart-ass, Fidias? Triple chores for you tomorrow. That involves fetching water from the leaf-spring.”

“That’s ten miles away!” the boy complained painfully and slowed down reflexively. The tatar device began flickering, becoming unstable.

“More pedal! Don’t slow down, not now!” Sisyphus urged the two boys and Fidias groaned, pedaling back up to speed. The flickering stopped and the machine resumed its normal, still unsettling noises.

“If that seems to be the case, then... By the Gods, I need

to write this down. Keep pedaling!”

“We know!” Fidias groaned again, his voice brooding from the physical effort, only to elicit Damon’s weary eye and a thorough, disapproving shake of the other boy’s head. Master Sisyphus was engrossed in finding a clean piece of scroll and a pen in what undoubtedly was a mess of a laboratory; pieces of equipment were lying about in various states of working order, ranging from nuts and bolts to full-blown monstrosities ready to go if one dared to use them. Still though, a simple writing apparatus complete with paper and ink wasn’t easy to find under a heap of books, plans, grocer’s lists and thingamajigs.

“Will someone get me a pen and a piece of paper? A scroll? Anything, at all?” Sisyphus shouted.

“But we’re pedaling, master!” Damon said with a strained voice.

“Bah! What good are you two when you’re most needed?” Sisyphus wondered and shuffled at various desks and shelves at random. Before long, he found a suitable piece of scroll that had only been used in the most rudimentary way; an old shopping list with enough room in the back. He picked up a jarred piece of a broken glass tube, very much like a sharp-tipped pen, and dipped it in a nearby pool of spilt, always-wet ink.

“It will have to do. This could prove the greatest discovery ever!” he intoned momentarily.

“Could you hurry up, master? I can’t feel my legs anymore,” Damon asked petulantly. “I’m burning up inside. I think I’m going to throw up,” Fidias added morosely.

“Would you have it on your heads if the world crumbles away and the universe is engulfed in the eternal flames of destruction?” Sisyphus asked the boys in all seriousness even

as his hand scribbled down in a muddled, dense script, notes, numbers and designs that seemed to make no sense. The two boys barely had the energy to venture a miserable look at each other.

“This will change everything. At least, everything that matters,” Sisyphus said staring at the piece of scroll he had just finished writing down. He let the piece of glass dripping with ink fall on the dirt floor, and simply stared at the crystal in awe.

“Can we stop now? Please, master,” Damon said even as the lights on the machine began flickering on and off alarmingly once more.

“Haven’t we discussed the merits of perseverance, Damon?” Master Sisyphus said even as a terrible cracking noise thundered above them, followed by a series of thuds and howls. It sounded like a whirlwind had ripped the roof of the house in a violent, sudden turmoil. Sisyphus looked up, as if the noise was unsettling only in the way a pesky rat might be.

“Boys, how do you feel about some extra points in combat orientation?” Sisyphus asked, looking at the wooden floor above them with a sense of impending danger.

“We’re kind of beat, to be perfectly honest, master,” Damon said as his pedaling slowed to less than a walking pace, while Fidias had given up entirely and was resting his chin on a handle of the pedaling apparatus. “I want to go to sleep,” Fidias murmured drowsily, right before the wooden planks above their heads were ripped apart by half a dozen blue and black claws. Through the gaping chasm, tendrils of livid flesh writhed and squirmed like living things with a mind of their own, reaching for the two boys.

“I’m afraid that’ll have to wait. Pole-arms! On the double, boys! Cover!” Sisyphus said and reached under his robes,

uncovering a minuscule repeating crossbow loaded with unusually sharp cone-shaped bolts. The boys fell on the ground instinctively, the clawed hands and tendrils grabbing nothing but air. Sisyphus had an easy enough target, a blue-black mass of flesh that was stuck half-way into the basement. He let fly his shots wildly, turning a crank that reloaded the crossbow in less than a second. All the bolts found their target; the monsters seemed to feel and acknowledge that they'd been hit, but it didn't seem to slow them down.

They ripped another whole section of flooring and just when they were about to jump down, they began trembling uncontrollably, faint rivulets of milky fluid oozing from where they'd been stung. The next moment, their heads exploded like a toad on a hot summer's day without warning, in a messy, gory fashion, milky blood and pieces of tendrils and Ygg brains flying in all directions.

"That wasn't supposed to happen," Sisyphus said puzzled, while the boys reappeared from the weapon rack, each armed with a wooden training pole-arm easily three times as tall as them. Lernea popped her head through the flooring, milky white blood stuff dripping from her dangling hair.

"Master, we need to move. Right now," she said urgently while behind her Bo flew past in an amazing flying leap, shooting fireballs that left a sizzling sound long after they'd flown into a couple of directions.

"Not the training pole-arms! The real ones!" Sisyphus exploded in anger, while tucking the crystal and the piece of scroll safely under his robes.

"But master, you said we weren't ready," Damon countered in a confused fashion.

"Ready or not, you'll have to do," Lernea said and reached for an arrow in her quiver before standing up and away from

the hole in the floor. The sounds of battle echoed down below, as otherworldly cries rose up from numerous directions.

“You heard the queen, boys. Consider this a pass if you live,” Master Sisyphus said, making sure to pickup his old, venerable quarterstaff before pulling down the small wooden staircase and climbing it in a hurry.

“If we live?” Fidias wondered and Damon shrugged. “You don’t suppose this is just another elaborate test?” Fidias said, as they too climbed the creaky staircase, wielding the pole-arms in a cumbersome manner, very much like fishing poles. What they saw at ground floor, left them speechless.

The roof of the house had been ripped apart, as if shaved off. The walls had mostly turned into rough patches of still standing wood and bodies of the same hideous black-and-blue monsters that had attacked them lay everywhere.

The bunny that had only barely singed a couple of locks off their hair, was hopping about, letting go fire-bolts with dead-eye accuracy at the ranks of the approaching, abyssal foe that the boys had only believed existed in sweat-breaking nightmares, of the sort you really can’t wake up from. Lernea was picking her targets wisely, covering for Bo, and Theo was levitating a foot or so above ground, holding his hands against his ears, as if trying to block out everything from his mind.

“What happened?” Sisyphus asked her.

“I went to search for Theo and Bo. They were out fishing on the docks, with little success if I may add, when the whole village turned on us,” Lernea answered flatly.

“Turned on you? Where did those monsters appear from?”

“The villagers, they were Ygg in disguise. Almost down to the very last one,” Lernea replied shaking her head.

“Is it possible that you brought them here, my lady?”

Sisyphus said ponderously.

“No way that I can think of,” she replied in earnest.

“Then they were here already. Waiting...” Sisyphus said and let his voice trail off.

“We need to carve out an escape path. I’m not sure we can take all of them head on,” Lernea said and let fly an arrow at nearly point blank range right in the head of a flying Ygg who was very mute about its death.

“Excellent tactical analysis, my queen. But on the strategic side, if those Ygg were already here, lying in wait... That only meant they were waiting for you, and that crystal,” Sisyphus told her as he stood by her side, reloading his crossbow with spare bolts from a cupboard-turned-armory.

“What did you find out?” Lernea replied as she nocked another arrow in her bow, waiting for a good target to approach them. Bo was having a blast, literally, but she was too busy turning Ygg into crispy stumps to even send a thought on the matter.

“Their father,” Sisyphus said nodding at Theo and Bo, “he’s alive and well, but hiding. He knows what the Ygg are truly after.”

“That information was inside the crystal? Who is he?” Lernea asked impatiently.

“A very talented, ingenious individual by the name of Athmoor Radaniel. What’s even more important, he’s marked a way for us to track him down.”

“What are the Ygg after?”

“The Netherspring,” Sisyphus said with a voice full of untimely melancholy.

“What’s that? What’s so important about that thing?” Lernea said as she let a double-shot fly, felling two Ygg, their heads perfectly pierced where it mattered.

“Everything!” Sisyphus said, sounding excited and scared at the same time, a feeling he very rarely exhibited.

“I suggest you take some kind of cover, master,” Lernea told him, looking at Theo with a cautionary gaze.

“Why?” Sisyphus wondered, as if the hordes of the Ygg trying to kill them were not justification enough.

“Theo is right about ready to blow them all to pieces,” Lernea explained.

“He can do that? How?” Sisyphus asked her, sounding very interested in the mechanics.

“Something called Rho,” she replied and closed her eyes.

“Did you say Po?” Master Sisyphus said and Lernea replied with a shake of her head and said ‘Rho’ once more. Only, no matter how loud her shout, her mouth seemed to simply open and close, in a slow, languid fashion, the sound of the compression shock that expanded from Theo visible in the air, blanketing everything in all directions.

And indeed, just like a stone makes waves when it lands on water, so did the power of Rho reverberate in a radius all around them, the Ygg writhing in sudden, terrible agony before their heads exploded in a gory mess of milky blood, pieces of tendrils and cerebral matter flying about, leaving their bodies slumped hard against the ground, exactly like a puppet on torn-away strings.

“I hope to the Gods Master won’t make us clean this up,” Damon said under his breath before Theo collapsed on the floor with a dull thud.

“Is it over yet?” Fidias was heard then and seeing his master’s squinting gaze, realised he’d asked the wrong kind of question again.

“The rest of the fleet should be arriving in the vicinity of Laertia within the hour, Mr. Larkin. Shall I signal the Magnometriton?” the short, thick-set captain of the HLS *Maryland* asked Ned, eagerly waiting for a reply. Ned was surveying the starry landscape with an intricate eye-piece that only served to make the distant stars a tad less brighter. Nothing remotely strange registered; instead, the world of Laertia rotated slowly, filling most of the star-scape with its blue, white and green hues.

“Not yet, captain. I don’t see anything strange. It’s just that I’d never fully realised how beautiful home was,” Ned said thoughtfully and turned to look at the captain with a furrowed brow. “Have you noticed anything strange, Mr. Peelpot?” he then asked the plump little man whose uniform looked about ready to burst. The captain of the HLS *Maryland* gave the matter the short time of attention it required and formulated an easy enough answer: “We’re running low on beer, sir, and as any half-competent sailor will tell you, that could prove to be troublesome. A beer-disgruntled crew is no laughing matter; I’ll check the stores personally,” he said, turned about crisply and quickly disappeared below.

