

Party of Five

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Book III

a fantasy novella by

Vasileios Kalampakas

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

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

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

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Foreword from the author

This is Book III in the “Party of Five” series of novellas - the final chapter in this particular story arc. If you’ve read the first two, I hop you’ll like where this is going. You can also grab the first three books in paperback format, entitled “Party of Five - A game of Po”.

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

“There’s a sinister threat lurking in the cosmos. It is a dark, sticky as tar and far worse than mouldy cheese. It reaches in places you would never believe or feel comfortable with; its livid tendrils sneakily out to get everything that’s fair and beautiful around us, even unicorns. I must do as my conscience bids me; I must fight to expose their ill-doings and bring them down once and for all. There’s a lot of danger involved which means I’ll probably die or go mad in the process. But I have to do this, for the sake of my children alone. And perhaps all the things I find dear in the world, like Taem berries. And roast veeb. Perhaps, Rovenii mead and Yule beer as well. Just thinking about what is at stake here, makes me ravenous.”

– Athmoor Radaniel, from his personal journal

Lernea felt her face set against something wet and grainy. As if caught in the moment between wakefulness and sleep, her mind felt numb, soft and muddy. A word popped in her head: Sand.

Wet sand.

Her face was half-buried in a patch of wet sand. There was a feeling of cold water splashing against her body every now and then. Maybe it was time to go to the latrine she thought to herself, but quickly realised it was the feeling of waves embracing her.

A beach then, she came to realise and opened her eyes half-expecting everything to be a dream.

There was no silken bedding around her, no morning sun’s glory behind laced curtains; just a misty, fog-laden beach with

low, crumbled rock outcroppings in the hazy distance which wasn't much of a distance at all. The sun was hidden behind a grim overcast sky. Lazy grey clouds barely seemed to move. A harsh, cold salty breeze made her face flush.

She saw the white bunny rabbit to her right, the way her head lay; Bo was munching on a small brush of saltweed when she looked her way as if enabled by some sixth or even seventh sense.

“Good, you’re awake.”

The words rang crystal clear in Lernea’s head; she was instantly confused. It was a woman’s voice, warm and cheerful. Her first thought was she had either bumped her head somewhere along the way or had gone mad. Voices in her head were more than she could cope with - it was the worst time to check her sanity levels.

“It’s alright. It’s me, Bo,” the voice said while Bo munched away, seemingly possessed by a real appetite for destroying saltweed bushes. Lernea squinted at the bunny with a puzzled, weary look. For all she knew and cared for, a talking bunny made as much sense as a magical, fire-spouting one. What felt weird was Bo appeared to be female. That wasn’t a life-threatening situation, Lernea knew; she’d just come out of one alive and well. And quite wet, she added as an afterthought. She sighed and suddenly wished for a steamy hot cup of Chamoleon: she could almost smell it too.

Lernea raised her head slightly above the wet sand and felt a sudden, awful dizziness. She remembered the drop into that churning nightmarish fire and the flash; a bright, blinding flash. She remembered Theo falling right behind her, clasping her hand and Bo’s eyes flaring up as if the small white bunny would explode with a hail of brimstone and fire.

She dug her hands in the sand and propped herself up;

her shoulders felt sore. She looked to her left and saw Theo laying there, his back against a patch of damp sand with arms splayed and eyes closed, where the waves would barely lick his body. Her mind flashed with a horrifying thought; she felt her stomach tie itself in a knot.

“He’s just sleeping. He was actually snoring a little while back,” Bo sent to her mind.

“You can read minds now as well?” replied Lernea audibly, with just the right amount of annoyance in her voice.

“No, it’s not that hard to tell what crossed your mind,” said Bo and dug her rabbit body under a rocky ledge where the wind seemed to die down and sat there snugly. Lernea replied with a stare and a scoff.

She drove a hand through her hair reflexively; it was a ragged mess with pieces of seaweed clinging on like little green braids. Her leather bodice was soaking wet and her boots made squishy sounds. She felt wet and miserable, her only measure of relief the reassuring weight of her bow strung against her back.

“Aren’t you cold? At all?” Bo asked her timidly; her little bunny body shivered involuntarily.

“I am the rightful Queen of Nomos, the Kingdom of the North,” Lernea replied in a stern voice. She felt better just by saying that.

“So, you’re accustomed to this cold, I take it?”

“You know, Theo would need to ask something as obvious as that. Are you two related, by chance?”

“Actually, Theo is my brother,” said Bo and even in Lernea’s mind her voice had an awkward feeling.

Lernea raised an eyebrow and took a long, hard stare at Bo. Then she shook her head and looked at Theo, silver-haired with a touch of blond, the wet, ragged dreadlocks

adorning his elven face with all the grace of a mop. She burst out laughing.

“You’re funny! Better than Ned!”

“I’m serious.”

Bo’s words nearly made Lernea’s mind feel a bit heavier with all the weight the voice carried suddenly.

Lernea blinked furiously as if something were caught in her eye. Her face became taut suddenly; she stared back at the sea like a castaway waiting for a ship that’d never sail by.

“Ned. And Parcifal. They’re not here, are they?” she said and walked over to Theo, vague moulds of her boots trailing behind her on the impressionable sand.

“No. Neither is Winceham,” Bo voiced. Lernea shot her a frowned look and paused mid-stride. “The weird, short fellow. Don’t you remember?” Bo asked with a hint of worry.

“Halfuin, really. I remember. I’m not really sure what exactly happened, that’s all,” Lernea said and sat down beside Theo, legs crossed. Locks of her hair were stuck against her face. She looked to windward, her arms laid back against the sand.

“Do you want the short version, or the long version?”

“I wager we’re not in a hurry. If someone wanted us dead, they’d done it by now,” she said and shrugged. “Shouldn’t we wake Theo up as well? He might want to hear all this,” she added as an afterthought. Bo twitched her nose and hopped towards the sea, soaking her bunny feet in some wet sand.

“He gets a bit antsy if you wake him up,” she said in Lernea’s mind. “He’s kind of groggy and slow-minded for a while afterwards,” she added and backed away playfully from a slightly frothing wave. Bo seemed to be having some kind of fun, despite it all.

“For a while? Like what, a whole day?” Lernea said with

a sneer. Bo turned her bunny head uncannily towards Lernea; her eyes seemed to brighten up a little - it was a reflex.

“Hey, that’s not nice,” she sent to Lernea’s mind; there was some sadness involved, rather than anger. Lernea looked at Bo for a moment and closed her eyes. Right beside her, Theo could be heard, snoring lightly.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that,” Lernea said and awkwardly ran a finger in the sand, drawing random curves and shapes. Bo seemed satisfied; the bunny’s eyes lost their glint and she turned to look at the sea once more, her head bobbing slightly as if mesmerized by the waves. “It’s true though, isn’t it?” Lernea said after a while. The bunny looked at her sideways.

“Well, he can be a little daft sometimes. But he did save us,” Bo said and hopped merrily towards Theo and snuggled right beside his head.

“He did? I thought that was you,” Lernea replied, genuinely surprised to hear that.

“I tried, but there wasn’t much I could do other than put a shield around us. The wormhole that brought us her in the nick of time, that was Theo.”

For a while, Lernea stared at Theo as if in shock. The sound of waves dying a few feet away rose easily above the eerie silence. Bo blinked at Lernea without saying a word. Overhead, a sea bird of some kind croaked. It drew Lernea’s stare. “I thought he was goofy with magic,” she said.

“Oh, whatever he did, trust me; it wasn’t magic,” Bo said and wiggled her nose. “Theo is magically inert. Has been ever since I can remember,” the bunny said and dug its face in Theo’s sand-ridden dreadlocks, before pulling it out again sharply - as if it smelled something unruly.

