

Party of Five

January 20, 2013

Book II

a fantasy novella by

Vasileios Kalampakas

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

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Foreword from the author

I couldn't really find a working subtitle for this first book in what's to become a series. Arguably, it's not a book per se (meaning not a full length novel), but a book it is still.

“Party of Five” starts off with this book here, and I envision it as a series of novellas that I want to keep writing, evolving the characters and the world as I go. I could do that in a full length novel, but it's much easier for me to write smaller, self-contained adventures that are linked together through the same characters, being fresh and different each time.

Plus, I think a series of novellas can reach an audience faster and it easier and more practical (hopefully more fun) to read for most people. It is also my opinion that the novella as a genre, needs some more love from authors and readers alike.

I dearly hope you'll come to like the characters enough to wait for the next novella in the series.

P.S. : Please do write a review if you could bother, even a nasty one. It's what enables me to know what works and what doesn't.

Sincerely (I do mean it),

Vasileios Kalampakas

“I’ve never really understood all those planet-bound folk that look at the night sky all starry-eyed and gaze at it with a superbly idiotic grin and lose their grip on reality, making up all sorts of ideas about what space is like. I’ll say this just once, hopefully some of you cadets are dead drunk not to notice the mistake you just made; space is boring, unforgiving, empty and a lot bigger than it looks like. A real lot.”

– Rear Admiral Stephen Zondmeier VII, Human League fleet academy welcoming speech

Ned was leaning against the upper deck railing, gazing at the milky blue sheen of a swarm of stars that showered the ship with a fuzzy, moon-like glow. For the last few days, ever since they’d sailed into the stars, a strange smile seemed to occupy his face for most of his waking time, while in his sleep all he could see was the glitter of stars, and the image of his father waving at him encouragingly to move on into a beautiful unknown.

The ship moved in dead silence; one could only surmise it was really moving at all because of the twinkle of the stars as their light bounced off the metal ramrod in its prow. Winceham was snoring heavily nearby, occupying a simple hay bed he’d brought from below deck, while Parcifal kept a mindful, worried eye at Lernea’s handling of the ship, who looked utterly and totally bored to death. Theo and Bo were shooting fireworks far off astern and seemed unequivocally happy.

“It’s wonderful, isn’t it?” said Ned to no-one in particular, and for a rather awkward amount of time, noone bothered to reply. At length, Parcifal turned her head and looked at him morosely, her hands folded behind her head as if surrender-

ing to the uneventful, humdrum quagmire that she felt their journey was.

“What, exactly, do you find wonderful?” she said with a monotone voice. Ned pointed to the vastness of space surrounding them and replied in earnest:

“All this.”

“This,” she said and nodded to a random patch of blackness, “is a void. A nothingness. I’m nearly spent by boredom.”

“Oh, you’re just lacking that flint to spark the imagination within you. I’ve written down a song about it. Dozens actually.”

“Please, not another one,” said Parcifal with a worried, sickly frown and a thrust-out open palm. Ned was truly puzzled, and it showed both in his voice and the sudden jerk of his neck.

“Why not?”

“I’m not in the mood. Gracious Skrala, not now, not ever,” said Parcifal and failing to find the north in a place where it meant absolutely nothing, she sighed and made the warding gesture of Skrala.

“Mood is a thing for cattle, and love-making,” a grumpy, muffled voice said without warning.

It was Winceham, half-asleep yet instantly aware of what was being said, his rogueish instincts always at the ready. Lernea’s hard, solemn face changed abruptly to that of a radiant, noble lady such as her lineage would demand of her.

She said, or rather announced with a beaming voice:

“Mr. Winceham, I think that now, as they saying goes, she’s all yours.”

“I wouldn’t want to intrude on your persons miladies. I think she’s rather tall, too young and inexperienced for me

taste, not to mention somewhat lank on the waist,” replied Winceham, with his face still buried in the soft cloth mattress filled with hay. Parcifal looked at the short halfuin with a perplexed frown, before she came to realise he was referring to her; her boot shortly thereafter connected with the halfuin’s behinds, shoving him off the cot and onto the hard deck.

“My waist is fine by all accounts, thank you,” said Parcifal looking mildly annoyed. Winceham picked himself up sporting a grin of mischief and no ill feelings, while Ned added, from an entirely different train of thought:

“Are you saying, my singing is bad? Because, if I recall correctly, it worked like magic with the pirates and the apemen.”

“Which is to say,” interjected Lernea, strolling around the deck stretching her back, “it’s fit for animals and scum.”

There was no-one at the helm, a matter which was soon made entirely apparent to everyone as the ship began to slowly list to port. Just as Parcifal walked over to grab the helm, a look of annoyance on her face, she saw Bo flying accross the air as if falling slowly sideways, his fluffy ears shooting in strange directions, firm and upright as if frozen by an amazing sense of danger. Theo followed close behind, smiling as broadly as a child left to its devices alongside a cookie jar. Parcifal stood baffled, while Theo grabbed the helm as he flew past it, turned the ship back on its proper course and twisted his body to settle his feet on the ground with the grace of a dancer.

“And, it seems now I can fly!” he said proudly, while Bo could be seen a few feet away, happily munching on an oversized leek with awe-inspiring veracity.

Ned exclaimed on cue:

“It’s space! It’s so grandiose, so alluring. Anything is

possible, see?" he said and pointed at a levitating Theo with a gleaming smile. Winceham and the Teletha sisters did not seem to share in the enthusiasm.

"That's what you've been saying for the past two weeks," said Lernea and let herself slump to the cot with a weary sigh. Parcifal added with some real concern:

"Not to mention that all we're navigating blind, based on that scum's word alone."

Culliper lay in shackles in the hold; he'd told them as much as he knew himself. He had been told to raid the village and that he would collect his pay at Tallyflop. Even though Parcifal almost convinced the rest to throw him overboard and use him as target practice, cooler minds had prevailed. Ned though very troubled about what to do with his father's killer, did not want to have his blood on his hands.

"He'd be a fool to try and swing us. We'll reach some kind of port, at some point. That's for sure. Food and water is aplenty though, no worries there," said Winceham scratching his head.

"Well, what if we're walking into a trap?" asked Parcifal, shaking her head, looking agitated.

"That would be sailing into a trap," corrected Lernea from her cot, without bothering to take her arm off her shut eyes. Theo said with confidence, even as he kept the ship on course with little effort:

"I think everything's as it should be. Bo isn't the least bit nervous," he said and toyed with the bunny's ears, Bo wriggling with pleasure on Theo's shoulder.

"Bo is a bunny, Theo," said Parcifal with a voice that teetered on the brink of a shrill. Theo wasn't taken aback and insisted:

"Well, I trust his instincts. You'll see."

“Believe me, I’m dying to,” said Parcifal, brandishing her lack of humor for everyone to see, as if it were Encelados, her trusted blade.

“Harsh words in haste can oft be bad in taste,” said Winceham in a sing-along voice as he produced his smoking pipe and pouch from a vest pocket.

“I thought Ned was the poet,” said Lernea with a puzzled voice and a childish frown. Ned was sincere in what he thought was an apology:

“I hate to disappoint, but I do not do free verse.”

“Well, Svarna be my guide, there’s hope for our ears yet,” replied Parcifal in an utterly disenchanted manner. Ned was beginning to realise his talents were being judged too harshly, all too unfairly.

“You keep making these remarks about my singing.”

“I thought you’d never notice. Frankly, I’d prefer you kept those kinds of performances to yourself,” said Parcifal and sat down on the deck, legs crossed.

“That’s what I do, Parcifal. I perform,” said Ned. It was obvious in his stricken face he felt more hurt than offended. Parcifal drove home what sounded like a thinly-veiled insult:

“Well, it would be more beneficial if you tried your hand at something else. A man without a sword is like a cup riddled with holes: useless.”

Winceham lit his pipe, drew heavily and added as smoke left his nose and mouth freely:

“And dry as hell to boot. Cut the lad some slack, milady; he’s more than proved his usefulness when that monster had us at his maw.”

“You’re being unfair, sister. You stood there frozen, incapacitated, just like the rest of us. Except Ned,” said Lernea and pointed a blind finger at Theo, missing Ned wildly. Par-

cifal unsheathed Encelados and dutifully began to check the blade in detail, from all angles. It looked sharp as ever in the starlight.

“I would still think that was a freak occurrence. It has never happened to me before,” she said, seemingly without giving the incident much thought.

“Well, there’s a first time for everything, milady. Maybe you’re too young to know better,” said Winceham and looked away, drawing on his pipe, trying to look innocent, yet a grin and a pout full of mischief adorned his face. Parcifal was quick to answer:

“Is that another one of your sexual innuendos? Mother always said men are immature. I had no idea she meant old people as well.”

“I’m not that old mind you. I don’t usually brag about it, but I could keep a lady up all night,” said Winceham and secretly wished he could remember the last time that had happened.

“It must be the snoring,” Lerneia said matter-of-factly, and Parcifal grinned without a word, her sister aptly filling in for her.