“I was under the impression that, with the ship being so small and all, there’s very little crew involved. In fact,” Ned said, not having realised the captain was gone. He then nodded at Winceham who was shooting craps with a small gang of sailors under the main mast of the Maryland and added, “there’s the whole lot of the crew right there. They look disgruntled all right, but I wouldn’t suppose it’s because of the beer,” he pointed out as another wave of boos and awfully uncharming swearing rose out from a half-dozen men who seemed to be having a suspiciously long-winded streak of bad luck.

“Seven times in a row? Again?” cried one of the crew. Judging from the look on his face, even if he was probably not very well versed in statistics, he knew there was something terribly lucky about winning seven times in a row, again. And everyone knew, luck has the propensity to run out in the end, not the other way around.

“Is seven a bad number for you? How about eight?” Winceham said with a provocatively smug grin, just about ready to throw the dice once more. Another one of the crew rose up to his full height, which was a little more than twice Winceham’s diminutive, halfuin-standard size. He gave Winceham a very haunting look that more than implied bad things were just waiting to happen, but Winceham continued unfazed.

“Bets? Anyone? No?” he asked around, more comfortable-looking than a pig rolling in mud. He received no reply and just as he was ready to pick up the small pile of coins resting on the ship’s floor, the tall, heavy-set sailor who otherwise looked like a nice fellow, if one could go around the fact he could crush a man larynx single-handedly, he told him in a rather calm yet threatening way.

“No ya don’t.”

Winceham cocked his head sideways and looked at him the way kids look at obnoxious neighbors. “These are my winnings. You know what winnings are, don’t you?” Winceham said as he made ready to gather the small shiny golden pile in his cupped hands.

“You’re a thief,” said one of the other sailors through gritted teeth.

Winceham laughed a polite little laugh before making a gesture with his hand, implying that was no secret to anyone.

“And a liar,” another sailor added with some more

bravado.

“Now I won’t have any of that name-calling. First and foremost, I’m a gentleman and I demand that honor be satisfied,” Winceham said in a passionate voice even as he began sweeping the coins with the cup of his hand off the ship’s deck and into his money pouch. Every last one of the sailors had lost money in that dice game. A lot of money, perhaps equal to half a month’s pay, which amounts to about a quarter of their drinking money. Which was a lot.

One of them took the dice into his hand for the first time since Winceham started shooting, and felt them in his hands. Then he held one up and turned it round and round; they looked like perfectly ordinary dice. He shot one down on the deck, letting it roll freely; the dice hopped and spun, and fumbled and sat in one of its faces with a seriously ponderous wobble. The face was adorned with the crude drawing of an anchor.

“Anchor. Again,” he said and looked at Winceham, through angry, red-shot eyes.

“I wouldn’t hope to explain to you the intricate workings of a game of luck, but it is quite possible to become confused. Especially someone like you,” Winceham said with a barb in his voice, his withered, leathery face twitching in a well-placed insult.

“What’s that mean? Someone like me?” the sailor asked.

“A sailor?” Winceham replied, acting like an innocent git who was only happening to pass by.

“You playin’s us for a fool now, eh?” another, bulkier crewman said, rising up to Winceham, his shadow occluding him easily.

“Fools are a lot more fun than you fellas, even the bad ones,” Winceham retorted, coolly smug.

The group got up on their feet and huddled around Winceham, just about ready to unanimously vote on giving him the old silent soap-in-a-sock treatment. Ned, seeing where things were headed, demanded their attention, trying his most conversational, level-headed tone of voice: "Now, gentlemen, I'm sure we're all a little uptight about the mission and all."

The men slowly looked at Ned with a curious kind of gaze, the kind people might think lizards look like when copulating. It was eerie and uncomfortable, but Ned had somehow gotten their attention for a moment, only to have Winceham pull them back in:

"See what I mean? Even the bad ones are kind of fun," he said grinning infuriatingly.

"Yer in fer a world o' pain, shorty lad," the tall muscle-bound sailor said and grabbed Winceham by his leather jacket, and whisked him into the air with just one hand. Winceham looked down upon the tall sailor and the rest of the men who nodded approvingly to what their idea of justice looked like.

"Now, let's not make any hasty decisions," Ned said and added with a generous smile and a show of his hands, "Have you ever heard of what happened when a pirate captain and a parrot happened upon a genie in their lifeboat?"

"What's a genie? Is it some kind of cod?" a sailor asked, quite possibly in the hopes of getting a free lunch.

"No, it's this mythological magical being, you see you usually have to rub a lamp and then " Ned tried to explain before someone interrupted him.

"Rump of the lamb?" another sailor asked mildly confused.

"No, no, you see this genie, you make a wish, right? And the captain wished for the sea to turn into rum, so "

“Why would anyone want that?” the tall guy said, Winceham still help up high in his grasp.

“Right. That’s stupid,” someone else said and the others agreed heartily, nodding in mumbling unison. “Where would we pee then?” someone intoned.

“Or take a dump? Think o’ the waste,” another one asked indignantly.

“Oh. Guess you’ve heard that one before,” Ned said to himself mostly and another sailor, the eldest of the crew, the one who had misheard earlier, did so again: “Rump, did you say? Wot’s going on? Is there lamb to be had on this ship?”

“Oy! We wants some of that lamb, right now!” someone roared.

“Aye!” the crew cheered unanimously, cradling mops and brooms, as well as ropes and knives, and all the assorted tools any sailor finds indispensable, like smoking pipes and switch-blades.

“Could you be so kind as to hold me up a little higher, now?” Winceham asked strangely.

“Nah, I’m not kind enough,” the tall sailor said grinning. Winceham replied after weighing in his options for a moment: “That’ll have to do then,” the halfuin said and kicked hard and high, aiming for the sailor’s jaw. Instead, he missed and his boot connected with the sailor’s nose; a crunching sound was heard and blood spurted, some of it spilling on his boot. The sailor growled with pain and the next instant, a shout was heard from someone in the crew:

“It’s a free-for-all!”

Fists began flying and various instruments of seaman-ship found a new use as bruising, head-crushing implements. Stools and pegs were in good supply and eagerly used as well. Ned hadn’t realised how easy it was for a gambling issue to

escalate into a full-fledged fist-fight. They had only been out to space for a day or so, and yet the beer had run dry, and the crew was already fighting amongst themselves.

“Wince? Stop monkeying around! These people are trying to help!” Ned shouted, only to receive a muffled answer of sorts a little while later: “But it’s my money now!”

The rest of Winceham’s voice trailed off into a dusty cloud of fists and brawler’s growls. He was well into the fight, and Ned knew that the captain of the HLS *Maryland* should be taking things into his hands sooner rather than later; unfortunately he discovered the captain was ostentatiously drunk, trying to steer the ship by using a strange mechanism that included a dead fish and one of those dangerous-looking, multicolored cannonballs. He was experiencing difficulties keeping the dead fish level on the rolling cannonball.

“What the hell happened to rigor mortis, eh? Bloody useless fish. Throw ’em out to dead space, I say!” Captain Peelpot urged no-one in particular, and Ned sadly realised he was all alone, at least until the rest of the fleet arrived. Ned took the helm, smiling all the time at the captain who looked at him with a wild-eyed look of confoundment and asked him with glazed, red-shot eyes:

“Is that you, Melissa?”

“I’m afraid not, Mr. Peelpot. I’d say I’m flattered, but I wouldn’t be telling the truth now, in any case.”

“Come to me, my bristling sea-wench, smelling of salty toffee, wet like the breeze and hotter than my stovepipe!” Captain Peelpot cried and throwing the dead fish aside, tried to grab Ned with arms open-wide and kiss him.

Ned was very nearly taken off-guard and side-stepped the drunk-like-a-bat captain at the last moment; he put out his foot and tripped him, but as Captain Peelpot was going down,

he reached out a hand and grabbed Ned from the belt of his pants, bringing him down with him. The prospect of being fondled on the deck of a very fast picket by a drunken captain of the Human League did not appeal to Ned who held on to the helm, making the ship roll with him vicariously.

The ship swerved violently and changed attitude and course as if some gigantic hand slapped its sides; and it was at that exact moment that Ned saw a blinding flash of purplish light fill the void of space above them, casting pinkish shades all over the ship. A great swath of light, like a flaming torrent of pure energy had missed them by a couple of seconds, Ned realised, and just a look whence the intense light came, made everything so much clearer and darker at the same time.

A huge oblong shadowy shape, stony black and flashing blue at times, was looming at an ever-decreasing distance, struts of jutting rock laden with bizarre crystal constructs dominated its surface. It was sort of terrible ship, shaped like a malevolent arrowhead made of grim, dark stone and it was clearly on a collision course with the HLS *Maryland*.

“Melissa? I’ll be gentle. Come hither, tis’ not alcohol you smell but after-shave,” Captain Peelpot said groggily, as if in a dream, one hand searching for a long-lost cup and the other groping at things better left ungroped.

“We’re under fire and on a collision course with a big black ” Ned urged him, but the captain put a finger to his lips before having a chance to explain the situation.

“Say nothing more!” Captain Peelpot yelled as if waking up from a terrible nightmare, demonstrating surprising clarity and brio. “Mr. Peppersplotch, man the C-taser turret! Mr. Roolgoolie, give me maximum sailing speed and Mr. Wool-dredge, will you put the halfuin down? He’s a guest! Report to Mr. Galloway when the battle is over and detain yourself

for conduct unbecoming of a sailor,” Captain Peelpot said in an orderly, commanding fashion, though still somewhat slurring his words. Ned was pleasantly surprised because they were still uncharred and alive, and the Captain seemed to know his stuff even when drunk as a squirrel in a barrel.

