

Party of Five

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a fantasy novella

by

Part One

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

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

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

"Does that mean we can't go back?"

"No, we can't go back Lernea," replied Parcifal with a sigh and a shake of her head, her piercing gaze stuck somewhere beyond the rosy-red horizon.

Lernea nodded with raised eyebrows. She noticed Parcifal's strange, angry look and knew it wasn't the right thing to do but asked her anyway:

"Not ever?"

Parcifal turned her head slowly around and gave Lernea a stabbing look before answering coldly:

"Not as long as the Jangdrivals are in power and the Unseen Council remains in place, not while the Eleven Pillars stand and the Noble Eagles fly above the Skarlas, no." Lernea put a finger on her lip and with a puzzled frown asked again:

"Is that never, or really just a long time?"

"You vex me, sister. Never means never."

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

“Master Sisyphus is dead, Lernea.”

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

“Get it right in that little thick skull of yours, Lernea. We, are, never, going, back, to, Nomos. Never!” she shouted, a lone finger rapping at Lernea’s breastplate with an audible clang on the beat of every word. Lernea’s eyes wandered to her chest for a moment, before her face reddened and her breathing became more pronounced, her nostrils flaring up. She pouted her lips and said icily:

“Don’t do that.”

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

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

“I know, that’s why I do it.”

“You’re such a child.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Mother made mistakes as well in her reign.”

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

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

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

extending into a hand holding her coinpurse.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lernea punched him in the gut then; the short little man

doubled over, his face flustered. He looked momentarily surprised and awestruck, rather than simply hurt.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She ran after him with Lerneia right behind. With little effort she nudged her way past a couple of bystanders who were having a smoke and grabbed the man by his cloak, lifting him up like a runaway child and handing him over to Lerneia. She grabbed him with both hands from his vest’s collar. The sisters looked positively miffed, if not thunderous. The short little man exploded with indignation.

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

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

“It’s him,” said Parcifal and Lernea nodded her affirmation, adding, “There’s no mistaking that breath.”

The man looked at each of them with an hurtful, presumptuous look and raised a hand before speaking, his eyes closed most of the time in a haughty manner:

“I can dispense with the insult to my dwarven heritage concerning my breath since as a gentleman I am aware that great allowances should be made for differences of custom and training. I can understand you are foreigners, fresh off the boat, clearly confused and utterly misguided as to the identity of my person. Although you are clearly lacking proper lady-like training and manners, such is my gentleness and strength of character though that I am willing to forego any and all legal accusations and forthcoming tribulations against your persons, should you deposit me safely and unharmed on the ground so I may go about my business.”

Parcifal turned her head and looked at Lernea with a raised eyebrow. Lernea looked at her sister and nodded before upending the short man who claimed to be a dwarf and shaking him vigorously. Other than a couple of bored, curious looks, no one seemed particularly inclined to question what has happened.

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

“Aha!” said Lernea gleefully, while her sister shook her head with an uncertain look on her face. The short little man who claimed to be a dwarf and a gentleman was looking at the two ladies in an austere manner, even though he was hanging upside down, his hands crossed on his chest like some sort of human-like bat having a difficult time sleeping. His cloak

brushed against the items that had fallen from his person; a small metallic disc with a chain, a gold, flat square tin like a cigar holder, and a small, thin, stiletto.

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

“What say you now, thief?”

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

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

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

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

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

Parciful had a moment of clarity and sprang into action, running through the street shouting to her sister:

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

Lernea stood motionless for moment, idly holding the

stolen goods with both hands in her lap. Her lips formed a soundless circle while her eyes shone with a dazzled ferocity. Realizing they had been duped she dropped everything and ran after her sister and the dwarf - or perhaps a simply very short man - who kept surprising them.

The man shot a glance behind his back and saw the sisters were right on his tail, shoving and brushing people aside as they ran after him. "Fire! Fire! I say, fire!" he shouted amidst the crowds in an effort to cause panic and hysteria that would suit his purpose of getting away. That did not work; the people all around him went about their business, a few casually wondering to themselves where the voice came from. He had to make himself scarce.

"Quick! Into that establishment!" yelled Parcifal to Lerneia, her finger pointing to a large sign, graced by the presence of nearby lamplight. Night proper had fallen and the light posts were being lit up, one by one.

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

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

"By Skarla, of all the places.." said Lerneia mostly to herself but followed Parcifal inside being careful not to touch anything.

Inside the Sniggering Pig, there was ample candle light from chandeliers on the high ceiling, as well as candles and lamps on each and every table where people had still not passed out. A heavy scent dominated the air; rye, ale and roasted meat. The tables were mostly full of rowdy gangs of sailors, and everyone seemed to be having fun when the

music suddenly stopped. The hubbub of laughter and loud conversation filled the emptiness until a rather tall and lanky fellow appeared at the far end of tavern, on what seemed to be the stage where the band of musicians sat. Parcifal's eyes had the chance to search the room for a moment. There was no sign of the thief.

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

And as if on cue, the tall lank man who had appeared on stage cleared his throat loudly and bowed, only to receive a handful of drunken "Show us yer tittays!". Nevertheless he smiled professionally and went on:

"Well, this place is lively, ain't it? Feels like a band of roaming Dwarves would love to come by. Hell, it's not like they're set in stone or anything," he said, grinning widely, posing towards the crowd which hardly noticed anyone was talking on stage. The performer was having a tough crowd. He turned to the band and said in voice right above a whisper: "Guys.. That was a joke," to which the percussionist nodded with surprise and promptly made a half-hearted drum roll and hit a small bell. The sound was more like coconuts banging together. "Thank you!" said the performer on stage, clapping his hands all by himself.

Parcifal, equally oblivious to the bad comedian noticed something else and told Lerneia:

"Windows just on the front. That door behind the barkeep is locked and barred. He's somewhere in here. He's trapped!"

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

"He'll mop it up later, I'm sure. Just stay right here on the

door. I'll flush him out."

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

"That sounded like an, uhm.. Poop joke. 'Flush' him out like the little, uhm, shit he is!"

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

"Dwarves, eh? I remember one night, a group of them fellows walks in this very same place. One of them yells, 'Barkeep! Seven short ones', to which the barkeep replied, 'I can see, but what can I get you?'"

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

Spontaneously, half the tavern erupted in fits of laughter, while the other half had been magnetised by Parcifal's presence. Even if staring at her meant her replying with a stare that could shrivel their scrotum and turn their eyes into tiny glass beads.

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

There was no drum roll. The man on stage eyed the band and waved his hands. The drum roll and the bell finally came but the crowd went on drinking and singing rowdy songs, mostly containing obscene lyrics about unicorns and

the priest's daughter. There was a voice of dissent though:

"That's bloody lie!"

It was the thief. Parcifal turned her head around and saw him, pointing an accusing finger at the man on stage. She drew her sword and shouted above the din of the crowd, cradling the heavy blade threateningly towards the thief:

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

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

"Every other night, no-one reads the sign," said the comedian and tried to get everyone's attention:

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

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

"Balls!" they said in one voice and everyone suddenly had something that could kill, maim, or hurt like hell in hand, most prominently forks, knives and assorted cutlery. Parcifal stood in the midst of them all, perhaps fifty or sixty men the lot of them, half of them still conscious. She gave Lernea a look of determined despair and grasped her sword with both hands, ready for what seemed to be a sudden, uneven fight to the death. Lernea nodded to her sister without a word and loaded her bow with an arrow. In one fluid motion, she was already aiming at the thief's head from a very comfortable

distance; she couldn't miss.

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

“Jambalaya everyone! I'm buying!”

The crowd erupted in sudden cheers and howls, while there still was a man who yelled ‘Balls!’ right before slumping down on the floor. The comedian got off the stage, disheartened, and headed for the bar while the band began to play a serene, lute ballad. The barkeep smiled congenially to the comedian and said, “More peppers this time, Ned,” to which Ned replied faintly, “I know, father.”

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

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

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

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

“Well, I'm not the persistent, rush-headfirst, beautiful, foreign lady. I certainly wouldn't have heard anything of the sort if I were you,” replied the thief with a kind smile. Lerneia

stood by her sister's side and lowered her sword before she said with a calm voice:

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

"There, a civil person. With all this tension, I haven't introduced myself properly. My name is Winceham Higginsbottom Abbermouth the Third. At your service," said the small man with slight bow and a smile, before showing the sisters a recently emptied table. Parcifal looked at the man as he had insulted everything holy by Skrala and couldn't help but shout angrily:

"What, we're having drinks with the runt now?"