“There!” shouted Ned suddenly and pointed a finger, his excitement threatening to tear his face apart. Everyone turned thier heads as if silently obeying an order. A moment or so passed before Parcifal asked with a somewhat surreptitious, wary look, her hand drawn to Encelados’ hilt on its own:

“Where, exactly?”

“Don’t you see it?” cried Ned as he rushed to the ship’s bow like a five-year old waiting for ice cream to appear out of thin air. Winceham furrowed his brow and toyed with his beard for a moment before adding:

“What are we looking for, lad?”

“That star! See how its light trembles? How it fades in and out? That’s it! That must be Tallyflop!” shouted Ned without taking his eyes off the trembling, pointy source of light. Bo’s eyes lit up like a blowing furnace all of a sudden and he made sure he had Theo’s full attention, jumping up and down around the ship’s steering wheel. The elf knew the bunny meant business so he brought the ship’s bow to bear dead on where Bo pointed with his whole body, much more like a hunting dog than an innocent-looking herbivore would.

Lernea spared a moment or so to take a look as well, barely standing straight up from the cot, as if peering over an invisible perch.

“All I see is a twinkling star,” she said drowsily and fell on the cot again like she half-expected to be roused for school too soon for comfort.

“It could be a beacon,” said Winceham stroking his beard thoughtfully.

“Exactly!” shouted Ned, while Theo exclaimed:

“Bo sure looks excited!”

Parcifal looked at the star, growing subtly larger with every passing moment. Then she stared at the elf and the bunny for a moment or so, her look full of apprehension. She said to Theo:

“Whenever those eyes flame up...Nothing good ever happens.”

Theo would have none of that. He shook a hand dismissively and firmly said, his eyes fixed on the twinkling star up ahead:

“Preposterous. Utterly unfounded. Pessimistic superstitious misconceptions. Bo’s eyes flaming up and our predicaments have absolutely no correlation, on a scientific or thaumaturgic basis whatsoever.”

Wnceham turned and looked at Theo rather confounded, yet approving of his answer. He nodded and said:

“Well said, lad.”

Winceham smiled at Theo, who in turn bowed lightly towards the halfuin. The brief moment of well-earned flattery made Parcifall roll her eyes and sigh. Winceham, always prowling about to boost his ego in many small ways that to him added up to enormous amounts, was about to make a sly, wry comment on the virtuous of proper language and etiquette, the grin on his face a sure sign he was going to enjoy it no matter what Parcifal’s reaction was.

To his surprise though, the only words that came out of his mouth when his gaze ventured upwards before it came down again, had nothing to do with proper language and much less, etiquette:

“Blasted gracious all-mighty hairy cactus of your mother’s tit!”

Parcifal spent a moment with her flustered face stuck in a deep frown, trying to fit the words she had just heard into nameless categories. Her finger was already raised in a warning when she looked at Winceham with a seething glare and shouted:

“Recant, sirrah! I know an insult when I hear one, even if I can’t fathom it!”

“Look!” cried Ned as he ran towards the bridgehead, his head stuck upwards as if he was training for a sword-eating contest.

Parcifal only had to look upwards to see both Theo and Bo were looking up as well, their faces and fur respectively strangely illuminated, standing perfectly still like under some sort of enchanting spell. Her hand instinctively went for Encelados’ once more but half-way it froze as well: the sight in

front of her eyes had captivated her very soul, and the souls of everyone else as well, it seemed.

They were sailing under a majestic field of starlight; rivulets of stardust and beams of light wafted down from above, where the giant gnarly branches of an old, wizened tree dominated the starscape. Where before there had been nothing, now the ship felt like it drifted onwards like a butterfly loitering around a blooming flower. They gracefully soared by clusters of huge green leaves, easily the size of a hamlet or small village. The huge leaves emanated a faint greenish glow, while in the distance all around them, more and more leaves and branches appeared little by little, like some omnipotent invisible hand was clearing up a fog-stained window.

Swaths of light and soft shadows crept over them at an easy pace as the ship continued on its course, as if it sailed under a soft, thin, silken-coloured bedding the likes of which every child would only ever hope to dream about; a tunnel of light and shadow had manifested itself on top of a playful, shining net that tossed and writhed about in a beautiful dance that seemed to have a breath of its own.

“What is this place?” wondered Ned, a feeling of awe coming over him like a wet breeze would, every inch of his body feeling it little by little.

“It certainly looks like a tree,” said Winceham, unable to peel his eyes away from a sight that now enveloped the whole of the ship.

“By Svarna, it’s the most beautiful thing I’ve seen outside the Holy Mountain,” said Parcifal with a stupefied grin on her face, all her worries and fears instantly gone, her smile beaming with a shine her armor could never match.

“See? I told you Bo had a good reason for being excited.

Isn't that right Bo?" said Theo gleefully as he kept the ship steadily trained between a pair of nearly parallel branches that seemed to lead them on like the walls of a corridor.

Then suddenly, literally out of nowhere, a ship the shape of a bumblebee and easily twice the size of the "Mary Watchamacallit" appeared at her prow; ridden with holes and clumsy patches of copper plating and shoddy, badly trimmed sails, it looked more like a flying collection of scrap. The fact that a ship like that could also sail into space made the whole endeavor of traveling through the stars acutely unremarkable all of a sudden. It wouldn't have drawn everyone's attention with a snap if it wasn't for the pair of large harpoons trained on the "Mary Watchamacallit". The oversized sharp implements of hunting and warfare were manned by unruly pairs of short, ugly, mischievous-looking green little things wearing ridiculously extravagant goggles and leather helmets and sadly, nothing more.

"It's an ambush!" cried Parcifal and clutched Encelados defiantly with both hands, warily checking all around her, as if she half-expected more invisible threats to materialise. The blade though, remained a shiny grey steel color; it did not give off its glow of warning.

"It certainly looks like an ambush," said Winceham not knowing whether he should ready his stiletto or finally have a try at space swimming, which in retrospect did not seem like a dangerous waste of time. Theo remained silent exchanging some oddly thoughtful looks with Bo, even if that meant mainly staring at the rabbit's frenzied twitching nose. Its eyes though did not flare up; a mayhem seemed an evermore distant possibility.

"It's fairly normal, I think," said Theo coolly with a thoughtful pout on his lips, while Ned commented with a wor-

risome, yet controlled voice:

“Which is, the gargantuan tree floating in space or being ambushed by naked goblins?”

Theo gave Ned a flat shrug, failing to see an answer was not expected of him. A deafening, snarling sound made everyone’s face twitch and contort unpleasantly as it was amplified needlessly through some sort of makeshift speaker device:

“Oy! ’Tis Mr. Snog, Cappn’ o’ the ’Mary Celestial’. We’ll be towing her into the harbor, mind you. Don’t try and scuttle the ship or break away; we’ve got hooks and arrows and cannoshot and all sorts o’ thingamajigs to take care o’ the runaways.”

A cough, a loud buzz and a shrieking noise were heard before the voice died down. The little green creatures wearing the goggles seemed to be enjoying this immensely, judging from the way they giggled and toyed around with the oversized harpoon launchers; crude-looking contraptions but menacingly sharp and shiny nonetheless. One of the crew jumped off the goblin ship holding a thick rope in hand; a towing line. The little goblin was wearing nothing but a toothless grin.

“What did he say? They’re towing us in?” Ned asked Winceham who nodded with a frown. Parcifal still held Enceledos at a defensive stance.

“What for?” she asked, while Theo again offered another shrug of almost complete indifference, seemingly too preoccupied with steering the ship.

“I’m up! I’m up! Stop that awful shouting!” said Lernea who had jumped out of bed, her hair in a ruffle, rubbing her eyes and judging from her wild-eyed look, trying to understand why there was a large oak tree yelling at her in space.

“I really don’t understand why they’re naked”, said Winceham and Ned threw him a wary look and a deeply troubled sigh before he said:

“I really don’t understand how’s that going to help.”

“I wasn’t trying to help. They’re sending one of their own to tie the line,” said Winceham and pointed to the naked, grinning goblin.

“I see,” said Ned and blinked vacantly with his hands in his pockets, while Parcifal couldn’t help but ask, her voice on the verge of breaking:

“Are you just willing to let them have this ship?”

“They’re towing us in. It’s not dangerous. At least that’s what I think,” said Theo and petted Bo around his ears.

“Think of it as a harbor service,” said Winceham stroking his beard, his eyes trying to focus where the goblin’s genitals might possibly be. Lerne scratched her head and straightened her back before opening her eyes wide enough to let what has happening around her sink in. In a moment of sudden, angst-ridden clarity she exclaimed:

“We’re being boarded!”

To which the goblin tying up the line on the prow answered flatly from afar:

“Yer bein’ tooed.”

“That probably means we’re surrendering! I’m not surrendering to a bunch of naked.. Things!” cried Parcifal, Encelados trembling in the air hesitantly.

“Goblins, lass,” said Winceham and nodded before starting to walk towards the towliner onboard the “Mary Watchamacallit”. As both ships moved closer to the immense trunk that was still a bit hazy, the air around them started to pick up a heady smell unlike most; it was a mix of oil, walnuts and grog gone bad.