“I thought you were dead drunk,” Ned told the Captain with an approving smile, even as he gave the helm another random swing and push and the ship dived and swerved erratically, avoiding another swath of purple light, bright as the sun and wider than the main mast of the *Maryland*.

“That I am. Drunker than a dead dodo, sir, but blast me to pieces if I’ll lose her!”

“That’s a whole lot of devotion for a ship. I must admit it’s admirable Captain but let’s be realistic!” Ned shouted, trying to bring the captain back into the fold of reality.

“I was talking about Melissa,” the captain said and shot Ned a grim-eyed look that made him flinch instinctively. The captain swerved the ship around and with the crew finally taking their places and Winceham panting on the deck, searching for his pipe, the Captain screamed in a maddening show of the power of intoxication:

“I’m coming for you, Melissa! Full speed ahead, bear down all guns on that piece of flying rock!”

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Ned suggested, feverishly trying to find a way out of an almost certainly oblivious turn of events.

“Of course not! If we we were sure, we wouldn’t be out there, caught in that God-forsaken storm, Melissa! Oh, Melissa!” the Captain said, barely holding back a full onslaught of tears and sobs.

“Right, I thought so as much,” Ned said and punched Captain Peelpot in the face, bringing him down on the deck harm-

lessly, but certainly painfully unconscious. Another great column of purple light missed the ship proper by a few feet, evaporating the top of the mast without so much as a sizzle.

“I’m not running away,” Ned murmured to himself, clutching the hem tightly, even as he heard Winceham complaining coarsely, still searching for his pipe: “How can anyone have a decent smoke in peace around here?”

The mess they'd left behind them was a grim reminder of what may lay ahead in the musky, rough maze of caves under Ered Domas, the mountain where upon the Kings of Nomos dwell. Bo was leading the party in nearly complete darkness. She'd lit her eyes up just so that there was enough light for them not to trip badly or fall into a suddenly wide, gaping, deep chasm. They could feel the gentle, soft-spoken wind touch their skin from time to time, but still the caves seemed to go on forever. Only Sisyphus directions kept them going without getting utterly lost.

"What about traps? There could be traps lying around," Theo whispered with a hiss. Master Sisyphus answered, as if lecturing one of his apprentices: "These old mines had been used for safeguarding thousands of refugees back in the Warm Age. No-one but sages and the odd adventurer ever roamed these tunnels again since then."

"What if they set traps?" Theo insisted, sounding rather concerned about it.

"I thought elves can detect traps. It's supposed to be like a sixth-sense," Sisyphus replied, and elicited Lernea's laughter.

"Next thing I hear, they can see dead people as well," she said grinning in the dark.

"Well, can't you all? I mean, don't you see dead people? Like the mariners in the ship?" Theo said in all seriousness.

"Those were phantom constructs. They came with the ship, actually," Master Sisyphus said with a gruff undertone.

"In any case, even if we can detect traps, I wouldn't know what to look for," Theo said and shrugged.

"You're not supposed to look for them, they just spring to mind, if you'll excuse the pun," Sisyphus argued.

"I can detect traps, but I need reagents," Bo sent to Theo and Lernea who instantly asked out loud, "Carrots?"

“No,” Bo sent, like her feelings were hurt. “Never mind,” she sent and continued to hop in advance, her feet barely heard on the bedrock.

“You’re talking to the bunny, aren’t you?” Damon asked from the back.

“Be silent,” Sisyphus told the boy sternly, and both boys intoned with a knowing, failsafe monotone that implied nothing, “Yes master.”

The party continued on, passing through rough-cut service tunnels made by man as well natural crevices that widened abruptly or became barely passable. The whole underground tunnel system was filled with caves, large and small; housing room and storage space indeed, by the looks of it. They hurried by, following a twisting and turning path as directed by Sisyphus who seemed to have recorded the whole map of the caves in memory. He gave simple, short directions at every junction, and Bo hopped along in silence, lighting their path.

The boys weren’t exactly restless but they could be heard whispering idly from time to time. Invariably, Master Sisyphus turned and gave them a look, which somehow penetrated the nearly complete darkness and made the boys fall silent once more. There was even the hint of a shudder when they realised there would be serious reprisals when the proper time came.

“We’re here,” Master Sisyphus said gravely, looking up into the rocky ceiling in the hazy ambient darkness.

“Are you sure, Master?” Lernea asked, having almost no idea or indeed the capacity to recognize the place.

“Of course I’m sure,” Sisyphus said and poked the ceiling with his staff to emphasize. “This is old, nay, ancient rock. It’s where the old cistern was carved out back in the days of

Grumgold Theosporos.”

“Then the drainage plug must be nearby,” Lernea said nodding to herself. “Bo, lights,” she said and the next instant the cave filled with a clear, bright light that seemed to come from nowhere in particular. The vision that filled everyone’s eyes made them freeze in place, holding their breaths. Everywhere around the cave’s walls which was large enough to be a king’s court, there were strange, egg-like things clinging on to the rock and dirt like outrageously oversized clams. Even in the stony pillars that held the ceiling, interspersed around the cave, these odd eggs lay, scaly and silvery, fish-like in appearance, yet trembling and pulsating like living things should.

“By Skrala, what are these things?” Lernea asked noone in particular with a hushed voice.

“They look like eggs of some sort,” Theo noted and nodded enthusiastically to himself, as if biology and the sciences were suddenly a particular priority.

“An infestation. A hatchery of some sort. This is not natural, it is the Ygg’s doing. By the Gods, these Ygg are a devilish plague; we must move swiftly. Imagine what would happen if these things hatched,” Sisyphus said with a furrowed brow.

“Something would grow out of them?” Theo asked plainly, unfazed.

“Precisely. More Ygg,” Sisyphus replied with his thoughts firmly on the task at hand and cautiously moved forward. “There’s the plug, that circular plate of metal over there,” he said and pointed with his staff to a manhole cover, jutting out of the ceiling at the end of a wide cast metal pipe a few yards away. “We need to get to the Walled Garden. It is where the so-called monument is being constructed. Does everyone remember the layout? We need to move like shad-

ows. If things get out of hand and we're forced to fight, make it quick. Whatever lays in the Garden, it must be destroyed. Speed is of the essence. Do you understand, Theo and Bo?" Sisyphus asked eying the elf grimly.

"I think I do. Just get there, right? Bo says she does as well," Theo replied, squinting his eyes as he focused on some particular egg for no reason.

"My queen?" Sisyphus asked Lernea and she simply nodded with understanding and determination written across her face.

"Damon, Fidias, stay close," Sisyphus prompted but did not receive the usual reply his young apprentices were always eager to sputter.

"Boys?" he asked once more and looked behind him only to discover they weren't where they were supposed to be. A quick look around the cave unveiled their whereabouts; they were poking a couple of the eggs with their daggers, giggling and toying with each other, as if the eggs were just one of many curious toys.

"Blasted furnaces!" Sisyphus shouted, his voiced raised to an echoing din. The boys froze, realizing they'd done something wrong. Their heads drooped, even as one by one, the eggs started sprouting open, in the shape of a certain exotic peeled fruit.

"That's strange, isn't it? They seem to be sensitive to sound," Theo remarked as if they were just there for the science.

"Really, now? Not exactly helpful," Lernea said and drew her bow, nocking an arrow deftly in the process.

"I was merely pointing out a possibility," Theo insisted, oblivious to the ever-mounting sense of danger that seemed to be crawling up everyone's spines.

“You’ll be fetching water until after you’re dead! Move!” Sisyphus said and the boys sprung into a running spree, like a pile of hot coals was shoved down their backsides. At the same moment, the eggs opened up fully, each one revealing a tentacled larva the size of a large rat, arrayed in dark, glistening scales, hundreds of pseudo-pods writhing under their carapace as they emerged and began crawling around the floor and the walls of the cave, menacingly drawn to the party.

“Quickly! Theo, stand under the plug! We’ll climb on top of you and then pull you up!” Sisyphus proposed, waving frantically with one hand.

“Why me?” Theo complained.

“You’re the tallest! It only makes sense!” Lernea said and shot an arrow, piercing a few of the hatchlings in one go, their tentacles writhing in a frenzy before dying out and falling limp soon afterwards. The rest came for them, as if having just woken up and feeling like going for a stroll.

“What about a rope?” Theo suggested even as Bo’s eyed flared up fully and she began hurtling fireballs at the hatchlings with frightening ease, engulfing them in flames a dozen at a time.

“Where would we tie down the damned rope? By Svarna, think for a moment!” Lernea shouted irately as she reloaded her bow.

“I am thinking! Yelling never solved anything now, did it?” he said sounding a little hurt even as Master Sisyphus climbed on his back.

“Stand still now!” he shouted as he turned the manhole a full circle, unscrewing it and tossing it down on the floor next to Theo. Another arrow flew from Lernea, but it was beginning to look like arrows weren’t flying fast enough as the hatchlings approached with an unwelcome, writhing cer-

tainty.

“Be careful with that!” Theo said even as Bo hopped around stylishly, seemingly having loads of fun spouting fiery death and turning the Ygg hatchlings into a crispy mass of ugly dead vermin.

“You’re not helping, Theo,” Lerneia said through gritted teeth, letting loose another shot at a mass of hatchlings crawling uncannily ontop of the ceiling, making them fall down on the cave’s floor like monstrous droppings.

“Well, I haven’t been used like a ladder before, I wouldn’t know how to help now would I? What’s next, make like a tree?” Theo said sounding annoyed.

“Just stand still!” Sisyphus said pushing himself upwards through the manhole, his feet wobbling on Theo’s shoulders for a moment before he found some handles to hold on to inside the pipe. The next instant, he disappeared inside it fully as he pulled himself up.

“Get them off me!” Fidias shouted as one of the hatchlings had grabbed on to him, writhing its way up on to his shoulders. An arrow flew past his ear piercing the minutely-sized horror, felling it onto the floor.

“Hurry, you idiots!” Sisyphus’s voice was heard urging them; it had a metal ringing to it, slightly muffled yet every bit as commanding as ever.