“I thought he was a sorcerer,” Lernea said. “He seemed to

be; well, kind of. Sometimes at least,” she added shrugging, sounding clearly confused.

“No, no. I just made it appear so; I’m the sorceress in the family,” Bo sent and her bunny eyes flared up with a tinge of red flame that was snuffed out the next instant, just to illustrate her point.

“Just for appearances?” Lerneia asked. Bo leapt above Theo’s slowly rising and falling chest and perched herself on top of a mass of rocks. She stood straight up and looked around, surveying the misty landscape.

“The woodkin knew. I have a soft spot for Theo, what can I say? I thought it was prudent as well. Magical bunnies aren’t a dime a dozen - if word got out..” Bo let the words echo faintly in Lerneia’s mind. She gave Bo a weird squinting look - it was her calculating, thinking look.

“You’re in hiding, aren’t you?”

“That’s right. Have been for years.”

“From who? Why?”

“I have no idea. Just the words of my father, ringing in my head,” Bo sent to Lerneia and paused, sniffing the air. “Hide. That’s all I can remember.”

“I think I can relate to that,” Lerneia said with a shallow voice. Her face flushed red, remembering how she and Parcifal were cast out, humiliated, to be excised from memory, from history even. As they never had existed. She bit her lip and her mind turned to the quandary at hand.

“Then how did he do whatever it was he did that saved us?” Lerneia asked and pointed at Theo, looking baffled.

“The wormhole? I haven’t got the slightest idea,” Bo said and uncannily shook her head slowly like a human would. “Same goes about the place we’ve ended up at,” she added, her nose twitching faintly.

“It could’ve been worse,” Lerneia said and stood up. A cold breeze snapped against her hard, lean face. She felt invigorated.

“We could have been charred to the bone or flash-steamed into space, that’s true,” said Bo and began scouring the sand and rock for signs of moss or something generally green and edible. She sniffed profusely, like only a sort of herbivore hound would.

“I mean, this place could have been worse. Far worse. It however kind of feels.. Homely,” she said after pausing to find the word. She cleaned some of the sand off her pants, but the majority of the grains mostly clung on heedless. Bo’s eyes widened and she turned her bunny head around at an impossible angle - anyone passing by would have been horrified by the unnatural movement.

“What’s homely about this cold, wet place? I can barely see what’s out there. And as far as I can see there’s nothing but rocks - not even a tint of moss. The sun is hidden - there is no way to tell the time. It’s moody and grey, suggestive of a rainy afternoon without the rain. It’s ”

“Kind of like home, indeed,” Lerneia said and nodded.

“This place reminds you of home?” Bo asked Lerneia, the thought echoing with a positively unenthused quality.

“Reminds me of Thraka; the northern reaches. My sister and I spent a whole summer there when we were kids.”

“Must’ve been a lovely summer,” Bo said and dug in a shadowy cleft where lo and behold, a cluster of mushrooms lay. She began nibbling at them after barely shooting them a peremptory look. They didn’t seem poisonous, at first glance.

“It was; we went whale fishing,” Lerneia replied. Bo was focused on the mushrooms, making sure to eat just the caps; she never did like the stems.

“I was being sarcastic but never mind. Whale fishing, you say? Just how old were you?”

“Twelve.”

“What kind of kids go whale hunting?”

“We were rarely, if ever, normal kids, even by Nomos’ standards. We were born to become queens, mind you.”

“I was under the vague impression that queens go for croquet and tea parties,” said Bo and somehow her thoughts conveyed a sense of insatiable hunger, even while the mushrooms were coming to an end. Lernea spent a few moments staring at Theo’s rising and falling chest, hypnotized by the waves of the sea chiming in on tune. She was frowning once more, her mind seeking refuge in memories of old.

“We’ve met danger together. Narrowly escaped death. I thought you’d think better of me by now,” Lernea said in earnest. She smiled playfully.

“True enough,” said Bo and let out a tiny, nearly insignificant bunny burp that mostly sounded like someone sneezing.

“Bless you,” Lernea said and Bo looked at her sideways, as if she had just said something dangerous.

“What for?” Bo sent and her nose twitched.

“I thought you sneezed.”

“No, I didn’t,” Bo insisted and wagged her tail.

“Well, it sounded like a sneeze,” Lernea said by way of apology.

“No, I felt full, that’s all.”

Lernea nodded and then frowned. A lady, even in the guise of an animal, that admitted to making vulgar sounds was a deplorable thing. She was about to begin lecturing Bo when a noise was heard, very much like someone sneezing at a quarter of the speed but ten times as loud.

“Was that you again?”

“I told you, it wasn’t a sneeze. I burped, only ever so slightly. Now this sound.. This is neither a sneeze or a burp,” Bo sent.

The odd sneezing sound grew louder and louder, until it could be heard for what it was: a creaking sound.

“That’s odd. Sounds familiar,” said Lernea and looked around her trying to peer through the ubiquitous, impenetrable mist, to no avail. “It has this wooden quality. Something to do with wood, in any case,” she said and strained herself to hear closely for the source.

“I think it’s coming from the sea,” Bo sent, half her body turned around, scanning the sea nervously, her ears jolted rigidly upright like tiny, full-blown sails.

“Wood creaking in the sea. That’s bound to be a ship, then,” Lernea said and grinned.

“A ship?” Bo sent, not feeling entirely sure. “A ship,” Lernea replied and put a hand above her eyes, searching for a sail, a mast, a bow. The creaking grew louder; it was as if the ship was riding past them. Theo’s light snoring could not hope to match it.

“Ahoy! Over here!” Lernea shouted into the mist without an echo, her voice soaked up by the fog.

“What are you doing? You’re exposing our position!” Bo sent, and hopped nervously around Lernea’s feet, looking at her like a lost puppy.

“To whom? We need to find out where we are, one way or another. What if this is there won’t be another ship this way for years?” she replied in a hushed voice. The creaking sound became clear as day; the waves rising up the beach became jarred, irregular.

“What if they’re bloodthirsty cutthroats like Culliper? What if it is Culliper?”

“Ned sold him as a slave, remember?”

“You’re being naive! Do you really think someone wouldn’t recognize him? Strike up a deal to use his talents?”

“Who would strike up a deal with a slave? That’s preposterous!”

“Why are you, my dear lady Teletha, screaming to noone in particular?”, Theo offered drowsily.

“I’m having an argument with your sister!”

“My sister?”

“Bo? The bunny?” Lernea said and stuck out both of her arms in frustration, wild-eyed and nodding intensely.

Then a giant shadow carved itself through the mist with alarming speed. A dark wooden bulk in the shape of a ship’s prow appeared, accompanied by a creaking noise and the sound of foaming, rustling water.

“Move!” Bo managed to sent with a gasp to Lernea and Theo both, while the ship ran aground heedlessly, kicking up wet sand violently all around its prow. Noone had time to move, but nevertheless the ship came to a jarring, abrupt halt with a grinding noise reminiscent of millstones and sliding tomb doors. Nobody was hurt, but they nonetheless couldn’t pry their eyes of the ship’s prow. There was a bronze-and-marble statuette of a luscious half-gorgon, half-mermaid decorating it. It was voluptuously sculpted, sexually suggestive and quite terrible to behold.

“Who goes there?” came the grumbling shout of a man. Lernea cleared her throat and assumed a slightly regal pose, the seaweed still cluttering some of her hair.

“My name is Lernea Te-” Lernea uttered before abruptly pausing mid-sentence. A weird pain rose from her feet; her

gaze wandered downwards, where Bo was trying to bite her toenail through at least three layers of thick boot leather and skin.

“Don’t tell him your real name! Make something up! Make something up!” she voiced frantically in Lernea’s mind.