Lerneia sighed, took a deep breath and gently took her sister by one arm and walked with her towards the table. She said to her, "Now sister, this calls for some diplomacy. We might as well solve this quandary in a civilized manner. Things might not be exactly as they appear. Mr. Abbermouth seems like a.. Solvent type."

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

"I thought his breath stank!" exclaimed Parcifal in protest.

"Well, it's obvious that's the least of our worries. Mr. Abbermouth here will make sure we're properly compensated for all the trouble he's caused us," said Lerneia making sure to stress her last words. Winceham grinned and laid back on his chair before he said:

"The way things turned out, you gals should be actually

thankful. These folks live on rotten clams and maggoty bread most of the time; they'd rip you apart and feed you to the sharks right round the Mangled Horn if they didn't get some of Ned's jambalaya. Perhaps they'd have their way first as well."

Parcifal laughed in shocked disbelief and shouted at Winceham, "Thankful? For being robbed and humiliated by a dwarf?"

"Technically, a hauflin, but I'm sure you don't meet with our kind where you're from."

"A what? And how would you know where we come from?" asked Parcifal, raising an eyebrow, her voice edgy.

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

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

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

"Now that's a gentleman, Mr. Abbermouth. How about you?" asked Lernea and Parcifal added after wiping beer foam off her face and setting the keg hard down on the table with a thud and a spill.

"Yeah, where's our money runt?"

"In all those pots of jambalaya, I'm afraid. The Rule, you see."

"What bloody rule says you go off with our money and

then spend it on buying dinner to drunken sailor?" asked Parcifal with mounting anger, while Lernea tugged at her sleeve, pointing to a tiny wooden plaque on the wall right behind her, next to a broken light lamp.

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

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

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

"Then why not let us face everyone's wrath and make your way out with the money?"

"Because, I'm a visionary. I'm an opportunist and when I see an opportunity I grab it by the horns."

"You mean you're a thief."

"A thief.. What is a thief, tell me, dear Parcifal?"

"How can you tell us apart?"

"Oh, that's easy. Queen Lernea is still wearing her marital ring."

"News travels fast. So you've heard about we're not the reigning Nomos family anymore?"

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

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

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

“A coinpurse full of gold? That should be enough to buy this place!”

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

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

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

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

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

“Please, miladies. Don’t do anything rash. I’ll explain, I promise.”

Lernea and Parcifal exchanged troubled looks. They shot glances at the man who had practically ordered everyone to leave with a less than keen eye, and then saw the worry on Winceham’s face. There was fear, worry and anxiety written there, the sisters shared their lack of doubt with a simple nod. Ned appeared from behind the bar, holding the sisters’ coin-purse, still full. His father, the barkeep, looked at the bossy man with restrained anger.

“Where’s Hobb’s money, Sturgees?” asked the leather-clad man with a drawl.

“That’s Sturgeon. I’ve got the money,” said the barkeep, while Ned’s eyes seeped with fury.

“Ain’t that a surprise, eh, Mr. Brumbles?” said the man and slapped the ape-man across the chest. The ape-man replied, always grinning, the gold in his mouth sparkling:

“Mos’ def, Cap’n.”

“Righty ho, then. Go on, Mr. Brumbles, go on and count the money. Remember now, after ten, that’s..”

“Too late fo’ sho’ leave, Cap’n.”

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

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

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

Winceham rolled his eyes wildly as a signal to the sisters. It went largely unnoticed since they had both turned to face what appeared to be nothing more than glorified debt collec-

tor. The ape-man had taken the coinpurse and started counting the money, even as Ned found it increasingly difficult to keep his temper. His father shook his head and bit his lip.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mr. Brumbles stopped counting and drew his blunderbass to face the sisters, cocking the gun.

Ned replied through gritted teeth:

“My act is not shit.”

“What smells that bad then, eh?”

“That would be him,” said Lernea, drew her arrow, aimed at Mr. Brumbles and let an arrow fly right between his eyes

before he had a chance to even swerve the gun their way. A gunshot rang clear though; Culliper was holding a pistol, smouldering smoke trailing off its barrel. Ned's father was down on the floor with a dull thud. Parcifal sprang at Culliper with all the might of her sword, but he parried expertly with his cutlass as he turned to leave. Lernea was reloading her bow even as Ned cried in outrage, "You murderous bastard! I'll see you dead!"

Winceham simply stood in his chair, his palms on his face, mumbling to himself:

"Why nobody, ever, listens to the small folk?"

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

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

"Quickly!" cried Lernea and rushed towards the door, an arrow already nicked in her bow. She shot a quick glance behind her and saw that noone was following.

"Why are you just standing there?" she asked, even though noone was technically standing. Parcifal was on her knees, nurturing a hurt jaw. She had a bloody lip on her jaw and she was staring at Ned like a wounded tiger. Ned was lying with his back against the bar. A stream of tears had trailed his cheeks, his face flustered. Winceham was sitting on the same chair as before, his face planted smugly in the

palms of his hands in complete silence.

“What are you people doing?” said Lerneia with a sigh, demonstrating a mistimed and misplaced air of authority. “Come on, he’s getting away!”

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

“He punched me in the face,” she said and felt her jaw before she went on, “and that’s after I saved his life.”

Ned was wholly ignoring her, his face a mask of stone cold grief, tears drying out.

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

“It’s her fault, you know.”

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

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

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

The sisters both turned to look at him with an even gaze. They met his blood-ridden eyes and with a glance saw his father’s lifeless body on the floor to his right. They stooped their heads and crossed their arms on their chests and said with a single, humble voice:

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

Ned looked at them with menace, a sudden viciousness in the young man’s otherwise gentle, homely face. His voice

was calm, but it somehow sounded brazen, harsh and vibrant:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Parcival interjected with a nod of approval:

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

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

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

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

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

Winceham sighed and finished his drink in one go. He then told Lernea:

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

Lernea went wide-eyed in shocked surprise. Before she had time to retort to the insult, Parcival had her sword drawn,

poised in front of Winceham's chest, ready to pierce his heart.

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

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

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

"No need to mock us with fancy words, sir," she said, intoning the word 'sir' with as much disdain as possible. She went on:

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

Lernea managed to awe everyone into still silence, even her sister. Winceham managed to nod, not terrified but rather enchanted by Lernea's presence. The silence was broken by Ned, who took Lernea by the arm suddenly and spoke from heart, the words rushing freely out his mouth:

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

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

“There’s no need for that Ned. We are free women and our people, is a free people; we do not offer them a life of servitude, but one of worth fighting for. Worth dying for. We are honoured that you ask this of us; we shall avenge your father’s demise, or fall by your side. By Skrala sworn.”

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

“Spoken true, sister. By Skrala sworn, your father will be avenged.”

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

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

Ned then retorted even as Winceham’s hand was on the door’s handle:

“I’ve known you for a thief Winceham, but not a coward.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"My father has a name, Winceham."

"I've turned bags of shite into gold with Vern before you

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

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

"He really is afraid," Lerneia added with a curious smile, as if discovering something new.

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

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

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

"You gave away little business cards with that written on."

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

"Well, I wish I didn't need to, but now you're bonded by oath."

"Yes, well, if there's one thing I'm good at is finding the silver lining, which in this case is we'll all be dead or deadish pretty soon."

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

for us?”

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

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

“He does,” replied Winceham curtly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Imperial force of justice. If there's still such a thing."

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

"Remind you of anyone now, sister?"

"Now's not the time to bicker about the Jangdrivals, Parcifal. Please."

"I'm only saying that this analysis of yours would have served better in the past."

"You've run into him before, then?" asked Ned expectantly.

"No. Just someone who they share a lot of common traits with."

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

"We lost the throne and were exiled from Nomos," said Lernea tersely. Winceham smiled ironically and said:

"See? And that was probably them being very gracious. Hobb isn't."

"But we're alive. We can still fight. And we won't be alone."

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

"Retired?" asked Parcifal in disbelief, while Ned exclaimed:

"It's always a tough crowd!"