“You told me to stand still!” Theo complained with a confused shout.

“Not you, them! Throw me the rope!” Sisyphus yelled, while Bo kept most of the hatchlings at bay, their dead, charred bodies forming an ever-narrower ring around the party.

“We don’t have any rope, master!” Damon replied, looking confused and arguably scared.

“Not you! The elf!”

“Me? I don’t have any rope,” Theo intoned, sounding surprised, even while Lernea was grabbing on to him, propping herself up.

“You just proposed using a rope a minute or so earlier!” Sisyphus yelled at him.

“I was merely suggesting we could have used a rope,” Theo replied with a maddening calmness.

“Skrala lent us strength,” Master Sisyphus said and sighed, even as Lernea climbed along the pipe.

“Hurry, boys!” she said, urging them to climb on Theo’s back as fast as possible. The ring of hatchlings around the party was growing menacingly narrow, only a few feet of clear ground between Theo and the writhing mass of what looked like newborn Ygg.

“What if they’re friendly? Maybe they just want to be pet. And fed,” Theo suggested musingly while the boys both scrambled on top of his shoulders like frightened children would on the bark of a tree.

“They want to be fed alright!” Lernea shouted as she reached for the boys’ hands, hanging upside down. Master Sisyphus was holding on to her legs, using his body as a counterweight, his feet propped against the lip of the man-hole pipe. The boys extended their hands and Lernea caught onto them, pulling them up slowly with her arms, grunting from the effort.

“What have you been feeding these kids?” she exclaimed through gritted teeth, while Master Sisyphus replied in earnest “They just keep getting into the pantry at nights!”

“It wasn’t us, master!” Fidias proclaimed as they rose through the pipe and onto the bed of the old cistern, a huge empty walled expanse with barely enough light to see each

others face.

“We were only trying to feed our cats, master!” Damon explained as he collapsed on the cistern’s bed, panting.

“Cats? You have been feeding cats from the pantry? Haven’t I told you not to feed the animals? Especially around the laboratory?” Sisyphus intoned sternly.

“I think I can feel them crawling up my legs,” Theo said sounding rather uncomfortable while Bo hopped his way up on top of Theo’s head and into the pipe, easily reaching the cistern proper.

“Hurry, brother!” she sent to him and Theo raised his hands but he couldn’t reach out to Lernea. There was a small gap between them.

“I can’t reach you,” Theo protested. “By Svarna’s seven-starred crown, just jump!” Lernea urged him even as half a dozen hatchlings clung on to his robes.

“Right, jump!” he said enthusiastically and did so, his hands latching on to Lernea’s. With a strained effort she pulled him slightly upwards, before he could put one hand on a handle and feel his way up. Bo took care of the hatchlings with small pulses of fire shooting forth from her eyes, burning them to a crisp one by one without even singeing Theo’s hair. The next moment, Theo was lying down on the cistern’s bed, hatchling-free. Right behind him, a couple or so hatchlings crawled their way up, hundreds or so following right behind them.

“The manhole cover! The plug!” Lernea said alarmingly, pointing at the gaping manhole.

“Idiots! Must I think of everything?” Sisyphus said and slapped the boys across their faces.

“Oh, right,” Theo said and without moving a muscle, he closed his eyes and the manhole cover lifted itself from the

ground and floated easily upwards, crushing a number of hatchlings as it firmly closed the manhole and screwed itself into its locked place.

Bo took care of the last few crawling terrors that had time to climb through. A collective sigh of relief echoed around the huge empty space.

“By Skrala, you could do that? Lift things into the air?” Lernea asked Theo, sounding positively miffed.

“Well, yes. It’s the power of Rho,” Theo replied and shrugged.

“Why didn’t you lift us all up then?” she said with a quarrelsome voice and slapped him in the arm in a rare fit.

“No-one asked me to, honestly. You just told me to stand there,” Theo replied matter-of-factly.

“Well, by Skrala, take some initiative once in a while,” Sisyphus offered while Lernea simply shook her head.

Theo thought about that for a moment and nodded to the darkness surrounding them.

“Alright. I’ll take care of the bats then,” he said and pointed at the lips of the cistern’s walls, where dozens of blue pinpricks of light flickered on and off, growing in size and numbers with each passing moment.

“Bats?” Master Sisyphus asked, the furrow in his brow carried over uncannily in his voice.

“Those aren’t bats,” Lernea said and a piercing, monstrous shriek reverberated, echoes of doom following in its trail.

A sleek, fiery streak of light, metal and wood hurled itself across the sky of Laertia. Close behind it like an incessant hound on its mark, was the jagged hulk of the Ygg warship, shooting hooks and chains in an effort to grab the HLS *Maryland*, which wobbled uncertainly but always managed to steer away at the last moment.

Winceham was at the ship's helm, while everything around him wrangled with the overpowering noise things make when they're about to be torn up in pieces.

"Ned, lad! If you have any brilliant ideas, now would be a good time!" Winceham yelled, his pipe cut in half, hanging from his mouth perfectly destroyed by a beam of light that would have proved unseemly fatal if it were to stray a few inches closer to his head.

"Nothing fancy, but it would help if you could land someplace where we can hide!" Ned replied from the deck, where he was helping the crewmen take out a fire that threatened to burn down the main mast. The ship's hull glowed with a warm, at times fierce orange and silvery light as they entered the planet with a speed far superior to the one the ship had been designed for. Unfortunately for them, the Ygg behemoth which closely resembled a sharp flying mountain like a magnified chipped stone spear-tip had little trouble keeping up.

"I can't see a bloody thing lad, we're still going too fast! It's all a blur!"

"Try to find some clouds to hide in!" Ned shouted back as they kept pouring buckets of sand used as ballast on the main mast, with little success in keeping the mast from turning into a cinder. "And try to keep her steady!" Ned added from a prone position on the deck, after a sudden violent lurch had sent him and four other men off their feet. A wide beam

of purple, eldritch light thick as shadows shot by the ship's starboard side, right beside the ship's waterline, filling the air with a reverberating, fizzing and crackling sound.

"You mean you want us dead?" Winceham retorted.

"I mean keep her flying in the same direction! We need to spot the Kingdom of Nomos!" Ned urged Winceham even as he was getting back on his feet.

"What am I looking for then?" Winceham shouted over the raucous din of the ship falling apart and the turbulent, violent entry into Laertia's skies.

"Mountains, I guess!" Ned replied carrying a bucket in his hand, loaded with sand. "Parcifal!" he shouted out, his eyes searching for Parcifal frantically. He saw her then, at the stern of the ship, perched inside a huge throne-like enclosure, like a bird in a cage with a pretty hefty-looking cannon attached to it. Then the whole assembly she was controlling through all sorts of levers intricately connected to a whirring, rotating mass of cogs and rods, shook in its entirety as a violent, blinding, multi-hued colored flash of light followed a fireball shot forth from the cannon's muzzle in a show of sputtering fireworks. A moment or so later the shot landed at the Ygg ship, tearing down a jutting rock spire and stripping it away from the main ship, crumbling in the air as the turbulent air wrecked it to pieces. The Ygg ship seemed to have noticed, trying to swerve a moment too late, but only barely; it answered with a massive volley of violet bursts of raw energy in a square-grid pattern, its source a neatly packed, shiny mass of rough-hewn crystals.

"Incoming!" Parcifal shouted for everyone to hear, before urging the cannon's crew: "Reload! Make it look like your lives depend on it!"

"I thought they do, missus. Don't they, Mr. Tinkerery?" a

crewman asked earnestly even while loading one of the multi-colored balls into the cannon. “Oy boyo! Shut your mouth and do your job, or there’ll be no rum for you next shift!” replied the crew-master, expertly unfazed even as a violet ray of death ate away crisply at his sailor’s hat. He nevertheless tipped whatever remained of his hat to Parcifal who let another well-aimed salvo the instant she felt a tap at her knee.

“Parcifal!” Ned yelled, running toward her, the mast behind him snapping in two like a badly burned fire log, just when Winceham put the *Maryland* in a violent downward spin. The sudden lurching motion threw everyone off their feet, except for Parcifal who was tied down in her cannon cage and Winceham who held on to the helm as if it were the last mug of beer in the universe, his body going flat, in line with the deck. The rest of the crewmen were very professional about it all and simply held on to anything they could, their expressionless face a testament to their seamanship and complete ignorance of danger, even when faced with it, clear and present.

“Reload!” Parcifal urged the cannon crew and shot an angry look at Ned who was barely able to hold on to the ship from her cage. “What is it? I’m in the middle of a battle!” she said with a piercing, fiery gaze and a voice filled with proud undertones.

“Well... I don’t know what to say, really. I’m sorry. I... I hadn’t noticed,” Ned found the time to reply in apology, looking surprised and abysmally hurt, his eyebrows twitching and his eyes rolling.

“This is exactly what I mean when I say you could use some lessons in sword-fighting, Ned. Now please, try and keep the ship steady,” she said while another tap on her knee made her pull on the firing lever, and another fiery ball of light

and destruction was hurled against the Ygg battleship, missing at the last moment. The Ygg ship was steadily closing in and this time replied with another salvo of hooked chains and anchors flying in an lopsided arc, aiming to land and latch on to the HLS *Maryland*. Ned exploded, completely unaware of a deadly mass of iron in the shape of an anchor flying his way:

“Are you completely out of sync with reality?! It was sarcasm! I was being sarc-”

Parcifal jumped out of her cage and pushed Ned away with all her might; they both tumbled and fell freely for a moment before the *Maryland* uprighted itself at the last moment, crashing them hard against the deck as it entered a thick mass of cold, snow-laden clouds, completely obscuring the ship.

“You’ve trusted the dwarf to fly the ship, haven’t you?” Parcifal asked even as an uncanny, sudden silence fell around them in tune with the extremely dense fog that only allowed one to see as far as his hands could stretch.

“Halfuin, please! We are a distinct race, descendant from the dwarves of old. We’re just not as thick, mind you,” Winceham said from somewhere probably nearby.