“Why, I can’t seem to shake off this terrible dream,” Theo said mostly to himself, looking rather worn. His voice had a touch of befuddled raspiness about it.

“My name is Lernea Testarossa.. Of the Testarossa family,” Lernea said with a hesitant frown, staring at Bo who in turn stared at the ship as if it were one giant carrot.

“You’re not a mermaid, are ye?” said a scruffy-looking old man that appeared by the ship’s railing. He was wearing what appeared to be more than a slightly used horned metal cap on his head and a tattered old shirt and pants of an indiscriminate nature and original color. A rather musky old beard hung from his face down to his waist; what looked like tiny barnacles clung on strands of it, as if their life depended on it. There was a wooden parrot that appeared physically and permanently attached to his shoulder. It was also quite emphatically dead, judging as it didn’t breathe nor move.

“No good sir, I assure you. I’m not a mermaid.”

“What’s he then? Could it be, he be a merman?” the old man said with evident worry in his voice.

“No sir. He’s a woodkin elf, a friend. We’re stranded here.”

“Where might ‘here’ be then?” the man asked, twiddling his thumbs.

“I was hoping a gentleman of your caliber and seamanship would be much more knowledgeable in these maritime affairs of navigation and mapping,” Lernea replied, to which the man

strained his neck like a turtle and offered with a bland, vacant expression:

“Wot?”

Lernea sighed and let her shoulders sag. “I thought you’d know,” she said and waved a hand at the ship at large. The old man who quite closely resembled a rather out-of-luck, struggling old-timer pirate picked at his nose and flicked the output with a bony finger.

“Lady, I’ve been wandering around these parts for eighteen years. I’m still, I’ll have to admit, bloody hopelessly lost. Cap’n Van der Breckenrod. Perhaps, if it’s worthwhile, at your disposal,” he said and smiled showing an array of teeth in all their possible states of decay.

Lernea felt let down. She was hoping there’d be a silver lining in all that mess of a situation. Bo whispered in her mind, even if there was no real need to do so:

“Don’t tell him anything. Ask him everything.”

There was a slight hint of paranoia right there; if the Ygg had reached out wherever this place was, Lernea thought to herself, their agents would’ve realised who they were talking to by now. More to the point, she reasoned, if that old geezer was working for the Ygg, they were indeed a sad, hopeless, desperate lot.

“Mr. Gunnadeer, you’ve run us aground. Again,” the old pirate turned and said to someone either invisible, or non-existent. It was quite possible that he was simply driveling, yet Bo was instantly wary. “Where are the others? Why don’t they show themselves?” she sent to Lernea, in what resembled a hiss. She was trying to gnaw at her paws, but bunny physiology made it impossible. Theo was still trying to get some sort of bearing with reality at large.

“Is this really not a dream?”

“It’s not a dream, Theo,” Lerneia replied sternly. Theo blinked still trying to understand and got up, whole clumps of wet sand weighing down his dreadlocks.

“We wish to parley,” Lerneia said aloud to make sure the old pirate would hear. He looked behind him for a moment, as if someone had tapped on his shoulder, but there was no-one there. He nodded to himself, shrugged and said to no-one in particular:

“Mr. Munsheen, lower the boat. Prepare a landing party. I’m going ashore,” the old man said and coughed profusely, before spitting a globule with a decidedly abnormal mass. It splashed into the sea audibly with a plop.

“Let me do the talking. There’s no real danger; he’s old and probably senile. After all, can’t you see his alone?” Lerneia whispered.

“What about the ghosts in that boat then?” Theo said and Lerneia looked at him with a frown that dared to bring her eyebrows in contact, while Bo’s eyes flared up with a spark.

Parciful’s stare had the quality of solid ice; it was cold and opaque. She stood on the deck like a statue would, Encelados firmly clasped in her hands, the blade’s tip resting on the ship’s deck. Tark was standing nearby, his back on the ship’s railing. He cleared his throat and pointed at the blade.

“Would you mind, not really doing that?”

“Doing what, exactly?” Parciful replied icily and staring blankly at the rosy-red sky. Thick, puffy clouds passed them by, while below them a green tapestry inched by. There were tiles of brown and gold in there too; farms and the unmistakable signs of civilization. Roads and bridges, the roofs of houses small and big.

“I’d prefer it if you’d be so kind not to etch, notch, graze

or otherwise damage this ship's deck with that wonderful blade of yours," Tark said trying to smile thinly, his words carefully selected and his voice pitched so as to get the message through in a nice yet slightly irritated manner. Parcifal did not bat an eyelid or budge an inch. She simply spared Tark a fleeting glance as a warning.

"She's moody. You'll be properly compensated for any damages," Ned interjected, seeing the first signs of a discussion evolving into a fight. And Ned knew there had been more than one on their way to Pi Gamma Mu, a reasonably peaceful planet of the Human League. The fights usually involved Parcifal and Tark, and they were mostly resolved before anyone got physically hurt by either Ned or Judith. Winceham was either sleeping, having a smoke, or not having a bath most of the time. His decidedly neutral disposition had earned him a sort of invisible attribute to the rest, slightly ineffectual when the air shifted.

"Money is not the issue," Tark said to Ned with a sigh. "It is a matter of principle, Mr. Larkin," he added and turned his back on everyone without another word. Parcifal remained silent, unperturbed. Her mind was fixated on what really mattered; the whereabouts and fate of her sister. She knew Lernea was alive, that much she felt as well. But where, and for how long, she couldn't answer. Those uncertainties gnawed at her soul; it wasn't good for her disposition either. There was a constant ire, an anger at everything and everyone. What she wouldn't freely admit but knew in her heart, was that she blamed herself, more than anything. After all, she was still a princess of Nomos, Captain of the Guard. She had failed her queen, putting her in harm's way.

Absorbed in thought, it took her a while to realise Judith was watching her intently. Parcifal offered her a grumpy stare

and a few words:

“What is it that you require of me?”

“It doesn’t do you any good, you know. I know that stare. I’ve learned to turn that into something useful,” Judith said as she looked Parcifal straight into her eyes.

“What you know, is your own business. I suggest you mind to that,” Parcifal said in a flat voice. Judith stared at her for another moment before she obliged her wishes and walked away in silence. Parcifal’s gaze did not follow her.

Ned was conversing with Tark in a low voice; Winceham was sitting comfortably at a swiveling, puffy chair, his feet resting at the helm proper. The helm moved and rocked as Winceham shuffled his legs, but the ship stayed on course. That’s because the helm, though operational, didn’t really do much. The ship was an advanced design; among the many utilities and assorted paraphernalia, the mysterious thingamajigs and spurious artifacts it carried, it was equipped with an autothaumagator, a device that supposedly served many purposes, but which its primary function was to navigate the ship safely and without any crew assistance whatsoever. The ship, the *Mary Righteous*, basically flew itself. As an added bonus, it could talk.

“What’s.. Five times thirty five?” Winceham said and a puff of smoke left his nostrils. A sweet, lilting female voice answered with sensuous overtones.

“One-hundred and seventy five, Boss.”

“Tip-top. We could do business together, you know; I could use someone who can count and has no pockets.”

“Inference broken. Stimulate.”

“I wish I could, but you’re not really my type. Besides, I wouldn’t know where to begin the stimulating.”

“I am a type-III autothaumagator. User Boss is a user, provisional. Conflicting types.”

“Yeah, I know. It was never meant to be, but still that voice of yours.. It’s like a honeytrap.”

“And you’re the proverbial fly in the ointment, Mr. Higgsbottom,” Tark said with a good measure of disdain.

“No need for name calling, Mr. Tark. If that’s really your name,” Winceham retorted and grinned.

“We’re not having that discussion. Stop harassing the ship’s autothamagator,” Tark said and lowered Winceham’s feet from the helm forcibly.