"A bard who can't sing?" Lernea asked Ned cocking her head sideways.

"I'm a comedy performer! Why does everyone ask that?"

“No, I asked if he is retired,” said Parcifal, pointing to Winceham with eyebrows raised in suspicion.

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

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

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

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

“It’s more complicated than that Parcifal!”

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

Everyone took a moment of silence. Parcifal and Lernea looked at each other briefly, reassuringly. Winceham nodded and pouted his lips.

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

while Ned shook his head and said curtly:

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

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

Ned stared at Winceham unyieldingly for a few moments, until they all looked at each other and simply walked over to the body of Ned’s father and helped him carry him out back.

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

It was midnight on a moonless bay.

Part Two

“Are you sure this is the right way?” asked Parcifal who had taken point alongside Ned, Encelados firmly clasped on her back, tiny slithers of starlight bouncing off her glistening armor.

“Father and I used to hunt boar around these parts. We’d find traces of the Woodkin here and there; tripped animal traps and hand-picked herbs,” replied Ned with certainty, his eyes wading through the darkness of the night warily. He carried an old hunting crossbow strung along the belt at his waist. What the others couldn’t help noticing though was the small leather drum he had strapped on his back, none of whom had found particularly able to deal damage when the need arose.

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

“I am.”

A somewhat uneasy silence followed. Lernea gracefully trod through the thick, lush brush as if this southern, exotic

forest was her natural habitat. At length she too felt the need to ask Ned:

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

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

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

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

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

They’d seek out the secretive Woodkin elves that some said dwelt deep in the jungle where death lurked in many forms: quicksand, snakes, and other wildlife did not discrim-

inate.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“He’s strong-willed, I’ll give him that,” she said as she

looked at Ned's figure growing smaller with the distance.

"Well he's bound to get lost or do something stupid. Or both. So go talk some sense into him," said Lerneia with a worried frown.

"Aren't you supposed to be the diplomat in the family?" said Parcifal with one raised eyebrow and a mocking smile.

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

Winceham stretched and a faint popping and crackling was heard; he let out a sigh and fiddled with his satchel. After a while he was holding a small leather pouch and a small, delicate pipe. Those items instantly attracted Parcifal's attention.

"What's that?" she asked bluntly, cocking her head sideways as if trying to peek.

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

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

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

Parcifal's turned her head and looked towards her sister and Ned. Her eyes searched for them intently but she could barely make their shadows further up the hill, shrouded by the tall grass. They seemed to have stopped, probably talking by the way she saw her sister flailing her hands about her. She

then asked Winceham with a rather peculiar voice, as if she was concerned someone might overhear them:

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

Winceham sat upright slowly and opened his eyes; they were red-shot, covered with a slightly glazed sheen. He looked all-too serene and calm, his face adorned by a lopsided smile that verged on drooling. He simply passed Parcifal the pipe and nodded languidly, his eyes half-open as if about to yawn and fall asleep.

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s not that rough of a trail. When my sister and I had to

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

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

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

Winceham was looking at her puzzled beyond understanding when his eyes bulged up with sudden terror. He saw the trembling flames from before, trailing orange light in their wake. They were attached to the head of bunny where its eye sockets should be; it was hopping about not further than a few feet away. His jaw dropped and he looked at his pipe before staring at the bunny mesmerized. The bunny paused as if it knew, stared back at Winceham and smiled unnervingly before hopping out of view and into some kind of burrowed hole.

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

"Enemies? Where? I see noone! Are they using some sort of trickery?" she cried and swung her sword randomly.

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

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

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

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

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

“Invincible,” said Parcifal with a grin.

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

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

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

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

Then as if out of nowhere, the figure of a robed, masked man appeared behind Parcifal and leaned respectfully towards

her ear. The man waved his hands and fingers in an elaborate gesture and whispered to her in a thin, calm and gentle voice:

“There is no bunny.”

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

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

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

“Will you not answer me, stranger?” Parcifal demanded of him with mounting volume in her voice.

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

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

“I am Parcifal Teletha, scion of Phedra Teletha and Helios, of the Teletha family of Nomos, princess successor and adjutant to the Throne, in exile. Now that I’ve described my lineage, speak of yours or insult and anger me at your peril.”

Her tone was noble yet menacing. It was easy for someone to see she meant everyword by her thunderous stare. The man opened his right eye, peeked at her, closed it and simply stood there like before.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“By Skrala, stay your loud mouths!”

Winceham and Parcifal turned and looked at Lernea with red, flustered faces from all the shouting. She bit them back a scolding stare but what caught her eye was the strange man and the fact he was looking straight at her. She was confused for a moment and then staring back at him with all the nobility she could muster under the circumstances, she asked him:

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

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

“You can see me? Impossible!” he said to Lernea, stressing the last word as if it were certainly absurd.

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

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

“I beg your pardon! Bo is not a monster!” said the figured man irately, instantly letting go off his prohibitions concerning the fact he was completely visible to everyone involved. He took off his mask and hood, and a couple of pointy ears flopped suddenly upright. He protested:

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

“It’s eyes spout flames!” shouted Winceham, being extravagantly descriptive with weird hand gestures and bulging eyes.

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

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

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

“Yes, who are you? And how is your hair that fair?” added Lernea with an inquiring furrow of her brow.

“Shut up!”

Ned’s roaring shout caused everyone’s gaze to fall upon him. He cleared his throat and said with an inspiring voice, the voice of a true leader:

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

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

“Ned’s right. I for one, agree.”

Winceham suggested mildly:

“What about the rabbit?”

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

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

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

Winceham cut in:

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

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

“What do you mean you people?”

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

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

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

“My name is Hanultheofodor Trypthwifidyr.”

Ned seemed to cringe at the thought of uttering the name fully, so he simply offered his hand and smile thinly but reassuringly. The woodkin obliged him somewhat awkwardly

after noticing that everyone had their eyes fixed on him. As he shook hands with Ned, Lernea told him:

“Take us to your leader!”

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

* * *

They passed a series of crests and hills shrouded in ever thickening bush and trees. The tropical forest had indeed turned into a proper jungle, full of mangroves and palm trees, thick grub and lush flower plants blocking their way. ‘Theo’, which was how the rest had chosen to call Hanultheofodor for practical purposes knew the terrain well enough to avoid the thicker parts, but occasionally had to sue his machete to cut a path through.

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

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

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

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

“So none of them followed you?”

“None that we could see, no.”

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

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

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

“Of course! Counterspelling an illusionist’s Ethereal Trance is a remarkable feat for someone not versed in the art of Choujou,” said Theo and Parcifal raised an eyebrow. She was beginning to suspect their guide had thought he was invisible from some weird reason that might or might not include an unreasonable amount of dreamhops or fuddlegrass, just like the kind Winceham had shared with her.

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

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

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

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

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

to seek the Woodkin. If of course the rest of Theo's kin had a firm grasp of this witchcraft he talked about. Because it was her informed opinion that the young woodkin elf was a bit lightheaded to put it mildly. She had no idea what to make of his peculiar animal companion though, unless it were stew.

Bo hopped in and out of the ground, the flames in his eyes lighting up the path ahead with a warm orange light. The bunny would at times pause, stoop high and shoot the party a glance before burrowing in the ground, only to appear a couple of minutes later down the path as suddenly as it had disappeared. But it never strayed away from Theo for too long. And that had got Winceham's attention.

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

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

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

"It's just your imagination, Winceham. It's been a long, difficult night and it's only a couple of hours until dawn breaks. Your eyes are playing tricks, that's all."

"What about its eyes, Ned? Hm? What about those flaming eyes?"

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

"Those were the drunken tales of rabid sailors, Ned! While this.. This abomination is right there, watching me."

"I recall yourself telling such morbid tales of fascinating creatures, Winceham. Could this be another fantasy of

yours?”

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

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

Ned stopped then and took Winceham by the shoulder. His look was grim, his voice unusually stern and cold:

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

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

“You’re right laddie, I’m full of it. Sometimes. I’m just saying, I don’t like that bunny one bit, that’s all.”

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

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

“You don’t know what to expect with Hobb. It does make sense though; they sent a mob after us, but we weren’t there. As long as we’re gone, Hobb will have the Sniggering Pig

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Something evil lurks nearby.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Retired,” she hissed and Ned simply grinned.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s not much of a difference. It’s just that I claim flying kills first, while Parcifal claims the land-dwellers,” she said matter-of-factly as she signalled her sister they were going to rush within whispering distance.