“Just thick as bricks, then?” Parcifal intoned as she got up, trying to orient herself. The crew breathed a collective sigh of relief. The crew-master’s voice rang above the others: “All right lads! Five minute break, have a swig if ya feel like it,” he said and a round of cheers went up.

“What are you doing?” Ned’s voice echoed around the fog, the ship wobbling and swaying as it limped through the cloud.

“We’re taking a break, sir,” the crew-master responded kindly enough.

“We’re in the middle of a deadly fight, you can rest when

no-one's trying to kill us!" Ned retorted wide-eyed.

"Well, there's always someone out there that might want to try and kill us, sir, so we figure, any chance for a break's as good a time as any," the crew-master replied and tipped what remained of his hat.

"Besides, union regulations," Winceham added and a tiny spark a moment later flashed from somewhere nearby. A tiny fire started going and Winceham was having a smoke.

"Dredge me down and drag me along the sand! What are you doing?" Ned asked, unable to believe Winceham was apparently like-minded on this as well.

"I'm having my break," Winceham said as if trying to explain something to a deaf person.

"Since when are you union? Since when is there a union? I thought this was some sort of Navy!" Ned asked in confusion.

"Joined up right before we left Rampatur. Really nice benefits, you should see their program if we get back alive!" Winceham replied smiling.

"Mutinous traitors!" Parcifal said and unsheathed Ence-lados, its blade glowing with a dim blue light that went unnoticed inside the foggy cloud.

"Now hold on a moment, we're just having a five-minute break, per the Navy's charter and our union's regulations," the crew-master said from somewhere close.

"And you think now is a good time for a break? A huge flying rock hurtling after us, having torn this ship almost asunder, and you take a break?" Ned asked with every bit of sincerity in his voice.

"Why not? Now's as good a time as any, isn't it Mr. Abbermouth?" the crew-master said, and Winceham replied with a laughing voice:

“I wouldn’t say no to a swig of rum any part of the day!”

“They’re trying to kill us and you’re having a break!” Ned said, trying to fully realize the concept and failing horribly.

“The penalty for mutiny in time of war is summary execution!” Parcifal yelled and thrust Encelados blindly towards the crew-master. Ned saw a flash of silver then and feared for the worst. Before he had time enough to speak a word, the fog lifted as if some giant hand pulled away a huge bedcover, and what they could now see, was something they didn’t have time to realize fully.

An Ygg was standing between the crew-master and Parcifal, Encelados protruding from the monster’s belly, its blue-on-blue eyes flickering with their dying light, and all around them on the deck of the ship, a host of Ygg was a couple of feet away from having their tentacled mouths on everyone’s heads, ready to suck their brains dry.

“Break’s off, lads!” the crew-master yelled and a moment of grumpy near-silence was followed by a sudden realization that in the flick of an eye gave way to a proper mayhem.

“Yagh! Yagh!” the Ygg soldiers roared through raspy, abyssal throats and lunged against everyone on-board.

“By Skrala’s might, begone to the void that bore you!” Parcifal screamed and with one easy swing of Encelados she cut clean the head of the nearest Ygg.

“All bets are off lads!” Winceham screamed and took out his daggers, tumbled swiftly on the deck and stuck an Ygg in its lower back, white blood sprouting profusely. The Ygg turned around and with a throaty yell lunged at Winceham, its tentacles writhing morbidly. Ned went for his crossbow and loaded a bolt, before realizing the Ygg warship was floating right in front of them, an array of glowing lights brightening up like a demonic spider’s head ready to spout its venom.

“Helm! Evasive!” Ned shouted even as he took hasty aim against an Ygg hurling itself against him.

“Wot’s that, sir?” replied the crew-master sounding confused, the cutlass in his hand weaving a path of white blood in front of him.

“Move! Move the ship!” Ned cried in anguish before springing into a sprint for the ship’s helm.

He was too late. The Ygg warship let a volley of bright crackling energy rays head on in the *Maryland’s* bow. The arcane crackling energies flashed violet and bored through the HLS *Maryland* easily, ripping gaping holes in its wooden hull and metal ribs and parts, small and large, leaving a spatter of destruction in their weight.

The ship keeled slightly to its left and began a whimpering free-fall, bereft of the thaumaturgic force that kept it afloat. Pieces of its hull began falling apart, as the insides of the ship bolted and sprung, tearing it apart like a badly wound-up toy.

“Let Svarna’s light burn through your evil!” Parcifal screamed with fury, lending herself to an onslaught amidst half a dozen Ygg, their claws eager to meet her, but always being cut short, literally.

“We’re going down!” Ned yelled even as he felt the deck below his feet remove itself.

“No retards?” Winceham asked while in free-fall.

“Afraid not, boyo,” said the crew-master falling away, letting his cutlass fly away as he dived down to the ground without sounding overly concerned about gravity and death.

The whole ship fell finally apart with a loud cracking, whipping noise and everyone began falling to meet a certain death a few thousand feet below, the remaining Ygg floating in the air, like harbingers of certain death, chanting in praise of their void master.

“Yagh! Yagh! Ygg shototh!”

Parcifal folded her arms and fell downwards like a bird of stone, flying past everyone else who were haplessly tumbling in the air. Their eyes were sharp and clean, bereft of fear. Ned had closed his eyes, his legs splayed and his arms wide. Winceham was trying to steady himself in the air, fumbling for his tobacco pouch; remembering the pouch had been cut in half as well, he rolled his eyes and folded his arms, beginning to tumble fuzzily once more.

Then Parcifal yelled with all her might:

“By Skrala’s might and Svarna’s fervor, Gods of the Mountain, lend me the ancient form!”

Her body began to transform; her skin became taught as her body began to swell and grow. From her back, a leathery protrusion grew into an ever-expanding tail. Her chest became swollen and her sides writhed as if a newborn was about to kick and scream its way out. Her face was cast in a reverend agony, while her feet and hands began to grow talons. Her clothes were ripped apart even as her head became elongated, her forehead becoming a bony, enlarged plate. Her nose turned into a snout and her skin turned into a leathery, deeply-scaled hide, red and orange, the colour of fire.

In the span of a few heartbeats, she had turned fully into a dragon, red and fiery, with large powerful wings flapping mightily in the sky. She turned and swept in the air, feeling for the currents, before she began to pick up the falling crew one by one, letting them gracefully land across her spine.

“Swear to any and all gods willing to drop me a line, living or dead, I ain’t having no mushrooms no more, never,” Winceham whispered mostly to himself as he twisted his head around to see Parcifal, in her dragonform, twist in the air gracefully and clutch Ned easily in one of her claws. He

then saw her coming for him, swooping down like a majestic predator. He was confused, feeling unsure whether or not he'd been kind enough to Parcifal for her not to rip him apart, possibly claiming it was only a mistake afterwards.

She caught him expertly in the air and he was swept upwards as she rolled and banked, moving away from harm's reach, dodging a violet, scorching ray in the last moment.

"Dear me, I didn't know you could do that!" Winceham cried with mixed feelings of amazed joy and sheer terror. It was oddly soothing to hear Parcifal speak in her dragonform, her voice deepened but not wholly changed:

"There's still some fight left in me, halfuin!" she said and tried to smile, though the effect was more akin to a cringing wall of teeth, each one the size of a man's fist.

"Watch it!" Ned cried, pointing at the Ygg warship, descending down onto them like a rolling mountain.

"I can't outrun them! Hang on!" she said and started swerving hard, left and right even as fresh volleys of death rays failed to touch her.

"It doesn't look good now, eh boyo?" the crew-master said, the air rushing past them with buffeting force.

"Depends if those shots land on target," Winceham said and pointed feebly at a swarm of multi-colored fireballs, whirling in the air above the Ygg warship.

"It's the *Bellerephon's Quagmire*! It's Judith!" Ned screamed overjoyed.

The bow of the mighty Human League warship appeared out of the clouds forcefully, shredding its fluffy face with a belligerent fury. The shots landed on the Ygg warship with terrible destructive force, shuttering rocks and crystal spires, chipping away at the flying fortress of rock like powerful, huge chisels.

“Hurrah!” the crew yelled, erupting in cheers and searching for their caps and hats to wave, realizing they’d lost in them in the fall.

“Too soon for comfort,” Parcifal commented and nodded with her dragon head to a flotilla of several Ygg ships, equally distasteful and menacing in design, only smaller. At about the same time, the Human League flotilla appeared out of the cloudscape, close behind the *Bellerephon’s Quagmire*.

“Think she’ll make it?” Ned said nervously.

“She’s a big ship, she’ll be fine,” Winceham said idly.

“I was talking about Judith,” Ned retorted, while Parcifal added: “You should start worrying about us for a change, Ned Larkin,” she said somewhat angrily.

“Thank you for saving us, Lady Teletha,” Ned said with a smidgen of sarcasm and added, “But we’re fine now, the fight’s up there!”

“There’s fighting down there as well,” Parcifal replied with what could have been a grin, and folded her wings, dropping faster towards the ground.

“What’s that big crystal down there? Is that a lake?” Ned asked, his voice strained against the wind.

“I don’t know about the crystal, but yes, that’s the Pristine Lake of the Walled Gardens,” Parcifal replied with worry in her voice.

“What about those dark spots down there? There’s hundreds of those, aren’t there?” Winceham asked in turn.

“Nine and a half out of ten, this doesn’t bode well,” Parcifal said while Ned had a terrible realisation: “It stands to reason, these are Ygg. And if those are Ygg, those spots smack in the center fighting them off, they could be...”

He let his voice trail off, and Parcifal shouted with righteous fury: “Sister! Hold on!”

“Would you mind not tensing up? These talons seem quite sharp,” Winceham said uncomfortably and saw the ground, the lake and the huge crystal rushing towards them with alarming speed.