“Stay yer footing!” shouted the captain of the “Mary Celestial” easily recognized by his eye-patch and rat skull-adorned black hat. Winceham raised his hands in the air and lowered his head, trying to peek at the goblin’s privates. He said in all seriousness:

“I’m just curious about the size, you know?”

“Nun o’ yer business, ya dwarven bastard,” said the towliner, its face scrounged up in an even uglier way than generally thought possible for a goblin.

“He’s a halfuin, actually,” said Theo and nodded to himself, looking pleased he had something helpful to offer in what he deemed to be a discussion of sorts.

“Of dwarven heritage, still,” added Winceham not the least bit mindful of the insult but still focused on trying to guess the average girth of goblin genitals from a distance.

“Is noone with me?” cried Parcifal in vain, while Lernea tried to quickly put the pieces together.

“We can’t afford hasty decisions, sister. We must think this through,” said Lernea while Ned looked at her sadly and said with weariness in his voice:

“They’re already towing us in, Lernea. They took us completely by surprise; their ship might look like a heap of trash but I can count four cannons, two harpoon launchers and maybe two dozens of them leering at us for no good reason I’d like to think of.”

“They’re smaller than Winceham!” cried out Parcifal in wild-eyed protest only to receive Winceham’s sharply irate response:

“Never underestimate the small folk, lass!”

The goblin onboard the “Mary Whatchamacallit” was lighting a pipe when it nodded to Winceham and said appreciatively:

“Now ya tell’er what’s right, ya dwarven bastard.”

Winceham gave the goblin a curt bow and replied congenially:

“Can’t be wrong when speaking from the heart, dear sir.”

“Dear sir, he says! He’s calling the pirate goblin, dear sir!” cried out Parcifal, Encelados seemingly writhing in agony in her fumbling hands.

“That’s his prerogative, sister. It’s a form of negotiation. You should do well to take notice of Mister Winceham’s diplomatic skills,” said Lerneia and searched the trunk near the bed on deck for her tin of tea. Ned wished he could do more than sigh, but it would have to do. He approached Parcifal with a friendly, knowing look. She looked at him with a desperate longing to let her have a go at them all, but he took her by the shoulder and told her with pristine calmness:

“Maybe next time.”

Parcifal looked at Ned with befuddled sadness. All she could utter was a half-croaked “But..”

“Ah, no worries,” said Theo with the smile of a child on his first trip to the sea. “She’ll be right,” he told her with a misplaced assurance.

A voice echoed around them. It had loud, metallic screeching overtones.

“You, the dwarf! Stop harassing my crew or you’ll be fired upon!”

The air inside the goblin dockmaster’s office had a nearly suffocating quality. The atmosphere felt thick as oil, yet it smelled of ink and rough, cheap paper. Tallyflop’s dockmaster’s office was built inside a hollowed out section of the giant oak’s skin. Its walls rose steeply into a dark, shadowy place with no ceiling in sight. Goblin helpers and staff could

be seen running atop tiny overhead railings, metal grates, through glass pipes, along rope bridges and wooden ladders. The almost always insidious looking creatures appeared and disappeared through small trapdoors built in the wooden walls. Sniggering like madmen at times, they carried large stacks of papers strapped on their back and were invariably naked.

Lernea's look darted around uncomfortably. It was as if she felt soiled by merely standing there. Parcifal had a brooding expression, her hands stuffed in her armpits, pouting like a child scorned. Winceham was looking intently at the stacks of papers and scrolls rising up into nothingness. He could make out the goblins criscrossing the room overhead with all the alacrity of rats in a cage. Stroking his fine beard, the odd look on his face meant he still wasn't sure about the goblins genitalia. He looked committed; he just had to know.

Bo sat on Theo's shoulder idly, practically asleep. The flames on his eyes were nowhere to be seen. Theo was silently trying to count the books and ledgers surrounding them; he had managed to start over and over again more than a few times.

Ned sported a troubled look and a screwed up face. He was trying to understand what it was exactly they were dealing with.

"What do you mean the ship's impounded?", said Ned as calmly and clearly as possible. The goblin sitting down behind an oversized desk in front of him, had earlier identified himself as Tallyflop's dockmaster.

The goblin dockmaster went by the name of Zed and was wearing nothing more than a smudged, shattered monocle. It was very doubtful that the monocle could serve its original purpose, but Zed nevertheless straightened it out before an-

swering.

“I mean, it’s being withheld,” said the dockmaster without looking up from a huge ledger easily three times his size. Ned allowed for a small pause before he cleared his throat.

“On what grounds?” asked Ned. Parcifal’s eyes narrowed, her focus on the goblin’s head.

“As per contract,” replied the dockmaster tersely with a shrilly voice, flipping some of the pages almost at random.

“We never signed any contract!” exclaimed Parcifal and red hot anger poured from her voice. The dockmaster raised his head and looked at her through the monocle, blinking erratically and trying - impossible though it seemed - to focus for a moment or two. He dived into the huge ledger in front of him again before answering. He waved a bony hand dismissively.

“That’s irrelevant.”

“How is that even possible?” shouted Ned, his face trying to express a righteous befuddlement words could not.

“Under statutory law,” said the dockmaster calmly, shooting a straight eye at Ned for the first time.

“Meaning?” asked Ned with and threw his hands in the air with exasperation.

The goblin took a moment and looked at all of the party crammed inside the little space that remained in front of his desk. He then raised a brow and said flatly before returning to his ledger, dipping a pen in some ink and adding a smudge that highly resembled goblin genitalia on the side of a page:

“The ship’s being impounded.”

“I can see that. Where does it say so you can do that?” said Ned pointing to the goblin crew outside the tiny window on their back. The goblin wrecking crew were hoisting down the sails. Lernea looked behind her shoulder and saw

a large metal barrel-like construct on wheels, pushed on a ramp. It had a number of saws and hatchets attached to it and left a trail of smoke as it vibrated violently on the *Mary Whatchamacallit's* deck. The next moment it exploded with a muted thud, sending perhaps a dozen goblins flying off into space. A rush of maniac laughter and snot-brained giggling followed suit before the wrecking crew went back to what appeared to be work for goblins.

“They really seem to be going out on a limb,” said Winceham with a grin and Ned looked at him as if he felt his wallet was missing.

“Same place it says you can take it off Mr. Culliper there,” replied the dockmaster and barely nodded to the shackled figure of Culliper, his mouth gagged with a very unhygienic-looking rag, tightly pressed between Lernea and Parcifal. Culliper rolled his eyes but noone was paying any attention to him, except perhaps for Ned.

Ned shot the pirate a hard look. His jaw tightened and his face became ashen gray. It was a very misfortunate series of events that had led them all the way to space and Tallyflop and there was still the matter of Culliper to settle. Ned looked like he was about to grab the dockmaster by the throat when Zed cleared his throat just in time.

“Says on section eight, paragraph fifteen dash seven of the ‘Bloody Infamous and Rather Fair Codex of Ethical Piracy’, and I quote: ‘Once ye take a ship, ye partake in all it is ridden with, be it bloody tax, bloody berthing charges, bloody refitting and in any bloody way legal or not so much investments or expenses accrued in relation to the ship’s hull or bloody floating bits thereof’.”

Ned took a deep breath and messed his face up with a hand. He appeared to gather every iota of self-control and

asked with a barely constrained shout:

“Meaning?”

“The ship owes us money,” replied Zed flatly.

A loud creaking sound was heard, followed by a couple of thuds and reverberating knocks. The floor vibrated somewhat, and grabbed almost everyone’s attention, except for Ned and the dockmaster whose gazes were locked in a silent, mysterious struggle. Outside, at the pier, the goblin wrecking crew had just chopped off the main mast and were trying to peel off what had previously been a somewhat less flat goblin. There wasn’t much laughter involved, at least not until the moment one of them brandished a bloodied spatula, much to the merriment of his co-workers.

Parcifal exploded with a shout, condemning the lack of logic behing the wrecking of the *Mary Whatchamacallit*, rather than simply stating the obvious.

“But you’re bloody wrecking it!”

Theo was now trying to count goblin parts and limbs flying off from the ship now and then, while Winceham’s fascination with goblin genitalia seemed to come to an end. There was a glad look of relief on his smiling face when he shook his head as if everything finally made sense.

“It’s one bloody size smaller then!”

“Ah, I see your friends here like to talk legalese. We’re wrecking it because it’s our bloody prerogative, ain’t it?” said Zed with what could’ve been a smile if it wasn’t impossibly lopsided, the dockmaster’s saw-like teeth failing to follow the geometry of the mouth.

“How are you going to get anything worthwhile from that ship by hacking it to pieces?” said Parcifal frustrated, while Ned looked engrossed in thought, his eyes wide shut.

“You’re not very experienced in the shipping business, are

you?” remarked Zed and added another blot of ink in the shape of goblin genitalia on some page on his ledger, before he turned the page and went back to trailing some other text.