“Oh, is that true? What happens if it’s a sea creature, or something that lives underground?” he asked ironically, surprised at the nonchalance of Lernea, as well as in himself.

“Coin toss,” she said as the irony was lost on her and nearly dragged Ned alongside her as they sprinted to cover the distance between Parcifal and them. Their feet shuffled over the thick boggy floorbed as they crouched low. When they were in earshot, Parcifal turned around and whispered to her sister:

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

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

“That’s utterly absurd! It’s not a lizard, that’s a dragonkin pure and simple. It is a fairly easy mistake though, since—”

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

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

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

“I protest! That dragonkin-”

Lernea could not resist the urge; she slapped him across the face and said to his face frozen in disbelief:

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

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

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

She swung Encelados down sharply and the creature’s head came off its neck clean, like a slice of fruit. The pool of blood around its lifeless body was already beginning to clog, while the cut below the head was almost clean dry. Parcifal looked at her sister with a mischievous look, underlined

by a gleeful grin:

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

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

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

“The dragonkin..”

The sisters exchanged terms and conditions loudly, fighting over first kill rights and standing scores, while Ned noticed something peculiar and said to noone in particular:

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

Theo chimed in morosely:

“Because that dragonkin was Vulsek, my flying steed.”

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

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

The bunny then popped up in front of him and started running around in circles, the flames from its eyes whirling in a blinding fashion.

“Bo looks excited about something. Maybe Mr. Abbermouth was excited about something as well,” said Theo

and then suddenly a trio of bipedal mushrooms holding iron spears and using their tops as shields came out of the thick grass running awkwardly, exchanging long-winded moaning sounds and pointing at Theo and the rest aggressively, judging by the way the spears faced towards the group.

“I’m not sure Winceham has a thing for mushrooms,” shouted Lernea and let her strung arrow fly.

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

“Did you hear the joke about the fungus?”

“No, what joke?”

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

Theo shook with hearty laughter, at the same time hurtling the ball of lightning at a mushroom charging Lernea albeit with a spurious gait. The mushroom promptly exploded into a cloud of charred dust, fleshy bits of what used to form its torso flying around. The smell of burning fungi permeated the air. Parcifal made sure Encelados wasn’t glowing any more before saying triumphantly:

“Such is the way Encelados pierces through evil!”

Lernea sounded demoralised, even distraught:

“That’s not fair! Even Ned killed one!”

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

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

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

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

“Where is Winceham?”

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

“Bad trip, it’s a bad trip’s what it is, bad trip, that’s all it is..”

* * *

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

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

The crack of dawn was upon them when they saw thick plumes of smoke rise up into the sky behind the last crest they had to pass in order to reach the village. Theo smiled brightly for the first time since his steed had been slain:

“Oh! They must be preparing a feast! That’s never happened before!”

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

“Hobb. Damn his name and soul.”

Winceham, who had dried up by then, sighed and added:

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m sorry, that’s all, Theo.”

She shook her head and smiled thinly, as they walked the last few feet in silence. The other were already on the top, casting long shadows on the foliage. The sank had barely lifted above the green treetops, yet a warm light embraced their faces.

“About Vulsek? It was an accident,” he said without conviction. He was still trying to come to grips with that. When they reached the top, they saw the village below, fires still consuming houses and trees alike. Theo’s jaw dropped in an instant, Bo always by his side, the flames in his eyes dying down suddenly. Lernea touched Theo’s hand gently and told him in an almost broken voice:

“I’m sorry about your village.”

Words failed him. He sank to his knees on the ground, as if the last iota of strength had left him. Winceham put a hand around his shoulder and said nothing. Ned looked with mounting anger at the burning village, his eyes wondering aimlessly as if trying to comprehend. The crackle of fire reached them with ominous clarity. Trees had burned to a cinder, leaving nothing but ashes and smouldering stumps behind them. Wooden bridges laid in ruins, half-eaten by the flames, the houses at the top of the trees burning away like candles.

The sun came up, its first rays lost in the glow of the fires. It was an unruly sight, but noone looked away; each one of them was lost in their own thoughts. Theo finally broke down in tears, a tender sob taking him over. Bo turned his head and his nose wrinkled; his whiskers twitched and his eyes lit up with a subdued flame before he ran down the hill, stopped and turned to look straight at Ned. He hopped a couple of times before running down again, towards the village.

“He wants us to follow him. Could he have smelled

something?” said Ned and set out after the bunny. Parcifal shrugged a little and followed close by, while Winceham told Theo with a gentle voice, almost a whisper:

“We’ll get him laddie.”

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

“No evil deed goes unpunished, Theo,” said Lernea and nodded as she helped Theo to his feet. Winceham shot her a troubled look and said:

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

To which she replied sternly:

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

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

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

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

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

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

“There are no bodies. There’s no smell of charred flesh either.” Winceham turned around and told them, rubbing his fingers full of dirt:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She looked at the dark-skinned elder woodkin as if measuring and then seemed content. Still, she kept a wary look for anything out of the ordinary in a burning village.

“Where is everyone? What happened?” asked Theo with an urgent, choked voice. Lerneia also looked at the elder with

a curious gaze. She asked him:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Parcifal spoke her mind:

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Not men, no,” insisted Fingammon with a wild-eyed gleam on his eyes. “Metal devils, not monsters of flesh. Tall as houses they be, shooting fire through their hands, eyes gleaming red like blood diamonds,” he said with an awed, humble voice and a hand that wove shapes in the air, trying to paint them a life-like picture. Parcifal shook her head and sheathed Encelados. She put her hands on her waist:

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

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

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

“My sister and I are scions bred to rule, halfuin. We wield sword and shield and bow, better than any of you. We’ve not been spared of tragedy, nor hurt or ruin. Our lives weren’t sheltered; they were stolen from us,” she said bitterly and looked at Lernea to strengthen her opinion. Instead, her sister asked her to calm down.

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

“Golems.”

Winceham nodded silently and Ned explained:

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

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

earnest:

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

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

Her sister shot her a look of accusation.

“Careful sister. Master would be quick to anger, calling him a liar. Beside, I think I remember mention of such things,” to which Parcifal replied mockingly:

“Of course you do!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Dat be why, yes. Dis be da reason, me thinks,” he said and showed them an amulet he had been wearing around his neck. A large crystal sat inside a gold girder. The crystal shone with iridescent colours and the girder was covered in a form of writing none had ever witnessed before, elegant and thin. Theo looked at it with a sudden rush of curiosity. He felt inexplicably drawn to it, somehow.

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

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

Lerneia answered that before the woodkin had a chance.

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

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

“Dat be because I can’t, Hanul.”

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

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

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

Theo’s eyes narrowed, his voice became shallow:

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

Parcifal turned around and saw Theo’s expression. She put her palm across her eyes silently. The others looked at

each other awkwardly, but noone said a word.

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

“What are you saying?”

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

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

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

“You have the Choujou as well, Fingammon.”

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

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

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

“Dey searched everytin’ first. Den dey put chains in me people, and flew away like dey came. I couldn’t see dem, but me could hear. I heard a man’s voice say dey be back, to

search wit da hound, 'e said. But de other voice I heard, dat was no man," said the Elder and shook his head from side to side ominously.

"Well, any suggestions?" asked Lernea.

Parcifal broke her silence:

"We need to rest. We can't press any longer today."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lernea shook her head before she replied flatly:

"I'm tired of running, woodkin."

Those words brought a grin on Ned's face, while Winceham rolled his eyes and mumbled something about his feet

killing him. They all set out towards the Lake, leaving the village's ruins to smoulder under an overcast sky.

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

"A flying ship," said Lernea.

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

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

Parcifal answered her own question before Lernea could answer:

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

It was a cloudy, hazy morning.

Part Three

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

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

Theo kept to himself, never uttering a word. He sat with

his legs crossed, his eyes unable to part with the vista of his village burned to the ground. Little clouds of smoke still gathered above it, but the fires had been extinguished by that time, after having eating almost everything, leaving little for the eye to see that at one time, people lived there.