“It’s not harrasment. We’re just talking. Isn’t that true, Mary?”

“Assertion ‘talking’ is true,” the ship said as if it was about to have a chocolate cake all to its own.

“What she said,” Winceham told Tark with a smirk and left the chair in search of friendlier company, which was to say, he headed below for some more sleep.

“Your associates are beginning to get on my nerves.”

“I’ve realised that. We’ll be on our way just as soon as we land.”

“That won’t work either.”

“How do you mean?”

“Though I am sympathetic to your cause, at least in principle, there are technicalities that must be observed.”

“Such as?”

“A debriefing is in order.”

“You mean questioning.”

“It might look like that, depending on who will do the debriefing.”

“Are we prisoners?”

“Not exactly.”

“Are we guests?”

“Not quite, no.”

“What are we then to the Human League?”

“Information assets. For now.”

“That doesn’t sound very welcoming.”

“It’s not. But it’s not like you’ll be treated like Expendable Information Assets.”

“I see. This Human League of yours, it doesn’t sound like a particularly inviting place. If it wasn’t for the predicament we’re in..”

“The Tallyflop Incident.”

“Whatever you wish to call it, it was more than just an incident. The whole place nearly got consumed by that, what was it again?”

“A Thaumaturgic Event Displacement. A TED.”

“Do you have a name for everything?”

“Not for everything. But for everything that matters. That thing mattered a lot. It still does.”

“I have a feeling it really only matters to you.”

“The Ygg are growing stronger by the minute. They’re a destabilising force that needs to be dealt with.”

“I’ve seen the truth of that. But what is it to you?”

“The Human League has a vested interest in a number of worlds. It’d be foolish to have to deal with this later, while we can deal with this now.”

“I meant, what is it to you personally?”

“It’s my job, that’s what it is.”

“Just a job? Going through all this, just to do your job?”

“It’s called professionalism. I wouldn’t expect you to understand.”

“Why is that?”

“Because you’re amateurs.”

“You haven’t seen me perform then.”

“Perform what, exactly?”

“I do stand-up comedy and play the drums. I know it’s an unusual mix for a bard, but I think it can have its own appeal.”

“Maybe you really are good at that,” Tark said and perhaps for the first time ever genuinely smiled.

“How can you tell?”

“Wasn’t that a joke? About the drums and all?”

“No, not really.”

“Well, I wouldn’t really know. I work for Naval Intelligence.”

“How are the two connected?”

“It’s an utterly drab, humorless job.”

“Another reason I can’t understand why you’re doing it.”

“Because someone has to do it.”

“But why does it have to be you?”

“Why not me?”

“That really doesn’t make any sense.”

“There’s no sense in intelligence. Just gents,” Tark said and looked thoughtful.

“Was that supposed to be a witty play on words?” Ned asked.

“No.”

“I thought it was funny, anyway.”

“As far as I know, that’s highly unlikely.”

Judith approached them, nodded to Ned with a slight smile.

“Sir, we’re approaching Rampatur,” she said and stood there waiting for instructions. Tark nodded and his eyes scanned the horizon momentarily, before his eyes met the city.

Indeed, the white towers and glistening prisms that made up the core of Rampatur City were growing closer. Like a miniature set built with extreme detail, Rampatur City looked nearly perfect and almost fake. Yet it was real enough; stretching across both sides of pristine river, it a sprawling metropolis with a distinctive melt of architecture from many different schools, from almost every part of the Human League. A large, tall pyramid-like structure dominated the center of the city.

Ned stood there wide-eyed, wonderfully fascinated at the rich white, grey and golden hues reflecting the mellow green and brown countryside surrounding the city. He couldn't stop staring; his lips curled in a grin. The sight of the approaching city even attracted Parcifal's parsimonious stare, but she didn't break her silence. She simply stood there, unable to contain the fact that her interest was indeed piqued. Ned, on the other hand sounded openly ecstatic:

“What a sight! It's so grandiose. So majestic!”

Tark sighed. “It's just a backwater planet's capital. It's quite rustic, really,” he said with a scoff. He then turned and faced the helm abruptly.

“Ship, send a hail message to the Directorate Office. Be sure to include the word ‘pumpkin’, capitalized. Negotiate a mooring with Rampatur Aerial and bring us in for landing. What was that nice place on Rampatur Central?”

“I have an index of three hundred and nineteen topographical entities in the vicinity of the Rampatur District labeled as ‘nice’. Stimulate,” the female voice demanded softly.

“The one where they put olives in that drink,” Tark said with some mild annoyance. “Stimulate,” the ship repeated.

“Never mind. Find an exorbitantly-priced restaurant. Book a table for five. Make sure to ask for privacy. And

put it on the expenses list,” Tark said raising a finger.

“Thaumaturgizing your request,” voiced the ship in mellifluous tones. Tark turned to face Ned once more.

“Excellent. We’ll be landing shortly, Mr. Larkin.”

“You made dinner reservations?” Ned asked him. Tark stared at him for a moment before sceding an answer with a slightly confused look.

“Yes?” said Tark and his answer sounded a lot like a question.

“Well, you reserved a table for five. Does that mean you’re offering a night out? Like a welcoming gift?” Ned said smiling a bit awkwardly, always a polite smile on his lips. He could see Parcifal fidgeting uncomfortably near the ship’s prow, as if itching to get off the *Mary Righteous*.

“Good gracious, no!” Tark exclaimed with a polite little laugh. “That would’ve been impertinent to say the least. Quite frankly, whatever gave you that idea?” Tark was looking at Ned from head to toe; what Ned implied sounded almost absurd. “I’ve been in the field for months. I’m having a blast tonight. All sorts of debauchery in mind, if you must know.”

“I wasn’t asking about details, but what about us?” Ned demanded with a sharp frown.

“Judith will handle your lot.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you need to co-operate and everything will be fine,” Tark said and squinted as he gazed towards the city, a hand over his eyes. From the right point of view, the setting sun did not blind but rather painted the round-topped towers with a rosy, pinkish sheen. Ned’s answer came with a heavy, slow nod of his head.

“I’ll co-operate alright. Just as long as we’re treated fair and proper,” he said and made sure to stress the last word.

“What about her?” Tark said and pointed at Parcifal, looking at her sideways.

“Parcifal is strong-willed and proud. She’s like a hurt, caged animal right now. You never know when she might lash out,” Ned said and shrugged. Tark took him by one shoulder and nearly whispered in his ear:

“As a word of advice, don’t act the fool with Intelligence. You’re not Human League citizens; you’ll be granted a provisional status upon landing. And that halfuin friend of yours. He’ll be in trouble.”

“How do you mean? What kind of trouble?” Ned said sounding alarmed and rightly so.

“You see he’s humanoid, not human standard. He will be considered an illegal alien,” Tark said and raised an eyebrow.

“Wincham? He might be old and smell bad because he never takes a bath, but he’s not an alien!”

“That’s not the official take on the matter,” Tark said and turned slightly around to see Parcifal; it appeared as if he was checking up on her. He saw Judith was busy making last minute checks to her inventory, all neatly stacked and tied down to the deck. Ned’s voice was filled with sudden angst.

“Why didn’t you say so before?”

“It would have been pointless, really. There was no place to drop him off,” Tark replied with a smug little grin.

“And now there is? Treating halfuins like aliens. Aren’t there any short people in the Human League?”

“That’s an entirely different subject. I don’t make policy,” Tark said and squatted, reaching for a metal box near the helm. “We’re on the clock. I’m doing you a great favor just by letting you know. It could get me into a lot of trou-

ble. Lose my job, get shot. I'm talking that kind of trouble," he said and sounded positively serious even though the grin would not leave his face.

"You won't buy us dinner, but you're willing to risk getting shot?"