“Is there a problem with that?” said Parcifal sharply and tried to approach the goblin threateningly. She moved about a couple of inches before bumping onto Ned’s back. Her sister shook her head disapprovingly and motioned her to just stay put.

“Ned can handle it,” she said and after a look at Ned added, “For the time being.”

Ned swallowed hard and nodded thoughtfully to himself before turning to look at the ship being hacked and sawed without a lot of regard for the craftsmanship or the safety of the wrecking crew.

“You’re selling it for scrap, isn’t that right?” asked Ned pointing at the dockmaster.

“If by scrap you mean firewood, that’s right,” replied Zed.

“Firewood? Isn’t that liable to catch on fire? Fire is dangerous, isn’t it?” said Theo suddenly and everyone looked at him as if realising for the first time he might not be actually aware of his surroundings most of the time. On the other hand, Bo seemed quite alert, yet his eyes weren’t lit up. He simply wiggled his nose and scratched an ear.

“It doesn’t make much sense to hack down the whole supporting structure on top of which this city is built on. It’d be like turning a castle’s foundations into a quarry,” said Lernea nodding thoughtfully. Parcifal’s face then suddenly lit up with a smile that meant an idea had been hatched in her head; she chose to remain silent though and grinned as if something wicked had crossed her mind.

“Still, it can’t be all that valuable. I mean, how much firewood does a city this size need? It’s not like it’s cold in

space,” said Winceham with a shrug of his shoulders that went largely unnoticed, especially since he stood smack in the middle of them all, hardly able to breathe properly crammed as they were.

“Steam engines,” said Ned with a sudden flash of insight. The goblin nodded and tried to smile congenially but the end result was less than inviting.

“By steam you mean that thing that’s like smoke, except it only appears to be around bathing houses and such?” asked Winceham, a very uncertain expression painted on his face. He absent-mindedly scratched his chin, breadcrumbs falling off his beard. None bothered to answer him; they were rather trying to absorb the implicit declaration that the smell about Winceham wasn’t just a matter of unfortunate timing, but rather a way of life. The minimal space of the dockmaster’s office made it all but impossible to ignore.

“Well, now that we’ve got everything sorted out, would you be bloody kind enough to leave? Work just keeps piling up,” said the dockmaster and as luck would have it, a goblin passed overhead riding a small unicycle on a rope and tossed an impossibly thick book on a huge stack that came crushing down barely a moment later.

“What’s a steam engine?” asked Parcifal with a quizzical expression. It was obvious she had never heard of such a thing before.

“It’s an apparatus that creates force applied to a system that can create movement through the use of the properties of water or other liquids in their gaseous forms,” said Theo matter-of-factly and petted Bo behind the ears. The bunny seemed to concur, if one were an expert on reading whiskers. Theo’s answer once again drew some weird looks but this time they were looks of surprise coupled with a failure to re-

ally understand what he was talking about.

“It’s what makes the ships fly,” said Ned with a face shaken by a sudden, acute realisation. He looked at Lernea and without uttering a word, he saw that same look mirrored in her face. She was at a loss for words for a moment. Zed was trying to look inconspicuous while eyeing a strangely illustrated centerfold page dangling from his ledger, containing fancy, dressed up goblins of indeterminate sex.

“You’re not selling the metal bits as well?” asked Lernea with a rather off-beat tone, as if she was being merely curious. Ned picked her train of thought, nodded and went a step farther:

“We’ll sell you Culliper in exchange for that metal chair down below.”

Everyone, except Parcifal, even Bo, looked at Ned like he had just admitted to being a large, furry whale dancing in a pot. Culliper did not even flinch; his stabbing stare was stuck on Ned.

“What chair?” asked the goblin looking suddenly quite intrigued. Zed started shuffling the pages in the ledger in front of him with furious speed, one eye searching the text on the pages and the other not daring to leave the naughty centerfold page out of sight.

“Ned lad, that’s bloody slavery,” said Winceham with a hushed, almost fearful voice. Lernea looked troubled, while Parcifal was still smiling, either lost in thought or staunchly approving of Ned’s decision. The former queen of Nomos for a day looked at Ned with a pang of worry and told him:

“Are you sure?”

“Unless they throw him into a fire or something, that probably counts as slavery,” said Winceham out of turn.

“Yes. I’m sure,” said Ned and shot a bland look at Cul-

liper. The pirate's eyes looked like small, glistening beads. He made no effort to so much as croak a muffled pleading. Instead, it looked as if his mouth curled up in a wicked, sly smile.

The dockmaster traced a very curly line of goblin handwriting with one crooked finger and said in a mumbling voice:

“Mary Whatchamacallit... Six pence and seven tiblins... Shoddy crufty rudder... Trimmed sail... Bronze thaumaturgic device... Propensity to drift when not handled... Broken Grog dispenser...”

“You’re selling Culliper as a slave for a grog dispenser?” Winceham asked Ned with a feeling of awed respect in his voice and Theo - who rarely jumped in to actually help someone else understand - helpfully added with a smile:

“The grog dispenser was the strange barrel with the lever and the tap near the lavatory, down below in the hold, not the one in the back with the odd slot.”

“There was a lavatory?” asked Winceham, sounding mildly suprised but otherwise unshaken.

The goblin gave the matter a small amount of thought while drool with the viscosity of tar started dripping off his mouth. He was looking at the centerfold page intently when wild-eyed and frenzied he suddenly cried “Done!” and offered his hand to Ned. After a moment of reflexive hesitation, Ned shook it firmly; he then couldn’t help but look at Culliper for a long, tense moment before he turned to leave. He fell on Parcifal and realised she was blocking the narrow, short exit. She was still lost in her own, grin-inducing thoughts.

“What have you done, Ned?” asked Lernea while Ned slid past Parcifal who was trying to squeeze herself into the wrong amount of space at the wrong moment. Once past the exit he looked at Lernea with what must’ve been guilt and

told her:

“It’s better than the alternative.”

“Is it? That’s not justice served, Ned,” she told him with consternation, her head raised slightly above the others as Winceham tried to squeeze through and out of the impossibly small office built into the giant oak itself.

“I needed to do something about it,” said Ned and shrugged slightly. Lerne bit her lip and shot a look at Culliper who was already being whisked away using a harness and a pulley, ever higher and higher by goblins hidden from sight. His ice-cold gaze sparkled away into the darkness; Culliper and Ned locked eyes. Ned felt like he had already made a terrible, unavoidable mistake.

A moment later, Winceham asked Ned even as the others left the crowded office with a bit more ease:

“Where are we going to find a new ship? What’s so important about that chair anyway? Why did the ship have a lavatory?”

“Maybe Theo can answer that,” replied Ned and Bo’s eyes suddenly lit up, even as Theo bumped his head on the doorway and silently nursed his head with a thoughtful yet promising look, as if something new and wonderful had just happened. His fingers went for the crystal around his neck. The shimmer on its surface as light fell from all the thousands of lamps and fires around the innumerable tall branches all around, above and below, was the warm orange glow of a dear hearth.

As they stood outside the dockmaster’s office, Parcifal was the last one to come out. She asked without really looking all too worried or indeed caring:

“I can’t find Culliper.”

The metal chair that had flown the ‘Mary Whatchamacal-

lit' was being hoisted into the air and brought onto the promenade, near where they stood. At the same time a team of goblins fell into the void as the poor ship split in two after the last few beams that held its keel together were chopped off into splinters.

"Ned sold him to the dockmaster for that chair," said Winceham, looking undecided on whether or not that was a good trading decision.

"Excellent," said Parcifal and walked along the promenade that slowly turned below like a corkscrew to a brilliantly lit, brightly coloured neighborhood where rowdy cheers and song could be heard, accompanied by the heady smell of fuel quality grog and an indistinct aroma of badly charred meat.

"Where do you think you're off to, young lady?" demanded Lernea with all the trained haughtiness of a queen and older sister. Her younger sister replied with her hands in her pockets, strolling about casually:

"To find a drink."

"I'll drink to that," said Winceham with a mischievous smile and set out after Parcifal, trying to catch up with her.

"There's things we need to settle first! We need to find the woodkin! We need a budget for lodging, we need to delegate tasks and agree to a course of action! We need to find out what this thing is!" she said and pointed to the metal throne and with one hand and the giant oak all around behind them, before pleading, "Ned, say something!". She sounded slightly panicked and her voice suddenly carried a lot less authority.

"Let them be, Lernea. They need to blow off some steam," said Ned and managed half a grin.

"It's been a very boring journey, that much is true," Lernea replied as she looked at the strange contraption in the form of

a chair sitting squarely in front of her on the promenade, a couple of leather straps still dangling from it.

“I could have given a few more performances if you’d only asked,” said Ned in an apologetic fashion, looking suddenly all too self-conscious.

“I said boring Ned, not suicidal,” Lernea retorted and changed the subject even before Ned had time enough to protest.

“And how do you suggest we carry that?” she said and Theo, who had been feeding Bo a thick stick of limegrass from one of his many pockets, inserted the crystal around his neck in the slot on the chair and by way of magic, it floated easily almost a foot above the air.