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

"It's not easy, is it?" said Ned. Theo did not look at him, but simply remained silent, gazing outwards into the sky. Ned walked over him, and sat himself down on the bedrock.

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

"I'm sorry for your loss."

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

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

"I don't know what you're feeling. That would be a lie.

But you haven't slept, and I couldn't do that either. I don't know if it's normal. But I'm not feeling tired. Sure, the legs hurt a bit, but that's not the real pain."

Ned let his words trail off awkwardly, remembering what had happened just the night before. He suppressed a tear and feeling somewhat embarrassed, looked the other way. They sat in relative silence for a few moments, interrupted by the far-away chirping of birds and Winceham's occasional saw-like snore. Theo broke the silence then:

"What was your father like?"

Ned's face scrounged up in while he tried to find the words. He put on a slightly sly smile and said:

"When mother died, I was only eight. I remember I knew that mother wasn't just away or simply sick."

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

Ned's brow furrowed but not unkindly; it was simply the fact that Theo couldn't fail to surprise him every turn of the way. It gave being around him an interesting flair.

"Right. Well, it wasn't that I was that bright, mind you; it's just that we burned her body; the plague, they said. I couldn't speak to her, for fear I'd catch what she had," said Ned and looked at his feet for a while before adding, "I think her 1st words to me were 'Go on, Ned. Be a good boy and help you father'".

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

"That sounds.. Well, awful. At least, I never knew my real parents. I knew there was something funny about the

skin color of the rest, but I just thought they spent a lot of time in the sun. I never thought I was.. Found,” he said as he swallowed hard and let his voice trail off, his head lowered moodily. A smile crept up on Ned’s face. Theo’s naivety was bordering on stupidity, as Parcifal would have it, but in his mind, Ned saw a child in a man’s body, and that somehow reminded him of himself. What was more, he felt that didn’t bother him at all.

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

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

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

Theo’s words had a touch of bitter sweetness:

“I have noone else to care for than my people. Even though they’re not really my people. I need this as well. Fate, it seems, has brought us together.”

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

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

Ned raised an eyebrow and seemed to give the notion some thought; he somehow felt lighter alongside the wood-

kin.

“If you put it like that, I have no problem with a fate alongside you, Theo. You’re a good man,” he said and nodded with a smile brimming with camaraderie.

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

Ned furrowed his brow and said loudly:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Theo asked him:

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

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

“I know it’s a little hard to play most omens, prophecies and tales with just a beat, but I believe it has great poten-

tial. Maybe if more bards got together and everyone played a different instrument, I could be, you know, supporting their music with beating the drum. And then we could tour, get the crowd rolling. It could be amazing,” said Ned with childish excitement overrunning his voice.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I don’t think that would work. I mean, I’m terribly bad at that sort of thing. I once sang in a feast, and the coconut

milk went sour for a week. Plus, people tell me I have a really bad sense of humor,” replied Theo and Ned’s realised with a scowl that Theo liked his jokes.

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

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

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

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

“We were just talking, Mr. Winceham.”

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

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

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

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

the afternoon.

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

“You didn’t see that, did you?”

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

“Never mind,” replied Winceham and spent a moment to himself before asking both of them:

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

“There! It’s coming out of the clouds! See its bow?” cried Ned and pointed to a hazy part of the clouds where some shadowy shape began to take form. Theo stared for a moment and nodded fervently:

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

Winceham said mostly to himself with a scoff:

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

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

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

“Of course!”

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

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

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

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

"What are you still doing here?"

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

"Don't expect me to," he said as his fugre disappeared into the darkness of the cave, with Bo hopping alongside him, lighting his way

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

"Bo! Get back here! Bo, don't touch the water now!"

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

"Is your rabbit allergic to water like yourself?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

“By pyrotechnics, you mean flames and such, right?” asked Theo anxiously. Ned nodded reassuringly. Lerneia talked with an impossibly sticky voice that reminded everyone of tar pits and death:

“What about the halfuin?”

“No other place to stick him? He could be the jester but there’s no suit and he couldn’t dance for the life of him. So, you’re a two-headed, six-legged freak.”

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

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

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

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

“Keep it quiet! Once we spot them, we’ll act like it, alright?”

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

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

“Ow! No need to get upset!” he said with pain evident in his voice.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We’re supposed to be a freak of nature. What’s natural about that?” said Parcifal dismissively while Lernea tried to

fit her bow snugly under the taught bearskin that covered all three of them like an oversized coat.

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

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

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

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

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

Where are me boots, me noggin, noggin
boots
they're all gone for beer and tobacco

For the heels they are worn out and the toes
are kicked about

And the soles are looking for better weather
And it's all for me grog, me jolly, jolly grog
All for me beer and tobacco

Well I spent all me tin on the lassies drinking
gin

Across the southern ocean I must wander

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

Where is me shirt me noggin, noggin shirt

It's all gone for beer and tobacco

For the collar is all worn and the sleeves they
are all torn

And the tail is looking for better weather

And it's all for me grog, me jolly, jolly grog

All for me beer and tobacco

Well I spent all me tin on the lassies drinking
gin

Across the southern ocean I must wander

The two-headed freak that were the sisters and Winceham in disguise tried to clap his hands together on tune but rarely

managed to do so. It rather seemed to punch its belly vigorously, both heads smiling brightly as it did so. Winceham's muffled agony at the hands of the sisters was obfuscated by Ned's singing and drum act, while Theo's cantrips had even attracted the gaze of the wary bucanears who were tapping their boots in tune. The ape-men had put down their blunderbusses and were dancing, arm-in-arm. The Hound though, kept trained at Bo, who was happily doing somersaults in the air, a flaming rainbow of orange light trailing him. Ned entered into a circle around the group of Hobb's men, and into the final verse:

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s one of ’em velonitrocultists!”

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

“We’re on!”

And then the sisters shed the bearskin with one fluid motion, revealing their armor and weapons underneath with Winceham in the middle, a rather pointed dagger in one hand and a wild-eyed grin on his face. Theo side-stepped Ned and passed him the crossbow he had tucked under his robes. Hobb’s men were fiddling with the flintlocks on their guns, gnarly looks of surprise on their weather-torn faces; their dropped jaws denoted dental hygiene was probably a pirate’s worst fear. The ape-men asked the pirates bewildered:

“Is this part o’ the troupe’s act?”

Before the pirate had the chance to retort with a curse as vile as his breath, Ned’s bolt had buried itself in his head. The other ape-man looked at Ned with a cocked eyebrow and asked even as his hand reached for the cutlass at his cloth belt:

“That’s not entertaining, at all.”

“How’s this then!” shouted Winceham and with a jolt and a tumble right beside the men, he reached under the large ape as he was about to have a go at Ned and Theo. Winceham gave the ape-man a quick stab in one leg; blood sprouted and the large brute growled in pain as his animal self took over. The pirates were only a pace away from the sisters who freed of the constraining bearskin, truly danced to an inner beat. the pirates’ blunderbasses let off their leaden shots with a thundering boom and a plume of smoke and sparks.

The sisters were nowhere to be seen.

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

“One is easy, two is old, three is flashy and four is bold!” she cried and let loose a fistful of arrows headed for the ape-man at point-blank range. Sadly though, they missed since the growling ape charged at Theo with his cutlass coming down from way up high.

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

Lerneia was nicking an arrow, and Parcifal was exchanging blows with the remaining pirate. He could hear Winceham cursing as he rushed behind the ape once more, but he was far too slow. And Bo..

Where is Bo? thought Theo and as he lay there frozen his vision filled with a rabbit smiling at him in an uncanny human fashion; Bo leapt in the air, swung his head around, and shot a pair of small fireballs at the charging ape, who was instantly engulfed in flames. His body came down crashing, writhing in flames, while Theo saw the Hound zip past him, ignoring him completely as it was after Bo with a pace that its size belied. Its three heads shot cones of fire, lightning and acid as it ran after Bo, charring the ground, plantlife fizzing away in the path it carved behind Bo.

Theo shouted “Bo!” with pained affection and worry and

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

"Oy, boyo, I'll do that," he said and raised his arms slowly.