"Let's not get all chummy all of a sudden," Tark said and raised one finger with one hand while he rummaged inside the metal box with the other. "Dinner is one thing; getting shot is a professional perk anyway. I like to think of it as extending a little bit of professional courtesy," he said looking up to Ned with a smile. In his hands he held what looked like a small backpack or rather a large bag with straps and whatnot.

"But I'm a performer. You're a.. Spy, right?" Ned asked with a good measure of uncertainty. To his knowledge, spies were vermin-like people, all cloak and dagger that you'd never guess in a million years what they did for a living. On the other hand, Tark was practically shouting it out.

"Things seldom are the way they appear to," Tark said and perfunctorily gave the bag a look.

"You're not a spy?"

"Are you seriously expecting me to answer that?" Tark said while wearing the bag on his back. It was black and somewhat rotund. A pair of red lines made of stitches ran its length; they were made to look like lightning.

"What is this stuff you're putting on?"

"It's a F.U.L.L. Retar.D, mark two," Tark said grinning.

"It doesn't look tailor-made," Ned said and made a sour face of disbelief. Tark replied without hinting at any sort of being annoyed or indeed being called a retard.

"It stands for Flight Updraught Linear Linen Retardation Device."

"Why does everything have to have a stupid name?"

Tark paused for a moment and gave the question some thought.

“I wouldn’t know about that. I’m not the one making up the names.”

“Well, what does it do?” Ned asked, voicing some genuine interest in what appeared to be little more than a bag with a strange colour scheme.

“Keeps you from hitting the ground when falling out of the sky.”

“Nofty. What if the magic fails?” Ned asked conversationally. He shrugged vaguely.

“Oh, there’s no magic involved. It’s a simple aetheric device.”

“You mean like, involving aether science?”

“That’s what the big-heads in VV-section told me, yes,” Tark replied, fastening a pair of straps around his waist. Ned’s gaze seemed drawn to the retardation device. After a couple of moments of scrutiny, Ned asked poignantly with one hand resting under his chin, to add even more thoughtfulness into his words:

“What if that fails?”

Tark blinked thoughtfully in silence before staring at Ned with a very particular stare.

“There’s always religion, I’m told,” Tark said and walked past Ned.

“Where are you going?” Ned asked him with a tint of curiosity.

“I need to jump,” Tark said and made a jumping gesture with both hands.

“I thought you were coming along,” Ned said and took a few steps closer to Tark, with his hands crossed over his chest. He was pouting slightly.

“Oh, no. I’m not even supposed to be on this ship,” Tark said grinning profusely.

“So, you’re hiding as well?”

“Hiding is a harsh term. Obfuscating one’s whereabouts is much more preferable.

“It still means you’re hiding. Winceham will be forced to go into hiding as well.”

“Look, I really need to jump. I’d hate to get skewered on a one of those towers if the wind changes.”

“I need you to do me a favor,” Ned said and touched Tark on the shoulder, smiling lightly. Tark noticed the gesture and sighed.

“This is strictly business. Nothing personal to all of this, do you understand?” Tark said and turned his back on Ned. He grasped the railing and was preparing to really jump overboard.

“I wouldn’t jump just yet if I were you,” Ned said, tapping Tark’s shoulder profusely.

“Sweetness of a maiden’s tit! What is it now?” Tark yelled with aggravation.

“Winceham jumped in that glorified parachute of yours a while ago.”

“He did? Then what am I wearing exactly?”

“His backpack,” Ned said with a beaming smile.

“Why didn’t I notice?” Tark asked, looking at the backpack’s straps mundanely.

“Misdirection, mostly,” Ned said as if it should have been obvious. Tark stepped away from the railing and took off the backpack. He opened it hastily and found nothing but a half-eaten mushroom salad sandwich along with a note that read: *Couldn’t resist meself - Wince.*

“Well played,” Tark said looking at Ned with a surprisingly sharp, gleaming eye. “Did you know about this?” Tark said and his stared turned sour when he pointed a finger at Judith who was about to try and say something, when Ned interjected:

“It’s not her fault, Tark.”

“I know, I know. It’s my lack of oversight. Now I’ll have to find a good deal of excuses. A damn good deal. There’s the debriefing. I dread debriefings. They bore me to death.”

“You could hurry things up, couldn’t you?” Ned said and ran his tongue across his lips.

“I might be able to,” Tark admitted, raising an eyebrow.

“As an added incentive, Winceham’s got your money pouch.”

“I see,” Tark said and his lip stiffened.

“No need to worry; he has enough sense to leave some of that money for dinner.”

“I wildly misjudged you Ned. You can be quite resourceful.”

“Beats being remorseful!” chimed Ned with a smile.

“Was that.. Was that meant to be witty?” Tark asked Ned with some hesitation.

“Yes, it was. Wasn’t it?” Ned asked him with a worrisome voice.

“I’m not sure if you’re in the right line of business,” Tark said and sighed, steadying himself as the ship tilted itself gracefully and began a slightly curved descend to Rampatur Central.

And all this time, Parcifal was still staring at the sun, hoping to see a glimpse of her sister if only in her mind’s eye.

The ship was the Mary Drunkard; a twelve-gun fast runner, light and deadly as a hawk when it first was put to sea. Three hundred and twenty three years later though, it was a small miracle or perhaps even a feat of magic that vessel still remained afloat. Anyone who could afford a bit of common sense would have bet an arm and a leg that a ship filled with gaping holes and made out of maggot-infested, rotten wood would happily sink away like a rock. The few unlucky souls who made those kinds of bets gave a small bump in the always-in-demand, but never-really-breaking-it-big, prosthetics industry.

The original owner, a rich eccentric drunkard that liked to spend his vast wealth in pointless exotic travels and self-inflicted adventures, had indeed named the ship in one his drunken binges. If one were to judge by the way it teeter-tottered ungainly as it tried to navigate the unabating fog, it was very fitting name indeed.

Lernea looked skeptical, while Theo sported a withdrawn expression, thoughtful to the point of weariness. It had everything to do with the gameboard he was glued to, its multi-coloured tiles and many pieces too much for the untrained eye.

“What if..” Lernea suggested at one point and inched a finger closer to one piece. Theo stopped her in her tracks with a single, wild-eyed glance. She drew her hand back onto her lap, where Bo sat, her bunny eyes going back and forth between Theo and the captain, as if a tiny spark was all that was needed to ignite a deadly silence into a veritable mayhem. But all they were doing was sitting comfortably around a table, sipping some tea and playing Po.

“No. If he moves his Guardian onto an Assailant’s tile then all the outbound Runners will be cut to pieces. I’ll never

be able to summon another Army like that. And it looks like this will be one of *those* games,” Theo said nibbling at a fingernail.

“What kind of game would that be, lad?” Captain Van der Breckenrod asked with an abruptly aroused suspicion, holding his chin up; the pipe in his mouth followed suit and remained stuck upwards as it glowed, ember-red after he drew heavily on it.

“Po,” replied Theo without skipping a beat or breaking his concentration. The Captain looked around him for a moment, looked at the table and let the smoke out of his nostrils. A small cloud hovered between him and Theo before he finally rolled his eyes and as if waking from a dream, fluttered his eyelids and said, “Of course, Po!”.

Bo fidgeted and couldn’t sit still. She had been growing more and more nervous by the minute. She voiced to Lernea and Theo, for their minds alone:

“He suspects something. He knows. Who knows what kind of plan he’s hatching, who he’s working for. We’re in grave danger!”