“There. Nifty little thing this crystal, isn’t it? I wonder how it actually works,” said Theo and his eyes turned into thin slivers as he peered over the throne.

“With magic?” asked Lernea and raised an eyebrow. Theo replied after a moment absorbed in thought.

“It might be, it might be. But what kind of magic?” he said in all seriousness, while Ned touched the chair and pushed it forward using just one finger. He shook his head approvingly and said:

“Now all we have to do is catch up with Parcifal and Winceham.”

“My sister always tends to act before thinking. If she had just waited to exchange a few simple words, we wouldn’t need to spent more time to find her in that awful crowd down there,” said Lernea and pointed to the massive marketplace chockfull of people below.

“That’s Parcifal alright,” said Ned and walked beside Lernea at an easy pace, pushing the aloft chair alongside him.

“You mean near that blue bright glow dancing in the air

down there?” said Theo without realising the full implications of what he was seeing.

Ned and Lernea exchanged knowing, troubled looks and sprang to a running pace, while Bo jumped off Theo’s lap, flames brilliantly wild in his eyes. The bunny easily outran them both in a few heartbeats. Theo then realised that something important was happening and decided he just might as well fly towards the glow instead of hopping along so inefficiently. He leapt off the promenade and into the vacuum with the practiced ease of someone putting on his slippers.

By the time he realised something was slightly off, he was freefalling, trying to swim in the dead of space.

“Is it now?” cried Parcifal as she swung Encelados fiercely over her head, the blade glowing blue hot. Lernea had her back, arrows flying from her bow with a trained, fast pace.

“Now is not the time, really!” shouted Lernea and the body of an orc clad in chainmail fell flat a couple of feet away, two arrows protruding from its head.

“Phew! What a putrid smell!” said Winceham, attracting aggravated looks from Ned even in the thick of battle. The halfuin would have made a comment if his senses hadn’t alerted him to a new threat. He stepped on the ledge of the promenade and vaulted himself into the air with a backflip; the next moment he landed on the wooden floor, his tiny yet lethal blade stuck in the neck of an orc, vile green blood gushing in spurts as the orc toppled and fell off the promenade without so much as a gurgling sound.

“That came close, Wince!” shouted Ned as he reloaded his crossbow with a new bolt and aimed at two orcs, rushing the sisters with their bucklers raised. Ned took his time and

let fly a shot; it missed wildly. The orcs drew their weapons, a murky blood-spat axe and a whaler's spear. Ned was already reloading.

"Incoming, lasses!" cried Winceham and filled his sling with a hefty ball of lead; a memoir from the ship.

Parcifal was locked in a swordfight with what must've been the gang's leader, a tall, brutish orc with a lisp, real mail and the nasty ability to dodge and parry like the devil. Lerne heard the halfuin's warning just in time; she loaded her bow with two arrows and knelt coolly.

"Yer worth the money, ya ferretth!" cried the tall orc, as he parried yet another blow from Parcifal aimed squarely at the small gap between his helmet and his armor. Lerne held her breath and let the arrows fly even as the orcs were ready to leap onto her; in an instant, their weapons were flying harmlessly in the air with the rush of their wielders diminished all too sudden. The orcs were slumped against the floor, an arrow having pierced their skulls clean through.

"Blathted windth o' Morrogah! I thould've athked for double the coin!" shouted the tall brute of an orc, dodged a blow that would've cut his arm off and managed to tackle Parcifal and drop her on the ground. The next instant came a blinding flash of light; thick smoke covered everything as far as anyone from the party could see. A mistimed flurry of missiles seemd to get absorbed into the cloud harmlessly.

"Is everyone alright?" asked Ned and coughed slightly as the thick smoke made it difficult to breath.

"Now who's going to pay for all that?" said a grumbling voice coming from somewhere outside the smoke cloud that was slowly clearing up.

Parcifal stood back on her feet, panting. Encelados had never left her grasp. The blade was silver gray again, yet

stained with dried, green orcish blood.

“I couldn’t land a single blow,” she said in what was almost a whisper, her brow furrowed and sweaty.

The promenade slowly returned to its more usual hubbub; the traders at the stalls picked up from they had left and started shouting their offers, while groups of sailors could be heard ordering new rounds of grog for everyone. Some even applauded the party as the smoke eventually cleared and cheered them for the well-performed fight. A couple even tossed some coin at Ned and Winceham’s feet.

“Do they mock us?” asked Lernea as she rounded up her arrows from all the dead orcs lying around. Ned wasn’t sure about the crowd’s reaction. By the look on his face, he was troubled that deadly combat counted as entertainment for these people.

“Nah, they’re just being appreciative. A good fight’s always a good fight around places like these. The jokes helped as well,” said Winceham offering his own perspective as he gathered any and all valuables the orcs carried on their persons.

“I didn’t tell any jokes,” said Ned without being completely sure. The halfuin produced a pair of pliers from his belt and went for an orc’s mouth.

“See, that helped not to spoil the mood,” said Winceham as he pulled out what looked like a silver, saw-like tooth.

“Everyone’s a critic, I see,” said Ned as he looked around, searching for something.

“Where is Bo?” asked Lernea with a contemplative look on her face. They all looked at each other and at various random points around them.

“He should be with Theo,” said Ned and kept searching the crowd around in vain.

“Where is that oddball?” asked Parcifal, still looking miffed and tired because of the swordfight. Lernea looked at her sister sternly.

“Princesses have to adhere to certain principles, sister. You can’t just use any word. ‘Oddball’ sounds rather demeaning. ‘Special’ is much more appropriate.”

“Call him daft if you like, but he’s missing, that’s for sure,” said Winceham and sat down to have a smoke.

“Are you sure?” Ned asked, sounding rather shaken.

“I just said that that’s for sure,” said the halfuin, stuffing his pipe with a generous amount of tobacco, before adding with a measure of apathy, “and those two aren’t the only missing items.”

Ned realised it immediately then, and Lernea voiced it.

“The chair. It’s gone,” said the exiled princess with a flush of anger on her face.

“Forget about the chair, now! Theo and Bo are missing!” said Ned.

“There’s no bodies lying around,” said Winceham and exhaled a cloud of smoke as if it somehow added validity to his point.

“This is serious Wince. They’re probably in danger and it’s my fault,” said Ned.

“Since when is everything your fault?”

“Isn’t it? It’s how it all started, isn’t it.”

“Stop being foolish. I don’t suffer fools gladly. And you’re not one, I can tell. I’ve developed a keen eye for them over the years.”

“Are you referring to me?”

“Usually I’d chide you for being so self-absorbed, but I did have you in mind.”

“Would you mind your step please, missus?” said a tall, lank fellow with a bland, ghostly pale face. An almost identical man beside him was pulling a handcart. They were dressed in simple, loose-fitting violet-colored robes and matching sandals. The two men began to load one of the bodies onto the cart.

“What are you doing?”

“Just clearing up the promenade, if you don’t mind,” came the answer without any sort of color in the voice.

Then suddenly an arrow got stuck on the pale-faced man’s back. He slightly furrowed his brow, smiled, and fell on top of the body he was holding. Lernea took a step back reflexively and saw there was a note attached to the arrow. The other man in the robe observed a moment’s silence and nodded to himself.

“Mack always said he wanted to go out on the job. You know, doing something notable,” said the dead man’s colleague and continued his work loading the bodies without another word. Lernea overcame her shocked surprise and read the note. Her face became an oblique mask of determination, suddenly harsh.

“They have Bo. And the device,” she said flatly.

“The grog dispenser?” asked Winceham simply out of curiosity, sending tiny circles of smoke up in the air without so much as batting an eyelid.

“The thaumaturgic device,” replied Ned searching their surroundings for signs of the messenger, to no avail.

“The what?” asked Winceham once again, as if he were hard of hearing.

“The grog dispenser, yes,” said Parcifal irritated. Lernea pondered at the note for a moment.

“That means, they don’t have Theo,” she said and took on a thoughtful look.

“Who are ‘they’?” asked Parcifal, wiping down her blade.

“The Culprits,” said Lernea, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes, I mean, who are they?” insisted Parcifal.

“It’s signed, ‘The Culprits’ with a capital ‘C’!” shouted Lernea angrily. Winceham was lying down on the promenade, totally relaxed, even as the body collector started washing away the thick, green sticky pools of blood lying about.

“It says if we try to do anything funny, and I quote - ‘the bunny will snuff it’. They’ll return him, once they’re done.”

“That still doesn’t mean much. Done with what? Making stew?” said the halfuin.

“That’s not funny. We’ll have to find out what it means ourselves,” said Ned.

“What about Theo?” asked Lernea. Ned shrugged and paused for a moment. At length, he said:

“Maybe he’s lost. Maybe he was scared. Maybe he’s just fooling around. Then again, if we find Bo, it should be easier to track down Theo, and vice versa. Him and Bo, they have this..”

“Affinity,” chimed in Lernea and added, “We just need to ask around.”