"By Skrala, Temisra guide my arrow!" said Lernea and her bow shuddered as an arrow flew away. It struck the Hound at one of its necks, and made it give pause to the chase. The head where the arrow had struck soon fell limp as it died - the other two ventured to pierce the clouds atop the sky with their howlings, and growling, turned about and charged straight at Lernea. Hurling past a bewildered Theo, the Hound swerved around Ned's bolt and shot him a glancing shot of deadly acid breath. Fortunately his drum got in the way, and promptly began to melt away.

"Blasted grog-scum of a mutton-whore!" shouted Ned and Winceham commented looking at Lernea sideways:

"Acted like a gentleman, did he? Ya got the beast's attention, at any rate!"

"Sister! Like the boar's hunt!" cried Lernea to Parcifal as she nicked two arrows in her bow this time. The Hound was closing in damnably fast; a shot of acid went wide of its mark, while a bolt of lightning knocked Winceham off his feet, and threw him down with a thud that didn't match the halfuin's size. Ned was reloading his crossbow, while Theo was still running after Bo, nearly lost in the thick bush.

As the hound's heads growled ferociously and prepared to leap at Lernea, there were no more than a few yards between them. It was Parcifal who dropped on her knees suddenly in

front of the hound, hunched behind the family shield: Erymanthos. The Hound clashed on the shield with all its might and a terrible raucous; Parcifal was thrown on her side wildly, while the Hound bucked and leapt on the air without any control, rolling happily. As it fell down on the earth only a few feet away from Lernea, it was still trying to stand on its feet when two arrows struck true right between its heads.

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

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

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

"It's a burnt shoulder. Keep an eye on this one!"

She put her bow away and started running after Ned, while Parcifal was still getting back up from the ground.

"Take Erymanthos sister!" she cried to Lernea, who nodded and picked up the shield as she went.

The cannon on the prow of the ship was manned by Culliper alone and his element of surprise was gone. He yelled menacingly:

"Ya land-ridden scallywags, I know yer faces! Should've killed you when I had the chance, good and proper! But it's

never too late!”

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

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

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

He threw it on the deck with a panicky motion and stomped on it. He then realised a bunny with flaming eyes was grinning at him, perched on a barrel of grog that so happens to be flammable.

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

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

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

“No, Ned, wait! Don’t!” said Lernea as she climbed on to the deck. She still clutched Erymanthos, its upper lip torn, a large sunken hole prominent near the Nomos crest.

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

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

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

“Tell me a real good reason not to pull this trigger, Queen of Nomos. I’d expect you’d understand. Or do you expect me to adhere to the sanctity of life, even a maggot’s like this one? Will this scar me for life? I’m already scarred, Lernea. Nothing good will come of this, you might say. I care for naught. It’s him, and Hobb. This one pulled the trigger; Hobb sucked my father’s life out of him. So tell me, good Queen, one good reason not to.”

“Bloody well do tell him! You won’t believe how hard it is to get brains off this deck,” urged Culliper followed by an awkward smile.

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

“He’s the only one that knows how to fly this ship!”

Culliper looked at the ship’s deck and mast sideways be-

fore slapping his palm across his forehead:

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

“What is?”, asked the Woodkin.

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

“You should’ve seen how you dug in that salami and pork pie. I thought you weren’t breathing.” Winceham counter-pointed, waving a finger as he spoke:

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

Ned sighed. He knew Winceham was overprotective, mostly of himself:

“It’s just a slight burn, Wince. Just make sure to sleep on your other side, and you’ll be fine.”

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

“Right. Do keep an eye though when the tower is in sight. We can’t trust him,” said Ned and walked away, towards the ship’s bow.

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

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

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

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

Lernea told her sister with a scowl:

“You eat like there’s no tomorrow.”

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

“Well, if there is no tomorrow there is no point in living your last moments like an animal.”

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

“Are you?”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“Well of course you should. I’m the one who has to bear our shame, first and foremost.”

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

Lerneia felt the woodkin intruding, his question a bit straightforward. Parcifal did not seem to think so and said with a playful grin and a raised brow:

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

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

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

“Why? Have you heard of any such rumour?” It was evident in his voice that the thought of time stopping and perhaps the world ending unsettled him. Parcifal laughed, perceiving

Theo was humoring her, while in fact, he was actually a bit worried.

“Hah! For some, tomorrow will never come. And for those that meet us with the wrong intentions, that might still be the case!” she said as she drank a mouthful of wine from the amphora. Her smile bristled with pride and ambition.

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

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

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

“What else can any mortal aspire to but become a legend?” exclaimed Parcifal with a gleeful voice, heedless of her sister’s disapproving look.

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

“Perhaps, the legend of the princess who ate like a pig?”

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

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

“Chuck’s point fore!”

Ned’s shout gave pause to the sisters quarrel. Everyone turned their heads to have a look-see while the neck of the ridge kept growing taller. Even Mr. Jessums moved his dead stare a bit, still strapped down the strange-looking contraption on the lowered part of the deck that resembled a chair. Arguably it was a most sinister chair that according to Cul-

liper, sucked the life force of its occupant in order for the ship to fly. Winceham had called the premise ‘a haybag full of excrement’ but his own personal experience of sitting on it caused him to squirm away at the sight of it the moment they managed to pull him off.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Find him. But don’t kill him if there isn’t need. And if you’re life becomes at risk, run. Leave without us.”

The sisters nodded in agreement, and touched their

weapons to their chests in salute. Ned returned the salute, shaking both of their hands heartily.

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

“Nadragatea, Wince. Until death, or dishonour,” pointed out Ned.

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

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

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

His voice trailed off into a thud as Ned pistolwhipped him once more into meeting the deck head first, and Ned caught the spinning helm firmly before the ship began to list dangerously.

“Are you sure you can handle that?” asked Lernea with a knowing look. Ned replied with a sorrowful smile:

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

“You know what I mean.”

“I don’t think I have it in me. I wish I could kill him back then, but know.. I just want to help the woodkin, for now.”

“For now,” she said and nodded as Ned pulled back on the helm and the ship began to rise through the clouds.

“I think I’m feeling sick,” muttered Winceham under his breath as the ship tilted itself in an upwards angle. Parcifal asked him without a hint of irony:

“Are you sure you’re a not just a child where you come from?”

“I’m sorry for spoiling your dinner appetite, princess.”

“Was that meant as an insult?” asked Parcifal, furrowing her brow acutely.

“Bright too,” said Winceham with a pale face and Lernea interjected smartly:

“I think my sister’s eating habits should be postponed until after assaulting a pirate stronghold.”

It was then that the ship pulled out of the cloudscape, little wisps of cloud like smoke trailing her bow and hull, unwilling to let go for a moment. Around them, a vast sea of rosy, mellow clouds stretched in every direction, as the sun began to die down in the horizon.

Ned brought her to bear against the top of Hobb’s keep, growing closer with each passing moment. There seemed to be little activity going on; torches had not been lit yet.

“Won’t they know something’s wrong when they see us instead of Culliper and his men?” asked Theo, Bo fidgeting inside his robes.

“Probably,” said Ned without turning to look.

“What do we do then?”

“Kill them,” said Parcifal with a grin.

“If it comes to that and they don’t yield,” said Ned looking at Parcifal from under his eye.

“I see,” said Theo and flexed his fingers. Everyone else readied their weapons as well, and hunched low to the sides of the ship. At the tower, an elevated wooden platform stood out, acting as a dock. It was supported on a wheeled scaffold. A sort of pulley arrangement was visible, and the whole dock seemed able to move, elevate and rotate with the help of some ropes and weights.

A lookout had seen the ship approach, and was now standing on the platform, scratching his head, rearranging his hat and squinting his eyes. A scruffy-looking dog was barking non-stop.

“Ahoy there! What took yer so long? I cannae see anyone. Jessums? Is Scubbs acting like the fool again? It ain’t no ghost ship this time, I can tell!” yelled the pirate and fell into a death-defying giggle that involved clearing up one’s lungs and nose cavities thoroughly, yet not cleanly. He spat a greenish globule, the color of grog and the consistency of glue. Even the dog cared enough to move, flee-bitten and ridden with lice as it was. No answer came and Ned simply let the ship slide effortlessly sideways, the platform grazing the hull slightly:

“Och! Watch the paint, you dumb rumsacked lollygagging halakazoo!”