Lernea tried to control her breathing; her face jerked slightly, involuntarily, as if something had bitten her. She picked up Bo and looked her in the eyes, those wonderfully red-hued bunny eyes with the propensity to spout fiery wrath when she was provoked. Bo looked rather adorable in her fluffy white bunny form, and Lernea was a young woman of noble heart, scion to a kingdom and very lady-like, good and proper in her manners, just and swift with her bow. But she was an inch closer to actually breaking the bunny’s neck, and Bo could feel she was at the edge of a chasm.

“Let’s just say, for the sake of argument, you were afraid, for some reason - well-founded or not - afraid a particular set

of events might occur in the future. Like taking an arrow to your knee that prevented you from living the life of an adventurer. Or some stranger you just met was awfully weird and had really bad bladder control on top of a drinking problem that made you suspicious of him. That man would not constitute a let's say, clear and present danger against your person, without showing overt aggressiveness in the form of killing you outright, in your sleep, or at least trying to throw you overboard to the killer whales now. In which I would be more than happy to do something about it to the best of my ability. Seeing though, as there isn't any evidence to support such a claim, I would be remiss to not point out that going on and on about a hypothetical situation without any basis on reality bent as it may be under certain circumstances can drive a person mad. It would thus be, by any account, not unlikely for a person under duress to be driven into acts of temporary insanity as can be proven under law, to which extent said person might not be held liable for his actions and be set free. Wouldn't you agree, overall, gentlemen?" Lernea said without tearing her eyes away from Bo who sat perfectly still, soaking in what was mostly intended for her ears.

Captain Van der Breckenrod looked at Lernea sideways for a moment and then looked at the glass in his hand. There was a little tiny piece of handicraft floating in it, an umbrella or some would argue, a parasol and it was slowly sinking in the dark, cherry red mixture of unidentifiable alcohol and rum. He downed the glass in one go, frowned heavily for a while, checked the bottom of the glass for signs of more liquor and then turned and told Lernea, the tiny umbrella still stuck on his beard:

"I, for one, Miss Testarossa, am agreed. I am quite agreeable a person, after all," he said and threw away the tiny um-

brella with the intention of sending it overboard. Instead, it somehow flew around in circles and settled on Theo's hair, who was too pre-occupied with planning his next move to afford the most perfunctory of looks. He did nod though, but only to himself in relation to a possible move he was contemplating.

"That's quite alright, Mr. Van der Breckenrod. Silence is after all, a common indicator of approval. Isn't it?" Lerne said and Bo seemed to nod imperceptibly. She remained silent indeed, and almost looked prudish somehow.

"Well, if my crew is any indication, you are spot on," the old pirate said and raised his glass. It was pretty soon floating mid-air in the direction of the ramshackle captain's cabin. Lerne had noticed a lot of that was going on around the ship; sails hoisting themselves, ropes being tied up as if by way of magic, giant waterproof holes in the hull. Yet it had nothing to do with magic, or else Bo would have at least a real possible threat to take into account. It had to do with ghosts and Theo was the only who could not just see them but talk to them as well. It had something to do with Rho, the ever-present life force of sorts that existed in everything living. Somehow, that even involved the undead.

"Still, a skeleton crew, no pun intended. How do you manage?" Lerne asked and put Bo down on the deck. Her voice was weary, but noticeably calm.

"How do you mean?" the captain said while scanning the board of Po with a squinted gaze.

"I mean, it's just you and what was it, three ghosts?" she said and Theo nodded reassuringly to her. He had made his move and thus was now aware of what was Lerne was saying. "You've been lost at sea for fifteen years. Don't you find it, taxing? I mean, isn't there a home you'd like to be back

to? At some point?"

"Ah. I've made the sea my wife and mistress; the ship is my home, and the bottom will be my grave if all goes well," the captain said nodding. "Sometimes though, I do wake up and see what's for breakfast and I wish I were dead, yes. But then I'm reminded I might end up as ghost crew in a ghost ship and I just know the kind of heartless bastards that run those ships," he said and gave the main mast an angry, crazed stare. "That brings me back to my senses," he said and took a swig from his pipe before moving a pawn shaped like an extravagantly built windmill to a blue tile.

"Interesting," said Theo and reshuffled himself in his seat. He was rather more quiet than his usual self. He hadn't raised many questions since he had woken up, and he had made no mention of Tejewel, the bear involved in whatever that thing they blew up in Tallyflop was. Theo must've thought him a real friend indeed, judging by the way he so easily and quite impressively killed the Ygg as if they were nothing more than monsters. It had certainly had some effect on him; he suddenly appeared grim and boring, all grown-up. Even the game they had been playing seemed utterly drab.

"What is interesting exactly? I haven't heard of this game before. All I see is a mosaic of tiles on an irregularly shaped board, and lots of different pieces made out of practically anything solid. Not to mention you've been playing for four hours straight," Lerne said and sat up straight in the utilitarian stool. She produced a comb out of a small vest pocket, and began combing her hair. Apart from not doing much to rectify the sad affair that her hair had been reduced to, the combing had the deleterious effect of grains of sand falling onto the gameboard with a rasping, clattering sound.

"Could you do that someplace else?" Theo said while

the captain extended a hand blindly to receive his flying, re-filled glass of the cocktail he was drinking, complete with a tiny umbrella and everything, up to and including a slice of pineapple. Lernea looked at Theo and noticed his stare wasn't the usual bland-eyed stare he seemed to confront the world at large with; it had a purpose and a hint of ire this time. She stopped combing her hair and apologised, though she hadn't expected anyone to notice.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realise a little sand was that much of a problem."

"This is a game of Po. Sand is definitely a real problem."

"What's so special about this game?"

"Everything!" the captain roared, and Theo nodded, intently fixed on the gameboard.

"It is just a game, isn't it?"

"You do realize games are simulations, don't you?" the captain said, and the dead stuffed parrot hanging onto his shoulder seemed to nod the way the old pirate made a vibrant gesture with his hands, roughly shaping up a sphere in the air.

"I thought games were supposed to be fun," Lernea said and noticed Bo was looking at the pirate intently, ears standing tall and upright like antennae. Though she remained silent, Lernea felt she was ready to absorb everything the captain was saying. Theo, on the other hand, was looking at the gameboard with a heavy frown, too absorbed in planning his strategy.

"They have to be fun, so people will want to play them. Do keep in mind, people's idea of fun differs greatly. For instance, Mr. Gunadeer, my navigator, while he was still alive, thought it'd be fun to throw away all the navigating equipment."

Lernea nodded with a frown, while the captain let the

barbed comment sink in. After seemingly observing a moment of silence, the captain spoke again:

“We’re not having that discussion, again, Mr. Gunadeer,” he said flatly and drew on the pipe. “You see, Ms. Testarossa, fun and games can be quite productive past-times. The risk-taking, the strategy involved, the planning, the logistics of the thing, your opponent and his idea of you, your idea of him..” he said and straightened the dead parrot on his shoulder. “If that’s detailed enough, it’s like war and all that fighting that goes on and on everywhere. But if you play it out first, in something as innocuous looking as this little board of Po, it might show you an advantageous situation, a way out of trouble or a way in. A winning strategy, or the cost of defeat. It’s more of a tool, Po. It has the added benefit it’s pretty hard to injure yourself. Unlike swordfighting.”

“So in essence, it’s like Zatrik,” Lerneia said nodding. Both the captain and Theo were instantly adamant in their rebuttal.

“It’s nothing like Zatrik!” they said in one voice and glowered at her for a moment.

“No need to get excited. I’ll take your word for it,” Lerneia said and noticed Bo was nowhere to be seen. Which was quite unsettling knowing she could flame her eyes up in a split second and start fireballing everything for no apparent reason. Adding her latest streak of paranoia did not help either. “Theo, have you seen the bunny?”

“What?”

“Bo, the bunny. The white magical bunny?”

“No. But she must be aboard the ship. I can sense her aura.”