Theo was in the middle of a rough circle formed by the rest; Lernea was down to her last few arrows, and Bo couldn't shoot her fireballs fast enough. She barely had enough thaumaturgy left in her to hop around. Damon and Fidias were using their slings and blowpipes to little effect, while Master Sisyphus was quietly contemplating their situation. Everyone's feet were wet, except for Theo who was hovering above the water of the shallow lake uncannily, as if praying solemnly. Around them, hundreds of Ygg were closing in, marching instead of charging, as if they were biding their time, reveling in the promise of the coming slaughter.

"Master, are we going to die?" Damon asked Sisyphus with a slightly guilty look on his face, his voice revealing the expectation of punishment. Fidias looked at Damon then with a sorrowful grin, his green eyes having lost their childish gleam.

"If it comes to that, there couldn't be a better place, friend," Fidias said and reloaded his sling with a pebble from the Hallowed Lake, letting it fly hard against an Ygg a few yards away. The pebble struck the Ygg in its mouth, whereas it begun choking and convulsing, before crumbling down onto its clawed feet and splashing in the lake. Others quickly replaced their fallen kin and followed in its steps.

Damon first and then Fidias felt a harsh, bony thing hit them hard against their cheeks, followed by a slapping sound. It was Master Sisyphus, who had shown them once again the back of his hand, while the rest of the party kept tightening the circle around Theo as if partaking in a silent, slow dance with death itself, every movement sombre and unique.

"No-one dies!" Sisyphus exclaimed and his face instantly returned to an unusually calm look of deep introspection. He then looked at the sky, and noticed that higher up near the

clouds, a dozen or maybe more dark spots were being brilliantly lit from flashes of light. Various colours doused them in a flame-like appearance. Then he noticed the flapping wings of a red dragon, and his thin, craggy lips curled into a tight smile.

“We’ve got company,” Sisyphus said with an unseemly brilliance in his voice.

“We know that already,” Lerneia said and looked behind Theo, exchanging a knowing glance with her former Master and mentor. She knew then he wasn’t talking about the Ygg - he looked up and saw the large red dragon coming down right on top of them, behind her, higher up into the clouds, strange-looking blots that were probably some kind of ship, literally having a blast.

For a moment she thought when it was the last time she had seen a dragon with her own eyes; it felt strange. She then saw the dragon coming straight at her, and saw the shine in those terrible glowing eyes, and all the people the dragon carried along and knew it was Parcifal.

“It’s Parcifal, master!”

“In full dragonform, no less!” he replied, grinning.

“Your sister is a dragon?” Bo sent to Lerneia’s mind, sounding exhausted yet awestruck at the same time.

“Dragonkin, actually,” she replied while letting fly the last of her arrows, striking an Ygg straight in its maw, the arrow sticking out from the back of its grisly neck.

“But you’re twins! Why didn’t you turn into a dragon? You’d think it would be an unfair advantage?”

“I chose the other Path! Now’s not the time! We still have a fighting chance with Parcifal on our side!”

“What about that dwarf and the strikingly uncharacteristic young man she’s carrying?” Sisyphus asked, pointing with

his staff.

“Winceham and Ned! Everyone’s here then? I don’t know how or why, but I’m sure there’s a reasonable explanation,” Lernea replied full of smiles, even as she drew her short sword, preparing to meet the first wave of the Ygg, in hand-to-hand combat as she ran out of arrows.

“Well, I’m pretty sure there’s no need for an explanation right now!” Bo sent, and perched herself on Theo’s shoulder, huffing and puffing from the exertion, feeling her powers nearly spent.

Parcifal spat a gush of fire from her snout, engulfing a row of Ygg in writhing flames, their raspy throats letting out otherworldly growls of dying pain. Her attack cleared some space in front of Lernea, while she flapped her wings quickly, breaking hard and releasing Winceham and Ned from a couple of feet into the lake, letting them splash feebly in the water, meeting its shallow bottom with their faces.

“That’s not a real lake, is it?” Winceham said grumpily, feeling his hurt nose, his face dripping with water.

“That’s not the real issue though, is it?” Ned added and they both looked at Lernea with a vacant, uncomfortable stare.

“Care to lend a hand? Or did the fall turn your brains into mush?” Lernea said sternly, while Parcifal let the surviving crew of the Maryland disembark from her back. A shot of bright blue light like thunder-flash cut a swath of Ygg down like a reaper’s giant scythe. It was Sisyphus, who was looking at his staff with a sad, pitiful gaze. Winceham and Ned got back on their feet, Ned loading his crossbow with a fresh bolt and Winceham brandishing both his daggers, eyeing his next move against the approaching Ygg.

“The Yul-mogur is spent, my queen. Your sister couldn’t

have made an appearance at a more opportune time,” Sisyphus said to Lernea and turned around and saw the Lernea touch her nose against the red dragon’s snout, tears of joy running down her face.

“Sister! I never gave up hope!” Lernea said, while Parcifal shot her sister a gleaming gaze full of unspoken, true love.

“I thought I had lost you forever,” Parcifal admitted freely and a short moment later urged her sister, “Let us sent these defilers back into the void whence they came!”

“By Skrala’s might and Svarna’s light, lent us the strength of the Holy Mountain!” Lernea yelled, rising her short sword up in the air; then the two sisters charged headlong against the oncoming wave of the Ygg, cutting a path through them even as the monstrous abominations tried their best to slash and pierce them with their claws, their tendrils aiming to grab them in any way possible. Lernea hacked, swiveled and pierced them again, while Parcifal swiped with her claws and breathed fire upon them, cutting down half a dozen Ygg at a time.

The sisters were a terrible sight to behold, looking invincible, a powerful natural force of righteous revenge. But behind them, Theo was struggling with an unseen foe, his veins jutting out, sweating, twitching in an uncomfortable half-sleep, inches above the waters of the shallow lake.

“Master! They’re so close now!” Damon cried in terror, while Fidias popped up from behind him and stuck the foremost Ygg with his knife. Once, twice and then three times; yet the Ygg didn’t fall, white blood oozing from his punctured wounds. As the Ygg was about to lunge at Damon’s head, his tentacled maw twitched with the expectation of feeding on a young mind.

“I said, no-one dies!” cried Sisyphus and struck the Ygg squarely on its head, bringing his staff down with all his might, bashing the monstrous skull, the Ygg crumbling down into the lake with a mute splash. The crew-master of the *Maryland* urged his people then to stand fast:

“Rally to me, men!”

“We still have a couple o’ minutes to our break, sir,” one of the men complained, and quite forcibly the crew-master snatched him from the nape of his shirt and told him through gritted teeth: “File a formal complaint report to the captain, then,”

“But he’s unconscious sir,” the crewman replied feebly, looking confused.

“See my point?” the crew-master asked rhetorically, nodding intensely.

“No, not really,” the crewman replied shaking his head and shrugged. A moment later the claws of an Ygg were dug deep in his neck, his tentacled maw attached to the back of the man’s head. His eyes twitched and rolled impossibly, his face chock-full of mortal horror, even as his eyes were drawn inside from their sockets, the contents of his head sucked through the Ygg’s maw. A heavy cutlass struck clean against the Ygg, its head rolling while still alive, its tentacles still writhing with the splendor of a fresh kill. The crew-master looked at the Ygg with disgust as its body lay slumped against the empty husk of the crewman who had just asked for his due break.

“Anyone else need a break?” the crew-master yelled and the crew of the *Maryland* drew their cutlasses, the Ygg crashing against them like a nightmarish tide of blue and black.

“Highly motivated crew,” Winceham suggested as he unstuck his daggers from a dead Ygg, tumbling at the last mo-

ment to avoid a deadly claw attack from another. Ned shot his crossbow at point-blank range, felling two Ygg with one bolt. He swerved to the side and dodged a dozen or so tendrils aiming for his waist, before kicking the Ygg hard in the face, making it dizzy for just enough time to hack at its head with a machete. The first hack dug deep; the second and the third made the killing a nasty, messy affair.

“Needs some sharpening eh?”

“Do they need to be that thick-skinned?” Ned wondered and wiped the machete against the Ygg’s body.

It was at that moment that everyone felt a wave of pressure overcoming them, feeling it reverberate through their bones. They saw the Ygg then tremble, growling in agony for a moment before succumbing to Theo’s powerful Rho, splashing in the water in an outward pattern, like stalks of grass blown against the wind. Theo fell down awkwardly with a splash as well, planting his feet in the bottom of the lake, gasping for breath, sweating profusely.

“That’s it, I’m spent. I need to sleep,” he said in what was almost a whisper.

“Well earned lad,” Winceham said, cleaning his daggers in the murky, white-stained water around him.

“Look!” Ned said and nodded to a small host of riders that appeared out of the small gate that led to the castle proper, from where Lernea and the others before had first appeared in the lake, where the giant crystal had been constructed out of the lake’s bedrock, smack in its middle.

“The Jangdrivals,” Lernea said, even as her sister returned to her human form once again, writhing and trembling in a controlled, practiced fashion.

“Their timing is rather... Fanciful, wouldn’t you agree, my lady?” Sisyphus said with a deep frown.

“Master, should we shoot them?” Fidias said eagerly, readying his sling.

“Not yet. You’ll know soon enough when it comes to that,” Sisyphus replied.

“Well, I guess you can now have the rest of your break, lads,” the crew-master said feeling at ease and the crew sat down in the shallow water, the water up to their waist as their buttocks touched the pebble-bed floor.

The small host of riders galloped at an easy pace, the horses’ hooves splashing in the water in a strange, perfect rhythm. A man wearing the Jangdrival’s colors over a shiny full-plate armor was at the head of the host, all in all no more than a dozen riders. Beside him rode a banner-man, flying the colours of the Jangdrivals proudly, on top of the Nomos crest, the Holy Mountain, embroidered in gold and silver cloth.

“Halt!” the leader of the host ordered and dismounted, a comfortable few yards away from Lernea and Parcifal. Ey-ing them intensely, he walked towards them at an easy pace, his banner-man close behind. The rest of them remained mounted.

“What are you doing?” Ned asked Winceham in a puzzled whisper, looking at him having a smoke with a borrowed pipe.