“How do we go about that? We’ve already been attacked once. Was it them? The place seems full of gangs like these. We don’t want to attract too much attention, especially not now,” said Ned and crossed his arms against his chest.

“I think I know the right man for the job. Well, almost,” Lernea said and shot a gaze full of meaning at Winceham, followed by a grin. The halfuin noticed, exhaled a puff of smoke and said with utmost sincerity:

“I knew you’d come around. It must be the smell of danger, isn’t it? Ladies just love the smell of danger around me.”

Theo opened his eyes in a dark, warm place. He blinked a couple of times until his eyes adjusted to the darkness. Still he saw nothing more than a faint orange glow caressing a crude opening. He felt his hands itch; he heard the sound of rustling leaves as he propped himself upwards on his hands. He was lying on a bed of oak leaves.

He remembered falling, trying to swim. And then the piers, the promenades and the ledges on the giant tree falling upwards. Or was it him that fell downwards, he wondered briefly. He got up and blindly staggered forward, with outstretched hands. He was looking for a wall or a lamp, anything that would illuminate his whereabouts in any helpful way. His eyes tried to pierce the darkness, without much success.

After the first few steps, the sound of leaves under his feet turned into a fuzzy feeling. There was fuzzy, soft grass under his feet. Then his hands bumped onto something soft and furry. It was warm and inviting to the touch, it felt strange yet familiar. Theo sought its outline with both hands; it stretched onto a wide arc before it dipped downwards and then upwards again, like a rolling hill.

“I gather you’re awake,” said a deep, rumbling voice with a hint of annoyance, followed by a low-keyed snarl. No answer came from Theo for a few moments, while he thought about the question hard.

“I’m not sure. How can I tell if this isn’t a dream?” said Theo in absolute seriousness, his hands groping the soft furiness in front of him reflexively. He then felt a slap across his face that left him speechless, his hands frozen stiff, groping

at nothing but air. There was a loud clap like wood meeting stone and then light suddenly poured from many points set around him. As light filled the emptiness it quickly defined a large enclosed grove, a floor covered in grass, flowers, tree-shapes and roots abounding.

Theo also became acutely aware that the voice belonged to a nine-foot tall bear in a toga. He looked at his hands and realised they were the same height as the bear's behinds. The bear lowered its head and sought eye contact with Theo. The elf raised his eyes almost involuntarily and their gazes locked. The bear had a stern, crystal-clear shine about its eyes, like a spotless mirror. A said with an elevated sense of importance:

“Now, you stand enlightened.”

“Do I?” asked Theo befuddled, nursing a flush-red cheek. The bear nodded slightly, and its whole bulk shook in tune.

“Question everything; that is the path of balance.”

The words came effortlessly, as if recited. There was approval in the bear's gravely voice.

“Where is that path?” said Theo, his eyes darting all around the floor, literally searching for some kind of path.

“Within,” said the bear and bowed slightly, hands pointing to its huge chest, “and without,” it added with hands outstretched. Theo was clearly confused. He barely managed a word, purely out of trying to appear polite, especially since he had - however inadvertently - grabbed the bear's behinds not a minute earlier.

“Ah.”

The bear motioned for Theo to lay on the ground as it did so as well. Theo sat down on a patch of grass, right beside a small, delicate tree. Water ran under it in a small stream not wider than the palm of a man. The bear sat near the old, mossy bark of the wooden walls. Its voice, reverberated

serenely:

“Please, sit. Let us share.”

Theo searched his robe’s pockets and felt embarrassed to find nothing but a piece of lint to share. He then realized the crystal was in that strange chair and Bo was nowhere around. He suddenly felt a chill rise up his spine. A terrible feeling of loneliness overcame him. The bear asked gently:

“Are you thirsty, friend?”

“Is there a wrong answer?” asked Theo with some alarm in his voice. A grin formed on the bear’s mouth. It seemed surprisingly happy.

“Indeed. There is no wrong answer; there is no right question. The universe, my friend, is always in flux.”

“I guess a drink wouldn’t hurt.”

The bear nodded with a wide grin and flexed its torso around in an astonishing show of agility. It reached for a couple of bear-sized cups perched on a natural shelf along the walls. He offered one cup to Theo who held it in both hands much more like a jar. The bear put its cup down on the ground and made a gesture with both arms stretched across its chest. The fingers on its palms were matched, forming some kind of winged shape.

A loud hum then started to reverberate outwards from the bear’s chest, in a rhythmic pattern. The humming stopped before it became too loud for comfort. Theo was about to ask for a smaller cup when suddenly a swarm of insects filled the grove. They danced around them with a benign, almost melodic buzz. They looked like tiny sparkles of glittering raindrops fluttering in the air. Then the swarm split in two and dove away like one mass in each cup, spinning wildly inside them. The next moment, their shininess had vanished and they had become little ember specks, vanishing as swiftly

as they had appeared.

The bear raised its cup and bowed slightly. It then opened its eyes and cocked its head in a manner which implied it was either having a good time or was right about ready to rip the living flesh out of Theo. Sadly, it was neither as the bear soon scratched its head involuntarily.

“My name is Tejewel Al-Dub. May the desert be fruitful,” said the bear and drank the cup in one go. Theo looked at his own cup and saw a wonderful, golden-hued liquid sloshing easily about the cup, starry like the sea at summertime. Theo took a careful, measured sip. His mouth felt like an ocean tide ridden with flowers, his stomach felt placated and full, his heart felt warm and his mind was at ease. It felt like drinking the stuff of dreams.

“I don’t really see how a desert could be fruitful. I hate to sound rude, though I fear grabbing your behind doesn’t make a good first impression, but what is this stuff?” asked Theo blatantly, with just the right amount of solid naivety and amazement. The bear smiled heartily, its eyes nearly lost in their furried sockets.

“The past is always gone from sight, friend. Your cup is filled with glowdew,” replied Tejewel and added, “How does the wind carry your face, friend?”

“I hope it doesn’t. I’m really attached to it,” said Theo with a furrowed brow. Tej laughed and his whole body jiggled.

“I only meant to ask your name friend. It’s an expression where I was born.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I tend to forget my manners around animals. Don’t get me wrong, my best friend is a rabbit,” Theo said apologetically and straightened his somewhat ruffled hair. “I’m Hanultheofodor Trypthwifidyr. My..” Theo

stumbled for a moment but nodded to himself and continued with a wavering smile, "My friends call me Theo."

"When I was but a cub the elders called me Tej. Sometimes, I long for those times; I was unaware, but not ignorant. Now I know there can be only one awareness."

"I don't understand. What does that mean?"

"I shall call you Hanul, in the manner of my ancestors."

"But my name's Theo."

"That was before you were enlightened."

"I am enlightened?"

Tej clapped his hands and complete darkness overcame them as light vanished like a swiftly waning moon. He then asked Theo:

"What do you see?"

"Darkness," replied Theo flatly, still not sure what the obvious questions were all about.

"Exactly!" shouted Tej with excitement.

"Is there something else to see?"

"Is there, really?" said Tej with a sombre voice that was meant to carry deep, profound meanings.

"I don't live here. You should know," said Theo. The bear erupted in joyous, body-shaking laughter.

"And you wonder about enlightenment!"

Theo felt befuddled, perhaps more than ever. He tried to inch his way through the darkness; his hands met the cup and it spilled all over his waist and legs.

"I'm afraid my cup runneth over," said Theo apologetically. Tej replied in the same manner:

"Fret not dear Hanul, for nothing but grass grows beneath us still."

An uneasy silence followed until Theo felt a pleasant wetness in the nether regions.

“I think I soiled my underpants.”

The loud, corny music stopped every time something or someone was flung against the merry, drunk dead band of musicians, but it quickly resumed with every round of drinks on the house. Apparently, noone knew what the tavern was called or if it had a name, as long as the grog kept coming.

“So you haven’t heard about a missing mammal of the Laporidae family? A rather peculiar mammal with strange, perhaps even pernicious powers? Or a thaumaturgic device in the form of a floating, ornate metallic chair? We are very interested in procuring them both, for a more than modest amount of money,” said Lerneia and stared at the ogre meaningfully, letting her words sink in with as much a sense of innuendo as possible. She laid herself back on the rather uncomfortable chair and tried to smile wryly. The rather uncomfortable seat coupled with the unruly, ugly company at their table split her smile in something akin to a cringe and a mentally retarded grin.

“Wha’at did she ’ay?” asked the ogre through its cave of a mouth, its teeth a purely decorative add-on. The ogre was the fat, grey-green sort, a typical example of its kind; its rotund belly was a good indicator that actually chewing food was not a prerequisite for ogres. Especially ogres that were usually employed as muscle in the various nefarious trading agreements that were all too common in Tallyflop.

“She’s asking, as far as I recall, if you’ve ever seen a flying bunny or a flaming chair. Something along those lines,” explained Winceham and filled his mouth with what was left of his drink. After making a show of sloshing the house special, Mythriam’s Loxsene Famous Grog around his mouth, he swallowed. He seemed to feel a bit queasy for a moment and

the next instant fell of his stool. Lerneia barely spared Wince a fleeting yet chastising gaze and returned her full undivided attention to the ogre, smiling awkwardly.