“It’s good to know you’re keeping tabs,” Lerneia said and went off to find Bo. Perhaps she just wanted to converse

with Lernea in a slightly more secluded spot - the ship offered plenty of those.

"I'm not doing that; I'm playing Po," he said long after Lernea had left the table. Stringing words together rather than someone talking, his eyebrows raised in a wide arch, the captain asked Theo.

"Whose turn is it?"

"Turn? I thought we were playing real-time."

"If we'd been playing real-time, this would've been over in a few minutes."

"Then why haven't you overrun me already?"

"I'm too drunk to play real-time Po in real time. So I take turns with myself, in-between drinks, mostly."

"You do not sound inebriated."

"No, I don't slur. But I'm so drunk right now, I couldn't put my finger to my nose without losing an eye."

"Why would you want to put your finger to your nose?"

"Why should I know? I'm drunk, remember?"

"That sounds more like an excuse, actually."

"Well even if it is, I don't care, because.. I'm drunk! It's a beaut, isn't it?"

"Land ho!" came a shout suddenly. It was Lernea and she sounded positively enthused.

"What? That's impossible!" the captain said with an unnervingly confused, drunken grin, spilling a good portion of his drink onto the deck.

"I don't think it is," Theo said and looked around him, the tiny umbrella still stuck in his dreadlocks. The fog was clearing up; the first purely golden rays of sun shafted through from above. It was as if someone had delineated an invisible line on some grandiose map, where one side was all grey and bland and the other side was shiny, green and sported cute

depictions of butterflies and cupids. It looked like the ship had just passed it and emerged on the fancy, nice side of the map.

“So, it worked,” Bo sent to Lernea mind happily. She was standing precariously on the ship’s prow, like a living figure-head, eyes slightly glowing orange, not unlike tiny beacons.

“What did you do?” Lernea said with a wide appreciative smile.

“Not much, really,” Bo sent to Lernea’s mind with a sigh. It seemed like the perfect answer to Lernea for a moment; her mind was indeed elsewhere.

Her gaze wandered up and down the coastline that unfurled itself graciously. The sun was almost noon-high, shining with all its might. Its warmth was a pleasant contrast to the icy fresh breeze; they were still somewhere cold but at least there was warmth to be found in the daylight. At the farthest reaches, Lernea could still make out large rocky cliffs and islets. A spatter of snow and ice hugged their tops. But the way the ship was pointed, they were sailing straight for a small bay, surround by golden and brown thickets. In the distance beyond, a hilly terrain formed, slightly sloping into the grey phantom vision of a mountain ridge. What was more telling, she could see thin columns of smoke rising up from the bay.

“Look! Civilization! Village people! We’re saved!” Lernea exclaimed with a beaming smile, managing to not throw up her arms in the air in a childish fashion at the last instant. “What did you do?” she said and helped up Bo like one would a furry trophy or a lovable pet. She restrained herself from squeezing in a damaging way.

“Nothing out of the ordinary. I just unlocked the rudder,” Bo sent to her mind. It felt like she was mildly confused.

“By using magic?”

“No, with my paw,” Bo sent and as if to illustrate the point, nudged Lernea with a paw in a cat-like manner.

“That’s all it took?”

“Pretty much,” she sent and her bunny eyes blinked in a sort of animal way.

“So we were going in circles all this time?”

“From what I can gather,” Bo sent and Lernea put the bunny down on the deck again. She put a finger to her lips and raised an eyebrow. It was a deeply concerned expression, the one usually associated with decisions that put men at the gallows and young women condemned to unhappy wedlocks.

“That would mean it was either done on purpose or this man hasn’t been near a ship before.”

“That’s a fair assesment,” Bo sent and felt uneasy. It was either the feeling of hungering for some fresh lemon-grass or the wary look on Lernea’s face.

“It means.. You were right all along,” Lernea whispered so as not to be overheard.

“About what?” Bo sent, scurrying around, sniffing the air which was filled with the currents of a salty breeze and completely lacked the pleasant brusqueness and faint bitterness of lemon.

“You were to distrust this man,” Lernea said in a hushed voice, leaning towards the bunny, nodding slightly over her shoulder. “We’re in terrible danger,” she hissed and her hands slowly began reaching for her bow and arrow.

“We are? Why?” Bo sent, looking up to Lernea uncan-nily.

“Because, he’s lied to us.”

“But, we’re clearly of the fog. We’re heading for a harbor. It looks safe enough now,” Bo sent. The bunny made

a grumbling, slightly disquieting stomach noise; Bo's hunger was now audible.

"It could be a trap. There could be armed men waiting for us. Or assassins might have a go at us while we least expect it. I'm not waiting around for that to happen," Lerneia mumbled under her breath, the lines on her face taut with determination.

"Right now?" Bo asked with a gleamy haze in the bunny's eyes. One of the bunny ears dripped suddenly.

"In our sleep. Murderous, cantankerous bastard that he is, he'll slit our throats and leave our blood to dry on his deck before skinning us alive, parading us like animals to his alien masters," she said and turned around to face the pair of Theo and the captain, still engrossed in their game of Po. Her face was darker somehow, seething with a devout sense of anger, liable to explode any moment.

"Oh, there's that, I guess," Bo sent, before realising the import of Lerneia's words. "We're in terrible danger!" she sent to Lerneia and Theo, but her brother barely acknowledged the message, rolling his eyes for a moment and sparing a glimpse at the sky, as if he half-expected death from above. The next instant he shrugged and went back to the board of Po.

"Reveal thyself for what you truly are, you whitened sepulcher of a man!" Lerneia shouted with an arrow strung in her bow, ready to fly. It was squarely aimed at the captain, who turned to face her with a blank stare.

"But it's me, Theo! That's my natural hair color!" Theo proclaimed, showing his silver-white dreadlocks with a confused, consternated smile.

"Not you, by Svarena's calling! Him!" Lerneia nodded and slightly rocked her bow.

"The ghost?" Theo asked with a furrowed brow and

pointed with his left thumb to thin air next to him. Lernea closed her eyes for the barest moment and allowed herself a sigh of frustration.

“Him! The captain!” Lernea yelled and purposefully took a few steps toward the two of them. “Stand still! Do or say nothing! Explain yourself! Why was the helm locked into a turn?” she yelled and Bo’s eyes flared up. Bo made a slow, rumbling noise; it was her stomach, dying for some grub, literally.

“I never was partial to maritime affairs, that’s true. But these are hard times,” the pirate captain said with some weariness in his voice. He stood up and looked Lernea in the eye, before averting his gaze and bowing ever so slightly.

“I said, don’t say anything! Your beguiling charms and spells have been swept away! Explain yourself!” she demanded authoritatively once more, without really taking into account it was impossible for most people to speak without uttering audible words. She was a bit nervous, it seemed.

“I don’t think he can explain himself without talking,” Theo said and nodded reassuringly, mostly to himself. Lernea squinted a bit, and seemed to give the notion some thought. The captain remained still; she could discern the early signs of a grin forming on the old man’s mouth. Bo’s eyes had the touch of a flame about them, ready to sparkle up to fire-spraying level at the flick of an eyelid.

“Forgive me, Mistress Lernea, but I do prefer to speak. Words can have a taste of their own, don’t you agree?”

“Keep still. Frozen like a statue would be preferable,” Lernea said and nodded. “Speak, and make it worthwhile lest I sent down oblivion’s path.”

“No Skrala to welcome me to the heavenly abode? No Svarna to guide my soul to the Eternal Light?”

“You tempt me, malfeator. Speak not of my Godly Forefathers with your foul, perfidious mouth,” Lerneia said and her voice sizzled. A tense moment passed, everyone silent except Bo whose grumbling stomach defiantly asked for sustenance. “How did you know I pay my respects to the Holy Mountain?” Lerneia asked the man with a raised eyebrow, the bow in her hands unwaveringly taut and aimed at the captain’s forehead.

