

Party of Five

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Book II

a fantasy novella by

Vasileios Kalampakas

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This is a work of fiction. Any likeness to persons and events is purely coincidental. I'm sure you'd be expecting that, since this is fantasy, but you never know.

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(which I don't really frequent but you could give me a good reason)

and see my other stuff, what I'm working on and let me know what I'm doing wrong.

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Foreword from the author

This is Book II in the “Party of Five” series of novellas. That means, there’s definitely at least one more book out there that needs some love as well. Plus, it’s really good to learn a bit more about the main characters and read their story, their first adventure together. Not that you really have to, me thinks, but I hope you’ll like it. It’s also good for the soul.

In book II, there might not be so many funny moments (the definition of funny is always up for debate), but I hope it delivers. For those of you who have already read Book I, by the time you’ve read Book II, I hope you’ll be enticed to wait for Book III. For those of you who haven’t read Book I, I hope you’ll get a copy after reading this. Get one for your friends as well; like a gift or maybe part of a sinister plot to make their day.

I dearly hope you’ll come to like the characters enough to wait for the next novella in the series. God willing, when this first story arc is completed, a paperback of all three books will be published in a single volume.

P.S. : Please do write a review if you could bother, even a nasty one. It’s what enables me to know what works and what doesn’t. Good reviews are really good for the soul, too.

Sincerely (I do mean it),

Vasileios Kalampakas

“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.

Winceham, 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, Wince had enjoyed their journey so far, even though he spent most of his time kicking in his sleep.

Parcifal, 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 grumpy, 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 Lerne 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,” Lerneia 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 Parcifall 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 Ence-lados' 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 Lernea 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. Lerne 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 towlin’ 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, crisscrossing 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 beffudlement 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 dumbbed-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 un-

til the moment one of them brandished a literally bloody spatula, much to the merriment of his co-workers.

Parcifal 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 Lernea 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 tiblings... 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 surprised 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 offered 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; Cul-

liper 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 prome-

nade 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 Lernea 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 inef-

ficiently. 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. Lerne heard the hal-fuin’s warning just in time; she quickly loaded her bow with two arrows and knelt coolly. The crowd applauded at the apparently 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 ferreth!” 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. Lerne 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 hubbub; 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.”

Lernea walked over to Ned’s side. Parcifal 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 Lernea.

“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 Lernea 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. Lernea 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. Lernea 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 Lerneia 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 mea-

sure 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’. Lernea 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 Lernea 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 Lernea 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 Lernea 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. Parcifal 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 Parcifal 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. Parcifal’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-lives 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.”

Lerneia 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 Lerneia’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 Lerneia’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!” Lerneia said with urgency, both her hands gripping Ned’s arms.

“Alright. We need to pick up Wincham 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 Lerneia 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?” Lernea 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. Lernea 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.

Lernea 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 Lernea.

“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 Lernea 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.

Lernea'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 Lernea’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 Tejwel 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 bee hive 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 dispropotionately 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 monologues.

“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. Trying 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 fretfully. 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 Lernea 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 ghastly 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 Ence-lados, 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 Lerneia 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 Lerneia 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.”

Lerneia 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.”

Lerneia 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 Lernea, 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 clar-

ity.

“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, no one 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 Lerneia and pointed at the three-foot high stools against the bar, with no handles or the like whatsoever. Winceham turned and looked at Lerneia 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 Lerneia 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 gobblefloppe’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 where 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 taught. 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? Lerneia 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. Lerneia 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 Lernea suddenly cutting in. She was flexing her muscles; the cracking of air went along with her movements. A rather new sense of preparedness flashed accross 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.

"Parcival? 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 Parcival 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.

Parcifal 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 Parcifal’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 Parcifal who sidestepped at the last moment. Ned was next; she shot Parcifal 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 developments? 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. Wincham 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 Tejewel 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