A rope seemed to shoot off itself down to the tower, and Ned appeared suddenly and stepped on the platform, his crossbow in hand, aimed at the pirate. Lerneia followed suit, an arrow nicked in her bow, while Parcifal simply unsheathed Encelados. The pirate was superbly equipped to deal with the situation at hand.

“Oy, I yield,” he said in a flat monotone and raised his arms, while the dog beside him had at a go at what was arguably some of the stuff the pirate had ever produced.

“See? Simple enough. Theo, help me tie her down. Sisters, you go on ahead and make some noise.”

“Gladly,” replied Parcifal while Lerneia eased her bow only slightly and followed her sister to an open staircase that led below.

Winceham felt it was high time he asked someone before it was too late:

“Anyone with some flint and steel? Something to light my pipe. I’m dying out here!”

And seemingly out of nowhere, a burst of flame ignited the pipe in his hand thoroughly. Winceham turned around and saw Bo, peeking out of Theo’s robes, and grinning at him uncannily.

Winceham and Ned had been silently climbing down the many storeys of the keep. Winceham was silent to a fault when he needed to; he scouted ahead and made sure the way was clear before Ned followed in his steps.

It was for the most part, an easy way in. There wasn’t such a thing as patrols, but rather bands of merry pirates with a lot of time on their hands and little to do other than pissing and drinking contests, though not necessarily in that exact order. A few rooms had pirates in the guise of guards posted outside who instead of guarding played craps or cards, usually with very lopsided results that ended in sharp instruments being used to clarify things.

All in all, all Winceham did was listen, watch and wait until Ned followed.

They hadn’t run onto anything especially interesting or dangerous; there was a vague hope the woodking would be held in the dungeons, but other than that the complete lack of noisy conundrums meant that the sisters were either brilliantly successful, or in grave danger. Winceham expressed that belief in a whisper, and Ned replied with almost a hiss:

“Mayb they’re waiting.”

“For what? Dinnertime?” asked Winceham and scrouged his face. He was about to take another step forward and lead them another floor down when he heard a duo of pirates conversing casually as they came down a corridor

to meet the staircase:

“Oy, how do we go about that then?” said one, scratching his head under his hat, evidently befuddled.

“Well, I suppose we ditch them in the pit and let the crocs do the rest,” replied the other with a shrug.

“No, you see I was wondering, how do we push them inside the pit. I mean, there’s like more than two of them,” insisted the somewhat not-so-bright-as-his colleague pirate.

“Boyo, you’re right! How ’bout we kill ’em first so they don’t move about and all?” said the other with mock surprise and excitement which did not carry over as intended.

“Dunno ’bout that, boss said feed them to crocs alive,” came the wavering answer.

“Well, he won’t know the difference know, will he?” said the other with a mischievous grin that could’ve been sparkling had more teeth been available.

Winceham nodded to Ned and then and casually appeared to them from behind the staircase wall:

“What is it with you pirates and dental hygiene?”

“Is it one of them? What’s it doin’ up ’ere?” asked the pirate uneasily, while the other turned and replied with a frown of uncertainty:

“No, too short. Oy, boyo, stick ’em!” said the pirate and brandished a cutlass. To his surprise though, Winceham wasn’t standing where he was supposed to be. Instead, he was now facing Ned’s crossbow, and his rather dull partner had a stiletto sticking out of his gut.

“The woodkin, if you please?” said Winceham and waved his bloodied stiletto menacingly. Ned kept the crossbow trained at the now glum-looking pirate, while he replied:

“Who?”

“The woodkin, the elves, the dark-skinned fellas you captured!”

“What ’bout them?”

“And I thought you were the brighter of the pair. The people you were gonna feed to the crocs!” said Winceham angrily, trying to keep his voice below a shout.

“What? The pigs?”

“That’s going to far even for the likes of you, sirrah,” said Winceham with a snarl and felt a sudden urge to stab the pirate vehemently. Ned stayed his arm and asked the pirate:

“What pigs?”

“The pigs, in the sty! We were gonna feed some to the crocs in the moat!”

“Were are the woodkin then?” asked Winceham urgently.

“Who?” asked the pirate with an ever more frightened, bewildered voice.

“Please, Ned. Let me,” said Winceham, his voice trembling from aggravation, an ill-tempered gleam in his eye and the stiletto swinging in his hand.

“The jungle folk. Where are they?” asked Ned as calmly as possible.

“Oh, them you mean? Off-world with the last shipment!”

“The last shipment?” asked Ned and Winceham followed suit:

“Off-world?”

Then they heard a cry echo down the walls. And then another. They were high-pitched and sounded familiar.

“A woman’s cries,” said Winceham under his breath and instinctively looked up, from where the sound came.

“The sisters!” yelled Ned and ran up the staircase with all his might.

Winceham said to the pirate:

“Duck.”

“What?” asked the pirate with a scrounged up face, unable to understand and Winceham sighed and added:

“Never mind, too tall anyway,” tripped the pirate and sent him careening down the stairs with many sounds of broken bones, before him too, running up the staircase as fast as any halfuin could.

The had ran up through the stairs and down corridors meeting little resistance. A couple of unlucky pirates had simply tried to see what the commotion was all about, and met a deadly, painful fate in the form of a bolt between the eyes and a stiletto in the nether region. Silent and deadly, Ned and Winceham searched for the sisters, like wild swirling dervished through a desert of stone. The keep was almost empty, it seemed suddenly. And the sisters were nowhere to be found, or seen.

Until they heard a different voice, in a very different way. The top of the tower, if you please.

“Did you hear that?” asked Ned.

“I’m trying to quit,” said Winceham reflexively, in a purely defensive voice. He then realised Ned was hearing it too.

“Top of the tower?”

“Speaking in our minds? What devilry is this?” asked Ned in disbelief.

“I’m not sure, but it could be a trap,” said Winceham nodding.

“What choice is there?” said Ned with a shrug. Winceham added:

“True, but I felt compelled to say that, just to make my point.”

Ned placed a hand on Winceham's good shoulder and told him with ardor:

"Hurry, Wince. Be on your toes, and try to hide yourself in the shadows up there."

"Believe me when I say that would have been my first choice as well."

The two of them ran up the tower expecting some kind of surprise on the way, but nothing obstructed them. Soon, they emerged at the tower's top, the night sky glistening with starlight, the clouds below a soft, tempting milky white mattress. They noticed alarmingly that the ship was missing, along with any signs of Theo and Bo. But what really caught their eye though, was the way the sisters stood, not far away from the tower's ledge right in front of the staircase: frozen like statues, the intensity of their plight drawn on their living, faces. They seemed to barely breath as Parcifal stood with Encelados blaring white hot above her head, both hands on the hilt, her face scrounged up in a mix of terror and hate.

Lernea stood beside her like the calm sea, deatermined and unyielding as she was about to let an arrow fly; yet the bow's string remained taut, and Lernea stood as if petrified.

Yet they both seemed to breath. Right behind the sisters stood an extremely tall, lavishly robed man with a beard, ruffled hair and a sharp, too sharp too be real, icy blue gleam on his eyes. Winceham tried to meld into the shadow, taking small backsteps to the nearest ledge, his face hooded. He spoke then with a rolling, deep voice that sounded like stony reeds alongside a foaming river.

"Now, now, Mr. Abbermouth. That would be futile, as much as it may hurt your ego."

"Hobb," stated Ned coldly.

"Well, yes. Among others," said the man, the torch in his

hand casting wild, creepy shadows of the two sisters as he silently and uncannily walked between them. Winceham noticed an unsettling thing about him; he wasn't actually walking. He was gliding a couple of inches above the stone floor.

"You are responsible for my father's death," said Ned and glared at him, heedless of how peculiar the man's voice and looks were, apart from the fact he was levitating. Hobb came to a stop and smiled thinly:

"Weird things, humans. You blame me for your father's death, while Culliper pulled that trigger. And still, you couldn't kill him."

"How do you know that?" asked Ned with uneasy suspicion.

"I know many things. But what I crave right now is one: that amulet."

Hobb's voice had a deadly finality to it: it took great composure for a man to simply talk, yet Ned found in him the audacity to talk back.

"I'm not a jewelfrafter; you have the wrong person."