“Well? Have you at least heard about a gang called the Culprits?” she asked with her eyebrow furrowed in a way that implied a conniving, insidious sort of discussion was taking place, while in fact it was more of a monologue. The ogre was scratching a layer of crust made out of some sort of fungi on its belly; it completely missed the delicately contrived facial expression.

“Two dozzin coin fo’ a beatin’; two times an’ one dat fo’ a killin’.”

“We don’t want you to hurt or kill anyone. We just want some information,” said Lerneia calmly, still believing a measure of rapport could be achieved with someone with the intellectual capacity of a log.

“I don’ do that. Info-irmation. Nah,” replied the ogre, pausing for a moment of reassurance and nodding to itself profusely.

“Well then, do you know of anyone who does?” asked Lerneia patiently. The ogre gave it a bit of thought. It scratched its belly once more and a piece of skin peeled off.

“Yea,” replied the ogre at length. Lerneia’s veneer of delicate handling of the whole information gathering task was falling apart.

“Well, what’s his name?”

She nearly screeched, but the ogre seemed dead set on dealing with its fungi problem rather than do business.

“I tol’ ya, I don’ do ’fomation an’ stuff.”

Lerneia sighed. She was a staunch believer in diplomacy, but it looked like they were wasting their time. She was about to grab Winceham from the belt and drag him away with

her, when she realised he was actually standing right next to the ogre's waist, looking top notch and not at all positively smashed.

"Well, here's a piece of thirty. I want you to hit yourself in the head a couple of times, real good though. You know, for good measure."

The ogre took the coin, nodded and eagerly said, "Aw'ight."

It then indeed proceeded to hit himself in the head with its powerful fist. Its eyes went rolling for a while and its head swerved this way and that, the eyes trying to see through a blurry vision. He raised a blotched hand with two fingers extended, and hit itself in the head once more. It nearly passed out, but it stood its ground in the chair. At length, after it could focus its eyes once more, the ogre spoke again. There was a recognizable amount of hurt in its voice:

"At hoit. A lot."

Winceham patted the ogre gently on one bucklered knee with a metallic pang. "I bet it did," he said reassuringly and went on. "Listen, do you have any idea who did a hit on this blue, green ogre a while back? Say a minute or so earlier?"

"Ask Lenny the Rat. He be ovah at 'Lemmys'. Tell'im 'Ken sent me'."

Winceham nodded to Lernea with a smile and offered his hand. The gesture went unnoticed, as the ogre was now eating some of the pinkish fungi shaped like tiny carrots growing on its belly. "It's been a pleasure doing business with you," said Winceham nevertheless and the ogre replied with a nod and a vile-smelling burp.

"Likewoyz."

Winceham bowed slightly and he showed Lernea the exit. As if in a trance, she slowly got up from her seat and straight-

ened the bow on her back. They began jostling their way through the crowd.

“I don’t understand,” asked Lernea sounding utterly dumbfounded.

“That’s how you do business on the street,” replied Winceham, as they calmly walked past a blunderbuss duel, right before both duelists’ guns exploded in their faces. Lernea was throwing looks behind her shoulder at the ogre.

“But, he could’ve told me! I would have paid it to tell me.”

“He doesn’t sell information. Not that he really could, anyway,” Winceham commented and his face missed a flying glass mug purely by luck. Lernea sounded rather miffed:

“He could’ve told us who does sell information!”

“No, that would be selling information,” replied Winceham waving a finger. Lernea was right behind him, trying to make sense out of that.

“But he just told us to ask that Rat character!”

“Yeah, as a tip. a matter of professional courtesy. We did business together, so we came to know each other. As a tip, an added bonus if you like, he gave us a bit of information,” said Winceham and picked up someone’s drink from a messy, knife-ridden bloody table. Lernea was nearly oblivious to the overall controlled mayhem going on around them. She kept following Winceham blindly, trusting he really knew a way towards the exit.

“Now if I understand this correctly, you’re saying that he wouldn’t sell us the information, but it was fine for him to just give it away for free?” cried out Lernea as they neared the music band and the exit. Winceham stepped on someone lying passed out or perhaps dead on the floor. Lernea hopped over it at the last moment.

“Nothing’s really free. We did pay him thirty pieces of coin,” said Winceham and downed the cup in his hand in one go.

“For another job entirely!” said Lerne and flung her arms wide in frustration. Inadvertently, someone’s parrot was knocked out cold and fell in another man’s rum-soup; the man thought the parrot was just another side dish.

“Hitting himself, yes. But we did get our job done, didn’t we?” said Winceham, smiling triumphantly as they finally got outside the tavern. A single sign read ‘B-Ware’. Lerne shook her head and looked like she had given up on any hope of understanding the logic behind everything.

“That’s just plain crazy!”

“Ah. You’re getting the hang of business,” said Winceham with a grin. Once a breeze of cold air touched his face though, he crumbled down on the wooden floor of the promenade and began licking the wooden planks.

“By Svarna! You’re inebriated to the bone! I thought you were putting on an act!” said Lerne with nearly shocked disapproval.

“It’s a condition! I’m not wasted or anything! I just blank out tempofurtively!” shouted Winceham without being in a position to sound believable.

“You need to get sobered up before anything else,” said Lerne and forced Winceham back on his feet.

“What? No, there’s not enough.. Not enough time.. We drinks! We need to get another drink at Lemmy’s!” blabbered Winceham, looking hurt, angry and crushed at the same time.

“There’s bound to be a bath house around here somewhere,” said Lerne and scanned the signs and lantern posts around them. Winceham looked at her with a half-asleep, out-of-focus look that he rarely employed. It was as if he was

trying to ascertain whether he wasn't just imagining things.

"That's not a half-bad idea at all," he said with a wide, lopsided grin. Lerne thought it was weird of Winceham to actually agree on a bath, of all things.

A few minutes later, she was about to realise bath houses in places like Tallyflop aren't just about bathing.

Parcival straightened her hair, adjusted her armor's bindings and straps and walked back out into the bustling promenade. In the natural alley that formed behind her, there were three figures trying to pull themselves together. They were all beat-up, nursing a bloodied nose, a couple of broken fingers or a cut above the brow. Their teeth had been invariably lessened in number and their flimsy-looking knives, fists and chains thrown out into the void. Parcival though, wasn't smiling as much as she had hoped she would. Even when she saw them stagger and get lost in the crowd, real fear in their eyes.

"They know nothing. At least, I don't think if they'd really known something they'd be that good at keeping secrets."

She stretched her back casually. Ned shook his head and sighed.

"I said be forceful. I didn't ask you to terrorize them."

Parcival was adamant in her view. Her gaze was still following the victims of her manifest wrath.

"I didn't. I actually think I went soft on those scum."

"If you push a man too far, he might admit to everything. Make stuff up as well. I know I would," said Ned sincerely. The point and effort was somewhat lost on Parcival who sounded somewhat angry at the thought she wasn't getting the respect she deserved even after a thorough beating.

"You think they'd dare lie to me?"

“I would certainly lie to you if that made you stop,” said Ned and nodded to himself thoroughly. Lernea’s nostrils flared up.

“All I wanted was answers. I tempted them to provide some.”

“Listen, some people have already tried to kill us. Theo is missing and Bo has been abducted. This isn’t the time for heroics,” said Ned in what was his most reprimanding tone. In reality, he simply sounded a bit disappointed.

“I’m only trying to help. Me and my sister.. We’re only trying to help.”

“Well, Lernea does help. She’s easy to work with, she understands timing; she’s familiar with my line of thinking.”

“Perhaps then her help is much more sought after. After all she is the Queen.”

“I thought she’s a queen in exile.”

“A queen still. Not a princess regent.”

“Are you.. Are you pouting?”

“That is a silly notion at best. I do not pout. A princess of Nomos, does not pout.”

“You’re jealous, aren’t you?”

“Your conclusions are ridden with nonsense of the worst kind, sirrah!”

“You’re jealous.”

“That is an insult! I’m not jealous!”

“I’ll just leave you be, then.”

“I’ll just leave you first if I can’t help. Do not fret, I won’t go missing!”

Parcifal simply shot off into the milling crowd, never to turn back her stare. In a few moments, Ned had lost her in the crowds. One thing was certain in Tallyflop; people could just disappear or be made to just disappear in the blink of an

eye. Ned wasn't really worried that indeed Parcifal would go missing; she did have a flair for the dramatic.

But Ned felt that whatever issues she had, would have to wait. In his heart, Theo and Bo took precedence, even though they were supposed to be trying to save Theo's woodkin people. In his mind, the throne from the ship and Theo's crystal were perhaps a lot more important than he thought. The fact that these Culprits had snatched it strengthened that perception. The note said they'd return Bo once they were done. *Done with what?* thought Ned and feared something very bad was under way.

"I thought I'd never find you," said a sweet female voice. Ned turned around and saw Lernea.