“I’m having my two-minute break,” Winceham replied unfazed, forming small circles of puffy smoke with his lips twirled in an ‘o’.

“I don’t think now’s quite the time,” Ned said shaking his head in disappointment.

“Union regulations, lad,” Winceham replied and shrugged.

“King Jangdrival of Nomos now, is it not?” Lernea called in mocking tones, pointing her short sword’s tip at the usurper of her throne.

“Encelados is still glowing, sister,” Parcifal whispered to her sister’s ear.

“I can see that. I can also see you’re buck naked,” Lernea replied, shooting her sister a disapproving look.

“Well, what did you expect? I was in dragonform!” she hissed and feeling somewhat self-conscious she asked, “I wonder why Winceham isn’t ogling at me. Or any of them at all, for that matter.”

“I’ve spent my last iota of thauma on a very thin illusion. All the men see you dressed in simple robes,” Bo sent in Parcifal’s mind. She nodded at the bunny in thanks.

“Let us dispense with the pleasantries, Lernea Testarossa,” the Jangdrival said approaching at a slow, even pace.

“Your rule is forfeit. I claim my rightful rule as Queen of the Kingdom of Nomos,” Lernea said authoritatively, her face set in stone.

“Laughable,” the Jangdrival replied and with a wave of his hand, the mounted riders circled around all of them.

“We outnumber you. Your forces are spent. Surrender or perish,” Lernea shouted, looking at the bland-faced riders with disdain.

“Reality escapes you,” the Jangdrival retorted and added, “Hand us the crystal and your vacant hulks will be of fitting service.”

“What’s going on lad? Hard negotiations?” Winceham said, putting out his pipe in the water and having second thoughts about it after he realized there was still a lot of white blood floating in there.

“I think these are not really men,” Ned replied.

“You’re correct in your assumption, Mr. Larkin,” Master Sisypus said, standing close by.

“You must be Master Sisyphus. I’m honored,” Ned replied offering his hand.

“Now’s not the time for introductions, but likewise,” Sisyphus said warily.

“Never,” Lernea replied to Jangdrival through gritted teeth while beside her, Encelados shone with a bright blue and white inner light in the hands of Parcifal.

“Stubborn animals, humans,” the Jangdrival said and in an instant his body warped and twisted itself violently, revealing the true form of an Ygg, the men in his company doing the same, their horses transformed into large carapaced abyssal terrors with large bulging eyes and a mass of tendrils with an enormous reach.

“Just about when I thought I could have another smoke,” Winceham said and sighed.

“Does that mean the break’s off?” asked a crewman right before he was grabbed by one of the tentacled monsters and swallowed in half.

“Anyone else have any stupid questions, you scallywags?” the crew-master intoned, brandishing his cutlass, before the Ygg and their mounts charged them.

“This is tactically unsound,” Sisyphus said grumpily. Ned shot a bolt smack against an Ygg’s face but it was silently absorbed, like the body of an Ygg was made of some sort of sponge.

“That doesn’t look normal,” Ned said with a frown and at the same time, the others as well had a moment of epiphany.

“The crystal,” Bo sent to everyone who could hear her, “The huge Ygg crystal! It’s acting up, flaring with eldritch power!”

“The crystal, right!” Sisyphus said as well, as if he had a sudden realization himself, and he produced Theo’s crystal

from his robes, attaching it deftly to his staff's tip, like popping it into a make-shift receptacle. Bo saw what Sisypheus was trying to do and skipped and hopped toward him, while the Ygg were charging them in full force.

Parcifal readied Encelados while Lerneia stood her ground with short sword in hand. They never showed whether or not it mattered to them that the Ygg now seemed to be impervious to damage. Wincham got up and put his pipe in his vest's pocket, looking quite pissed off at not being able to smoke in peace. The two boys looked at Master Sisypheus as his lips began to whisper words they had never heard before.

"What's the master saying?" Fidias asked Damon.

"I don't know. It looks like he's praying," Damon replied shaking his head.

"Should we shoot our slings?" Fidias asked, readying a shot.

"Maybe it doesn't matter anymore," Damon said to his friend and shrugged casually.

Bo jumped right in front of the staff then, at the exact moment that a thin, steady line of light not thicker than a hair's breadth shot through her, and behind her aiming at the Ygg crystal. And then a surge of immense power created a sphere of magnificent light, crackling with a never seen before force, surrounded Bo and Sisypheus. In a frozen bubble of time, the sphere expanded, shining with a light that tore shadows apart, shredding them to pieces, a haze of unnatural heat radiating in the air.

Once it reached the boundaries of the Ygg crystal, the sphere of light collapsed in a single point centered at Bo. The next moment, a brilliant blinding white light exploded from the bunny outward, engulfing the lake, the crystal, and everyone else in the bosom of a miniature star.

Higher above the lake, in the clouds, Judith saw the fiery explosion of light below her; it was a massive, terrible sight to behold, blinding her temporarily. Her mind raced with all the possibilities, but she soon realized something momentous had happened.

“Madamme, the enemy fleet seems unable to act. It’s like they’re adrift in the air,” the tactical officer in the bridge of the *Bellerephon’s Quagmire* informed her.

“Fire for effect,” she ordered without blinking and sighed, unable to tear her eyes away from the shrinking, unbearably luminous ball of whiter-than-white light below.

Ned opened his eyes lazily; he saw a stone-crafted ceiling, rough but elegantly put together, each piece of stone fitting, well-placed. Soft, golden-hued light bathed the room he was in from a wide-arched, paned-glass window which lay half-open. Outside, rows of chestnut tress could be seen with snow-capped mountains in the distance.

He felt the mattress comfortably hugging his body; he felt tired, his muscles aching for stillness. He heard the chirruping sound of birds; it reminded him of lazy mornings. He put his hands on his belly above the soft beddings, and felt content just by being there. He remembered the terrible white that occluded every other sense, and the thought of perhaps being dead entered his head. He stared vacantly at the ceiling for a moment, uninterested in the sparse fittings of the room; there was a simple bedside table where a jar stood and a low wooden table with an empty candlestick. And that was that.

He then heard the door to the room swing open; the face of a woman appeared through it timidly, as if he was being pried upon. He had no recollection of seeing her before, but her face was elven-like in its appearance, a sight to behold. Silver-haired with a face of simple, elegant beauty, she presented herself fully; she wore linen, heavy robes of a dark brown, starkly contrasted with her milky skin. If she had been wearing white, he'd be tempted to think once more he had died and this was what angels looked like. She smiled at him tentatively and bringing her palms together awkwardly, she spoke with a girly voice that made her impossible not to like: "So, Ned. You're awake," she said and nodded somewhere past the door.

"I'm not dead, am I?" Ned said, trying to get the question out of his head. He propped himself upwards, resting his back on the bed's comfortable pillows.

“No. No, you’re not,” she said and smiled. Past the door came Winceham with a playful stride, smoking his pipe fervently.

“Thank you, lad,” Winceham said and grinned, looking past the door behind him for a moment and grinning.

“About what?” Ned asked him and added, “Who is she?” pointing a finger, before reminding himself of his manners and slightly bowing uncomfortably to her, asking: “I mean, who are you, my lady?”

“It’s Bo!” Theo said with a gleaming smile, entering the room with barely enough clearance.

“Bo?” Ned asked with evident confusion in his voice.

“It’s Bo, and you just won me a good amount of coin,” Winceham said.

“I’m probably just as surprised as you are, Ned,” Bo said and shrugged. She looked at her hands for a moment and added, “Alright, maybe more.”

She then looked at her chest like it had never been there before, which was in some sense true, and said as if it begged belief: “Maybe a lot more.”

“Isn’t she lovely? Look, she’s got hair and everything!” Theo said, brimming with enthusiasm.

“What happened, exactly?” Ned asked, blinking while he tried to make sense of things.

“It’s a long story. There’s a short version, though,” Winceham said puffing at his pipe before adding, with a stream of smoke escaping his nostrils, “We won.”

“And we’re alive!” Theo added without being able to wipe the grin off his face, waving his arms like a boy who has just discovered the joys of what bouncing balls must feel like.

“And I’m a woman, now,” Bo said mostly so she could listen to it herself, and twitched her nose as if she was about

to sneeze for a moment.

“Now get dressed, lad,” Winceham said as he turned about to leave and added, “you shouldn’t be late for the party.”

“The party? Where are we?”

“Ered Domas,” Bo replied, nodding to herself as if making sure that was the name of the place.

“Which is?”

“A big castle! It’s a lot bigger than a house!” Theo exclaimed and hugged Bo, nearly squeezing her breathless. “It’s even got towers! Isn’t she wonderful?” he said and left the room as well, looking over his shoulder and nearly stumbled on the walls a couple of times.

“Well. Nice to meet you,” Ned said and pursed his lips awkwardly, nodding to Bo who was able to breathe regularly once more.

“Likewise,” she replied and nodded, looking around the room, as if she was still trying to get acquainted with her new size.

“So... Excited, much?” Ned asked her, twiddling his thumbs.

“It’s been an interesting turn of events, that’s certainly true,” she replied.

Lernea walked in the room right about then like she owned the place, which in essence she did, and shot Bo a look of suspicious contempt.

“You’re not wearing anything underneath these robes, are you?”

“Well, I didn’t know how to put those other things on and -” Bo began to answer before being interrupted with a scoff.

“Inexcusable for a lady, walking around without undergarments! Open to interpretations of the worst conceivable kind of a lady’s honor!” Lernea exclaimed. “And you! Not

averting your eyes and ogling a young inexperienced girl, taking advantage of her newly-found body, unable to contain your urges in a manner most unbecoming of a gentleman!" she added, pointing a finger at Ned, her ceremonial armor clanking as she jostled vigorously.

"What?" Ned asked plainly, unable to understand why he was being yelled at.

"Get dressed! Both of you!"

"But I'm not naked!" Bo whined feebly.

"You are underneath!" Lernea said and looking at Ned, stepped in front of Bo, as if protecting her from a mortal threat. "Shame on you, Ned Larkin!"