Hobb's face suddenly scrounged and stretched impossibly. With another twist of its flesh and a growling, the human face evaporated and instead an elongated head was now visible. Grey-blue skin shone slick in the starlight, and a flock of stubby, short tentacles like anemones writhed around a circular, sharp-teethed maw. Hobb, it turned out, was literally some kind of monster out of a nightmare. The creature that had disguised itself as Hobb looked at Ned with irritated curiosity and blared ominously, his voice now grating:

"Don't play coy with me! I know about your little escapades, and these females pathetic dreams! I couldn't care less. Where is the amulet?"

"That's a really ugly way to ask for things," said Ned,

while he noticed Winceham stood silent and immobile as a rock. Ned realised he was suddenly a little more outmatched, but carried on, trying to understand the foe in front of him and think of what to do next, really, really fast. The creature approached him with unnerving silence and stood a few feet away. Its blue-on-blue eyes had the colour of the deepest sea.

“The comedian. Humor. How infantile. Like your race.”

“Better infantile than have a mop for a face,” Ned told him pointing to his maw.

“You mock me? I am beyond mocking.”

“Yes, I see mopping really is beneath you,” said Ned grinning.

“You puny little human, you cannot begin to fathom the aeons that have born me.”

“No, but I’m pretty sure you bore me,” said Ned and noticed Winceham’s eyes twitch.

“I was hoping I did not have to feed tonight; your minds sicken me,”

“Well, I could say the same thing about your face but that would be a compliment in your case,” replied Ned, and saw Lernea hand spasm.

“I’ll have what is mine, Ned Larkin, and you’ll have what you deserve!” said the monster as he lunged forward with a gaping maw, aiming squarely for Ned’s head, his powerful long arms springing to catch Ned in a deathly embrace.

But it was right at that time that Lernea’s arrow struck him in the back, causing him to turn around reflexively and growl, his maw tentacles writhing like the feet of a millipede. Ned slid away and run towards the wheeled platform where they had docked at first. With a corner of his eye, he saw Lernea beginning to move, and Parcifal hands trembling; Winceham too, could move his head again.

“I will find great delight in sucking your skull dry, Larkin!” cried the creature as he hurled himself against Ned, his robes fluttering in the night breeze.

“With your sense of humor, that’s a no-brainer!” yelled Ned gleefully and saw Lernea, Parcifal and Winceham suddenly unfreeze, and without a second look at their surroundings, train their weapons against the creature with angered shouts and brave cries:

“By Skarla, we’ll have vengeance!” yelled the sisters, and Winceham simply added before rushing towards the blue-skinned terror:

“Ya think you’re tall, eh?”

With a wave of his hand and a low-key hum from it’s maw, all three of them were pushed back in the air, landing hard on their backs, their weapons flying off their hands. The monster turned its attention squarely at Ned, before it added gleefully:

“Where is the humor now, human?”

The last word had the subtle hints of sounding exactly like vermin would. Ned smiled coolly and retorted:

“You just keep asking yourself, don’t you?”

The creature let out a terrible sound between an infuriated growl and a cacophonous gurgling laughter before it tried to reach for Ned.

Right when there was nothing funny to joke about, right when Ned could see the others were still trying to get up, too far away to act, he saw Bo, the bunny with the flaming eyes jump right in front of him, smile uncannily and hop back out of view in a split second, right before the hot molten cannonball hit the monster square across the face and embedded what was left of him and his smouldering robes in the tower’s ledge.

He then saw the ship wobbling uncertainly, and Theo hur-

rying to man the helm, the bow cannon cooling with a red-after glow on its lip and a thin whisp of smoke carried westward, where the wind blew.

Ned smiled broadly and sighed, while Winceham yelled as he looked around for confirmation:

“Did ya see it? Did ya see the bunny?”

The sisters got up on their feet, nursing aching muscles and perhaps a couple of displaced bones. Lernea was about to say something to Winceham, but she changed her mind as she saw a bright flash and an uncanny oval slit appear in the night sky. It was looking peering through a looking glass, but all broken and uneven, like someone had pieced together parts of another night sky; another place lay beyond that oval. The monster limping heavily, glanced at Ned and said nothing. It’s eyes flashed suddenly, before it crossed into the oval slit, which then instantly disappeared.

Ned stood there unable to really understand what had happened. So did the others. Theo though, seemingly unfazed, settled the sloop near the platform a bit awkwardly, and jumped off the ship, quickly tying her down to the tower with a rope. He sounded awfully excited when he rushed over by Ned’s side.

“Wow! Did you see that? I think it left a crater!”

“Where were you?” asked Ned weakly.

“Well, that pirate was making weird noises like the ones people do when they die, and Bo seemed really worried when the ship began to wobble really bad. He kind of insisted that I put my amulet in this weird slot in that awful chair, and then all the wobbling stopped. But the pirate died,” answered Theo truthfully, with a somewhat sad voice at the end.

“No I mean, where were you when all this happened?”

“Oh, I heard this weird voice in my head, and it felt all

wrong; I was already at the top of the tower. But for some reason, Bo was already gnawing on that rope we had tied, and before I could convince him otherwise, the ship had drifted away, and I thought I'd give her a spin," said Theo excitedly and added thoughtfully:

"You did say I should keep an eye on her, didn't you?"

"Yes I did. I'm not sure though what would have happened if I hadn't. Or just what kind of a bunny Bo is, really," said Ned, ponderously gazing at bo who was happily tucked away again inside Theo's robes, his face barely protruding, and his nose twitching as if he was about to sneeze.

"Well what about that? You might be actually funny, lad. I think it saved our lives, actually. I couldn't flutter an eyelid, but everything you said, cracked me up! And then I could move again!" said Winceham as he nourished a bruised elbow, grinning as he approached Ned and Theo. The sisters followed close behind, bickering about which one's fault some thing, or the other, was.

"He, it, whatever, caught you by surprise!" Lerneia told Parcifal accusingly, who replied in even yet more aggravated tones:

"Me? You were the one who said to go have a look! Your decision, your responsibility, your fault! I was simply carrying out your orders, my queen!"

"Only when it suits you, sister!" yelled Lerneia, when Theo saw Culliper untying the rope that held the ship moored.

"He's trying to get away!" cried Theo and began to twirl his hands in the air for no apparent reason.

"You didn't tie him down?!" asked Ned in disbelief.

"You told me to look after the ship, not him!" replied Theo as the air between his hands filled with a warm, violet light.

“Amateurs,” said Winceham softly and picking up a loose cobblestone, closed one eye and aimed at Culliper, just as he was about to start running back to the ship. Winceham threw the stone expertly, and it connected with Culliper’s head at a very accident-prone spot; the back. He staggered for a couple of steps, before collapsing.

The violet light between Theo’s hands died down softly; he and Ned walked over to where Culliper lay. He wasn’t unconscious, but he looked painfully disoriented. His face sported a furrowed grin, quite suitable for someone with possible brain damage. Ned caught him by the nape of his jacket and told him, more so than asked him:

“We’re not done yet. Where do you think you’re going?”

“Tallyflop,” said Culliper drowsily.

“Where’s that?” asked Ned and Culliper simply pointed up in the sky. Ned asked again, his voice giving off signals he wasn’t in the mood for jokes.

“I’m not in the mood. Is that where the last shipment took the woodkin to?”

Culliper nodded like a drunken chicken would.

“Where is that?!” yelled Ned and still, a single finger pointed up into the sky. Theo asked rather calmly:

“The stars?”

Culliper smiled like a five-year old boy and happily crumbled down on the platform.

“It can’t be.”

“Why not?” asked Theo.

“Flying is one thing. But the stars?”

“Well I’m sure it’s perfectly safe.”

“What is?” asked Lernea, newly arrived over Culliper’s unconscious body.

“Flying to the stars,” said Ned and nodded.

“Ridiculous!” said Lernea with a scoff, while Parcifal commented with a curious smile on her lips:

“Noone in our history has done that before, have they?”

Winceham only heard Parcifal last, so he had to ask in turn:

“What’s never been done before?”

“Flying to the stars, to a place called Tallyflop, to save the woodkin and maybe get back at Hobb or whatever that thing was called,” said Ned, quietly gazing at the starry night sky. Winceham caught a glimpse of everyone contemplating this almost seriously, and after a moment or so of thinking, said with a sigh.

“Maybe, just maybe, if I’m lucky enough, I’m still having just a bad trip.”