"I thought you were with Wince," he said and try as he might, he couldn't see the halfuin anywhere nearby. It was a busy, jostling time on the promenade. There was a Trading Circus in town; the streets were filled with exotic pack animals, filled with riches from around the cosmos. The sight caught Ned's eye as a small caravan passed behind Lernea. A beautiful, elephant-like creature of smaller size caught Ned's attention.

"Look at those things? I've never seen anything like that."

"They're beasts from a far away place. Used for labor. There's hundreds like them in the streets. Who cares?" said Lernea and did not bother to even glance that way. She had a strange grin; it was as if she'd been drinking.

"Where's Winceham? You didn't have any drinks together, did you?"

"Would that be wrong?" asked Lernea with a furtive look on her eyes.

"I'm just saying, he didn't convince you into going off into a wild drinking binge. It's a tendency of his. A condition,

he calls it.”

Lernea nodded thoughtfully for a moment. Then she smiled widely and put a finger to her temple, as if she had just remembered something.

“Does he now? Well, he did stop for a drink on the way,” she said, trying to make it sound as if it was really just one drink.

“That’s just great. Your sister ran off just a minute ago. I don’t think she’s gone missing like Theo, but still she needed her head cleaned up. It’s probably just as well. We didn’t get anything useful; just a few street thugs with broken extremities and bruised bodies and egos. What about you?” said Ned, looking at Lernea with a feeling of hope.

“Nothing at all. Everyone is so tight-lipped. You didn’t get anything? Anything about the Culprits? Anything about Theo?”

She sounded anxious all of a sudden. Her eyes searched Ned’s face thoroughly, inquisitively.

“Zilch. Parcifal was rather efficient at making people run on sight. Still, what low-lifes we could get our hands on seemed like they really knew nothing about the Culprits. In fact, most didn’t seem to know the word,” said Ned and shrugged.

“I see. Well, in that case, I think I need a word alone with you,” said Lernea with a shallow voice.

“Alone? We’re pretty much alone,” said Ned and waved at the indifferent crowds that surrounded them.

“There’s something terrible going on.”

“Go on,” said Ned and nodded with arms crossed over his chest, eyes locked onto Lernea’s worried face.

“It’s Parcifal. She’s really not herself lately.”

“Well, you certainly know her better but I think she’s just jealous of you.”

Lernea sounded surprised and oddly excited. She touched Ned’s arm with a sense of purpose.

“Well, why should she be?”

“I don’t know, I’m not sure. I must’ve said something about you that ticked her off. But I’m not sure what or why for that matter,” said Ned and his gaze came to stand at Lernea’s hand. She was practically leaning against him.

“Well, that’s just like my sister now. Ever since she was a toddler.”

“What do you mean?” said Ned and felt her warm breath inching closer to his face.

“Since she were little.”

“You’re only a minute apart,” said Ned with a furrowed brow. His eyes now couldn’t help but peer at Lernea’s chest. She twisted her gaze away from him suddenly in a dramatic fashion.

“Still though. She’s the little one. But enough about her. I think I might have a lead.”

“You just said you found nothing,” said Ned feeling perplexed. Something bothered him, but he couldn’t pin it down.

“But there is a lead we need to follow,” Lernea said with urgency, both her hands gripping Ned’s arms.

“Alright. We need to pick up Winceham first. It’ll be easy to spot him; he might be small but he can make a lot of noise. Especially when he’s had his version of a couple of drinks.”

Ned made to turn and leave towards the direction Lernea came from. She grabbed him by one arm; there was a tone of instant anger in her objection.

“There’s no time for that. After all, he’ll need to get sobered up before he’s of any use.”

“Well then let’s find Parcifal. She’s bound to be somewhere near,” said Ned and started off toward the main street where Parcifal had sprinted. Lernea would simply not have it; there was an edge to her voice that had never been there before.

“You’re not listening; there’s no time. Our lead is leaving on a ship!”

“A ship? What’s the plan then? Jump him in the docks?” asked Ned incredulously.

“No, no. Just follow me. I know a short cut. We can catch him on his way there,” said Lernea and went right into the same alley where Parcifal had dispensed her sort of justice to the poor thugs of Tallyflop’s trade district.

“What? Just the two of us? Is he alone? What sort of lead? Can’t we just talk about this first?” asked Ned while Lernea was already making her way to the shadowy cleft, its far end a huge limb of the tree rising up to meet the main bulk of the giant oak.

“Through that alley?” asked Ned once more, pointing a hesitant finger.

“Yes!” Lernea insisted with an alien, ice cold gaze. Ned shrugged and followed her from a distance. He saw her bow strung across her back clearly and noticed something odd. She had her bow on the opposite way.

“Something wrong with your bow?”

“Why do you ask that?” Lernea said with a shallow voice.

“I’m just saying. It looks like you have it on the wrong way.”

“Oh, I’m just trying if it’s better this way,” she said and kept walking towards the shadowy alley.

“About last night..” asked Ned and let his voice trail off. Lernea came to a stop and turned around to face him slowly.

There was a strange grin on her face. Her voice was little more than a whisper.

“What about last night?”

“Don’t you remember?” asked Ned with a frown.

“Of course I do! But now is not the time to reminisce!”

“Isn’t it? I thought it was a special night. I thought you loved me!” he said with a voice full of hurt. His hands went to his waist.

Lernea looked at his blurry eyes intently. Her face warmed up, her eyes shone with sweetness.

“Of course I do! We can get together again later, but right now we must –”

Then he knew. Ned suspected it, he felt it in his gut, but then he knew that whoever this was, it wasn’t Lernea.

“Even odds suck, don’t they? Who the hell are you?”

The impostor changed his body stance. She now stood defiant, a mad grin on her face. She cocked her head sideways and looked at Ned with a crazy, wide-eyed look. Her eyeballs turned pitch black in a blink.

“I’m just a messenger.”

“Really? What’s the message?” said Ned, the crossbow now firmly in his hands.

“Hobb sends his greetings!” she said and backflipped into the shadows of the alley with blinding speed, in a cat-like fashion. Ned let fly the loaded bolt but he was more than just a step too slow. The bolt didn’t seem to hit; what was more alarming, it was as if the shadow had eaten her alive. Ned put away the crossbow and took up his machete, a gift from Theo. Again, he was too slow; a tentacle reached out from the shadows and twirled around his arm; it reeled him in with such force that he flew in the air, his arm pulled out of his socket. He saw the flash of metal and four evil, frosty blue

eyes. He tried to flex his body but he knew that metal flash was meant for him; he knew those eyes. He'd seen those kind of eyes before.

Another flash of metal; he felt something cold cover his face in spurts. His arm was free and he was laying on the ground, half inside the shadow. He tried to stand up, the machete still in his hand. He saw another tentacle shoot out from the darkness, but it wasn't meant for him. It was aiming for someone wearing dark, tight robes and wielding two short blades that seemed too thin to be real. A hood kept its face hidden from view.

Ned saw the tentacle cleanly cut away, spurting a thick murky liquid; it was almost, but not very much so like milk of some kind, the same liquid that was dripping down his chin. The robed figure then let his blades fly in the darkness of the shadow; instead of crashing against the alley's wall, two huge spurts of that white liquid shot in the air. A hollow, otherworldly shriek was heard.

Lernea's impostor then shot out from the shadow, cartwheeling past the robed figure faster than before. She was trying to escape; Ned was on his feet and running after her. A few heartbeats later she slumped on the wooden plank floor of the promenade like someone had tackled her. Three star-like pieces of metal were stuck on her spine. A shiny metallic sort of liquid oozed from her lethal wounds.

Ned stood there for a moment, unsure of what had just happened. He gathered his wits about him and turned around with the machete in his good arm, as ready as he could be. The sweet, distinctly calm voice of a woman sought to allay his fears.

"You're safe, at least for now."

The robed figure drew its blades from the shadow and

swung them in the air; white droplets of blood sprinkled the promenade's floorboards. The rest trickled down the flawless blades with ease. Ned realised his heart was beating fast; his hair was standing up.

"Calm down. We need to find the rest of your party. They could be in danger as well."

"Who are you? What were those things?"

"I'm a friend. These were a doppelganger and his assassin pet, a Sidian starfish."

Ned looked at the fake Lernea's body and shook his head. There was so many things that begged explanation, but it felt like they had to wait. He looked at the woman in robes and he was almost afraid to ask.

"I know you didn't want me killed, that's for sure. I owe you my life probably. Show your face."

"Not here," said the robed woman and with a sudden rush of her feet, she hugged Ned tight as a baby. Ned was frozen in surprise. He saw her grin and in the next moment they were climbing up the giant oak's bark, pulled up in the air by a shiny silvery line, thin as hair. Ned would have loved to sound more courteous, but the extraneous circumstances didn't allow for it.

"Just who the hell are you lady?"

"Just call me Judith," she said as they rose higher and higher. Below them, at the spot of the pretty uneven fight, a cart pulled over and a tall, lank man began loading the bodies. Admittedly, he had some trouble when he came upon the one with the tentacles. "Mack did the smart thing; this job's getting weirder and weirder all the time," said the man to himself, tutted and went back to work.