"What did I do?" Ned demanded and slid off his bed in order to protest. He felt a rush of cold air in his nether regions; it was Lernea's shocked eyes and Bo's curious gaze that alerted him to the reality of being completely naked.

"Cover your eyes!" Lernea shouted to Bo even as Ned began to feel inadequately embarrassed, his face flush red, and his hands reflexively trying to cover up the offending area.

"What for? I've seen everyone naked," Bo said sounding quite uninterested and left the room with a nod and a weird smile to Ned. "I used to be a bunny, remember?" she said without turning to look back even as Lernea looked at Ned with a sour face and told him: "Wipe that grin off your face. Honestly, get dressed," she said pointing a commanding finger and left the room, slamming the door closed shut behind her.

The large expanse of the dining hall echoed with the harmonious sounds of lutes and flutes. The din of the chattering people wasn't invasive, pervasive though it was. Ned was feeling a lot more comfortable among normal, yet completely unknown people. He was sitting next to Master Sisyphus who was enjoying a cup of mead, his watchful eyes meandering around the room, and always affording Damon and Fidias who had been assigned as honorary guards to Lernea and Parcifal a wary gaze that kept them on their toes, even if that did not add much to their overall height.

"So, we won," Ned began reiterating. Sisyphus nodded and sipped quietly.

"And Bo, the bunny, turned back into a human," Ned continued, underlying his words by tapping a hand softly on the meat-laden table. Sisyphus nodded once more, after pausing to think for a moment.

"And you don't remember how any of it happened exactly?" Ned asked with worry in his voice. Master Sisyphus cleared his throat before answering: "What I can clearly remember is that I used the Metathaumaturgic device as a Resonating Amplifier for a powerful disintegration spell, just when Bo got in the way."

"So you kind of disintegrated her? Along with the huge crystal the Ygg had been built?" Ned asked sounding rather concerned about what had happened to the crystal. He then heard Judith's voice as she pulled the empty, heavy, thick-built chair beside him and sat down.

"A major victory. Quick, with little to no losses at all. Decisive, informative. Diplomatically convenient. One for the history books," she said smiling confidently and eyed the table, searching for a specific, choice-cut of meat. "I hear the Dwelvar sausage is quite spicy and juicy, lady Judith," Master

Sisyphus said and smiled.

“Judith!” Ned couldn’t help but say her name, sounding inappropriately superfluous and a bit dumb with his overjoyed response.

“Ned,” she said nodding kindly and reached for a sausage. There were dozens of long, not very practical tables like this one around the dining hall, but everyone seemed to be in good spirits since food and drink was available aplenty. It was as if the world-eating menace of the Ygg had been but a mild inconvenience long past dealt with.

“That was some very good timing with the *Bellerephon*,” Ned said nodding, looking at Judith in a searching, gracious manner.

“It was luck, mostly. But I should thank you,” she replied, and took a bite off the sausage, munching it in a manner that would have Lerneia baulking.

“What for?” Ned asked with a curious smile.

“For trusting in me. For pushing me to do something I thought I wasn’t supposed to,” she replied after swallowing.

“You mean, command a battleship?” Ned asked somewhat puzzled.

“No. You pushed me into believing in a cause,” she replied earnestly, and took another bite off the sausage and swallowed.

“Eating my sister’s Kingdom away?” Parcifal interrupted harshly as she stood between Ned and Judith. They looked at her with a confused look of mild horror, before she understood they were thinking she was being serious.

“It was a joke,” she said and smiled harmlessly. “Ned should’ve picked it up,” she added.

“Frankly, it was crass and rather insulting,” he replied with a frown.

“Exactly,” Parcifal said and looking rather fresh and shiny in an exquisitely crafted armor of her own, turned about and left. “Have a drink on me. It is well deserved. And try to keep Winceham sober,” she reminded Ned with a knowing look.

“I think she insulted my abilities as a comedian,” Ned said. Sisyphus nodded, agreeing. “Yes, thoroughly so. Though I hardly know you, Ned, you don’t strike me as an especially funny person, if you don’t mind me being frank.”

“That’s not true. I am innately funny; but that’s besides the point,” Ned said shaking his head.

“Exactly. The point is,” Winceham said appearing on the other side of the table from underneath it, trying to stand on his chair without toppling it over, “He is not Frank. His name is Sysopas,” Winceham said and blinked furiously, grinning like a horse on a selling display.

“Sisyphus,” the wizened old wizard and scholar corrected him without showing any feelings of being insulted.

“That one, whatever it is, is not Frank. I know a Frank when I sees one, right love?” Winceham said and shot Judith a look that was supposed to be suave and charming, while in effect it was rather disconcerting as it made Winceham look like someone who had spent years trying to recover from a brain injury.

“Hifs brunk, ind’t he?” Judith stopped eating and said with half her mouth full.

“It’s a condition. He’s not exactly drunk,” Ned said and nodded apologetically like he had done so dozens of times in the past on behalf of Wince.

A loud gong was heard then suddenly, its ringing reverberating across the large dining hall. It struck three times, before a loud, stentorian voice announced emphatically: “Now hear ye! Hear ye! Her Magnificent Eminence, First Among

Equals, Scion of House Teletha, Protector of the Realm and Ascendant to the Holy Mountain, Queen Lernea, the True!”

As he did so, Lernea appeared from behind a wide-arched doorway, Parcifal behind her, both of them looking exquisite, majestic in their armor while kind and honorable in their demeanor, as they eyed the room with an elevated sense of duty. The guests, hundreds of them, rose from their seats and bowed in total silence. It didn’t look like a sign of subservience; it rather looked like a show of sincere, deep gratitude.

Lernea stood by a thick piece of stone, carved in the semblance of a stool or a low chair placed in the very head of the large hall, but she did not seat herself. Parcifal stood right beside her, not a step behind. They both scanned the dining hall with bright, gleaming eyes; a thin smile underlined Lernea’s words, while Parcifal looked a lot more cheerful than she had been for the past few days.

“It hasn’t been that long if we were to measure time by the rising and the falling of the sun. Yet to me, it felt like a long, arduous journey, until I could set foot again in my home; not as a runaway traitor, or an oath-breaking coward, but as the one true rightful ruler of the Kingdom of Nomos,” she said calmly, and took a breath filled with relief.

“I stand here before you, and I can hardly recognise most of you lords and ladies. I know though where your allegiance lies; it lies not in me, and not in my family. It lies in the laws of our great Kingdom, it lies in the rules of the Holy Mountain and the values of our forefathers. That is the very heart and essence of our being, our way of life and our code of honor. For without law and honor, we are but beasts made to look like men. Without fairness and goodness of heart, we are but tools to be used, wielded by our darker nature,” she said with

a crystal clear, strong voice.

“I came to realise, perhaps too late for comfort, how a far darker thing is out there, brooding, scheming. It is an evil of many faces, but one name: the Ygg,” Lernea said and the crowd of guests sounded uneasy, uttering prayers of protection. Lernea paused for a moment before she went on.

“Good fortune and the guiding light of Svarna showed me the True Path; with Skrala’s might and the help of my friends, we were able to save our Kingdom, and our world indeed, of an evil that would have seen us turned into mindless slaves and our world a smoldering wreck, a breeding pit for more evil to pour itself out into the universe.”

The crowd cheered and voices of praise rose up to the ceiling. After the crowd settled back into listening, Lernea continued.

“And that is why I must take leave of my reigning duties, for now. Because I cannot, and will not rest, until this scourge is nothing but a memory, a footprint in the annals of our time. Haste is of paramount importance; there are certain things that have been put in motion which must be acted upon now, lest the tide turns once more against us. I have trust in you to carry on your duties like you have always done, obeying the laws and listening to the heart of the Holy Mountain. We will have the aid of our newly-found allies, bonded in the heat of battle, the proud alliance of human worlds, the Human League.”

A silence filled by lonely whispers dominated the hall. Lernea sighed and continued, her voice ringing throughout the walls of the dining hall.

“It is thus why I name Winceham Higginsbottom Abbermouth the Third, of House Abbermouth, of the Halfuin race, to be Viceroy in my absence, to uphold the law, and protect

the innocent. May the light of Svarna shine on your path, Viceroy Winceham, and Skrala lend his hand where your righteous fist may fall,” she said officiously and left just as she had entered, with Parcifal behind her, having great difficulty containing her laughter.

“What did Lernea just say?” Ned asked Sisyphus dumb-founded.

“You’re leaving for a place called Noymansland, tomorrow. You need to find Theo’s and Bo’s father; he probably holds the key to the Ygg menace. This is a lot larger than Nomos, Mr. Larkin. You’re in a unique position to possibly save all life as we know it,” Sisyphus said and ran his tongue across his lips, before downing the rest of his cup in one go.

“Yes, yes, that must be quite important, but did she just name Winceham Viceroy?” Ned insisted.

“I believe so, she did, yes.”

“That’s like almost a king, right?” Ned asked sounding mortified.

“Well, very roughly put, yes,” Sisyphus said and filled his cup from a pitcher, while Winceham fell off his chair and onto the stone floor with a dull thud.

“Why would she do that? Why would anyone do that?” Ned said, sounding irrationally anxious, forming troubling mental images of Winceham as king of anything in his mind.

“Oh, I’m sure there must be a valid reason,” Sisyphus said wiping his lips with the back of his hand.

“Really now? Because I can’t think of any,” Ned said.

“Maybe it’s just a game,” Judith said putting aside her plate, filled with an uncanny number of bones and leftovers. “War is nothing but politics; and politics is a game. It’s just a game, with players of any number of weaknesses and any number of strengths. It’s like we’re sitting on a giant game-

board of Po,” she said and let out a burp, putting a hand on her mouth as an afterthought.

“A game of Po?” Ned said and listened to himself as through the ears of a stranger.

“Do you play?” Sisyphus asked casually, readying his pipe for a smoke.

“No, I don’t. But I’m a fast learner,” Ned said and had a sip of mead himself.

END OF BOOK III