“Let me ask you: Why does the eagle soar higher than the peaks?” the captain asked as well. Lerneia was taken by surprise; she blinked rapidly and nearly lost her focus; her breathing became shallow. “That’s a question, isn’t it? How can anyone answer a question with another question?” Theo asked himself. Bo’s eyes flicked back and forth between the captain and Lerneia.

“Because of the clouds. Why does the turtle hide in its shell?” Lerneia asked with a wavering voice.

“Because it is soft and squishy in the eyes of an eagle,” came a confident, smiling reply from the captain.

“It can’t be.. Master Sisypus! You’re alive!” Lerneia yelled with relief and dropped her bow and arrow on the deck before she ran with open arms to meet the embrace of the old captain whose face was slowly changing to that of another, even older man.

“I take it that is someone important, isn’t it?” Theo asked and received no answer, other than Bo’s growling stomach.

The walls of the Marvellously Rotund and Equivocally Reassuring Grandiose Official Hall of Endearment were basically rotund and ostensible too large for the common eye to perceive. Yet it was simply one of many similar halls if not in name certainly in capacity dotted around the Naval

Intelligence Bureau building in Rampatur City, itself one of many government buildings of varied shape and uniformly huge size to be found in the very center of the city. From the outside, the Naval Intelligence building looked like an even, totally opaque block from which a huge flag of the Human League was unfurled, drooping over the north face, above the diminutive revolving door entrance. It was identical to any other government building and noone in Rampatur seemed to pay it the least amount of notice, even if everything it shadowed was made cooler. As in, the temperature dropped because of the huge shadow.

The hall boasted some soft lighting in the form of a couple of unseen spotlights; Ned, Tark, Judith and Parcifal were standing under guard. Four men in full body armor, boasting elaborately ornate halberds that sported some sort of exotic machinery on them were keeping an eye on all of them. The ridiculously coloured suit came with a number of silly-looking hats being worn one on top of another, as well as any number of a variety of feathers adorning them. There were also a number of medals and bones hanging from the guards' breastplate armor. If anything at all, they looked like some sort of very state-of-the-art laughable jokers armed with nonetheless sharp instruments of bleeding death.

Parcifal stood emotionless, with a cold, calculating gaze. Ned was wary; he felt the whole situation was akin to a very tight balancing rope act, without a safety net, and razor sharp spikes on either side of the terminal drop. Tark was looking smug and confident in a very stylish, simple yet exotic suit of black cloth with matching smart pants and soft, spongy shoulder pads that made him look pretty suave. Judith was weary, fidgeting in her tight leather suit.

In front of them, at what was probably judged to be a

safe but not too impractical distance sat the Impromptu Intelligent Committee on Matters of Intelligence Missions Gathering Intelligence and Whatnot. There was even a wooden sign carved with those exact words sitting on a bleak, wooden desk where the members of the Committee rested their crossed hands. They were all dressed in non-descript white robes. Only the older man among them wore a fine-wrought silver chain around his neck from where a small curio hang. Their desk was filled with all manner of scrolls, maps, and papers which were being scrutinised. The sound of shuffling papers reverberated accross the gigantic empty space of the hall which appeared to have, oddly enough, excellent acoustics.

“They’re a bland-looking lot, I have to say,” Ned whispered to Tark, careful not to appear to do so. Unfortunately, the aforementioned acoustics betrayed him.

“There will be order! Will the familiar alien, citizen status provisional, by the name of..” said one particularly high-browed member of the committee and paused for a moment. “.. Ned Larkin, was it?” he asked himself, shuffling through a stack of papers expertly, his voice high-pitched and uncomfortably nasal. “..Remain silent?” he concluded and looked up to Ned with an indifference bordering on contempt.

“You will be found in contempt if you keep this up,” said another member of the committee, his voice gruff and bellicose. He cleared his throat and a third member, a woman with a saggy, old leathery face added with a snobbish, accentuating falsetto:

“You should know that this is highly irregular.” A woman sitting next to the old woman, rather younger and firm of face said in what appeared to be a gentle voice in comparison:

“Please, Mr. Larkin, be patient. Your matter is... Strange, to say the least.”

“Indubitably so!” said the old man who had asked Ned to shut up. “You will be found in contempt if you keep this up” said the man with the gruff voice and the old woman added in what almost sounded impossibly very much so like a chirp, “A highly irregular matter indeed!”

Tark turned to look at Ned with a smug grin and rolled his eyes, nodding ever so slightly in a comforting manner. Ned simply remained silent; he looked at Judith who appeared deadily bored and tired of the proceedings, even though they hadn’t officially started. Parcival stared back at Ned and he could see only see the kind of look that meant it was all his fault to begin with.

“The Impromptu Intelligent Committee on Matters of Intelligence Missions Gathering Intelligence and Whatnot is now in session!” said the older man with a voice infused with authority. “Mr. Maroon will now make his opening statement,” he said and nodded to his colleague, sitting to his left.

“Thank you, Mr. Prussian Blue,” said the man, shuffling a bunch of papers before clearing his throat. It was the man with the gruff voice.

“Insofar as it has been deduced from the preliminary report of field agent codenamed See-see-do..”

“That’s a sharp ‘C’, Mr. Maroon,” interrupted the old woman, her eyes firmly fixed on Tark with a cold stare.

“Right. Indeed it is so, Mrs. Razzmatazz. According to the data perturbations collected after a summary final exposition to the unary tentative bifurcation matrix, it is our analysis that the mission, codenamed Shining Ogre, was a marginal failure.”

“Ludicrous!” Tark said erupting in a fit of laughter that seemed quite inappropriate. Judging by the lack of smiles from the committee, they did not seem to share his opinion.

“The Office of Naval Intelligence had set out specific tasks for operation Shining Ogre, agent. Though according to the Mary Righteous autothaumagator, a great deal of hostile combatants perished and a significant blow was dealt to the infrastructure of the foreign party involved, one cannot simply do away with the fact that the main objectives for this mission were not met. As such, your standing here before this committee has been deemed necessary to explain yourself more fully as to the nature of the difficulties and circumstances that prevented you and your associate to complete your mission to the letter,” said the man identified as Mr. Maroon and cleared his throat, the loud noise amplified by the hall’s acoustics.

“Indeed,” added Mrs. Razzmatazz coldly.

“If I’ve learned anything in all my years of service in the Human League, is that field agents somehow always choose the most reckless course of action and consequences be damned. I would not find it at all strange if your explanation includes these two alien humans in one or another. I’m also willing to bet a large sum of timeshares that somehow you will try to impress upon the members of this committee that you were acting in accordance to your oaths, for the betterment and guaranteed safety of the citizens of the Human League.”

“Hear, hear!” intoned Mr. Maroon and Mr. Prussian Blue continued: “While I’m willing to recognize as do my fellow colleagues if our previous meetings are to be of any measure that you have indeed offered a great number of valuable services to the Bureau of Naval Intelligence and the Human League in general, that fact alone does not constitute presupposition for a lenient eye in the evaluation of this case.”

“Indeed, it is not,” said Mrs. Razzmatazz with a voice trailing with venom. Tark seemed largely unperturbed by

what the committee at large was implying. He had the look of someone who had heard similar things in the past once too many and was largely bored, though he did try to look humbled and civil about everything. Ned on the other hand had a giant frown, and though he felt like no expert in lawyer lingo, the whole thing looked suspiciously like a trial and it looked like before anything was even going to be mentioned about him and Parcifal, Tark was in deep trouble.

"If I may," Ned ventured hesitantly and was instantly overruled by Mr. Prussian Blue.

"You may not address this committee unless spoken to, Ned Larkin. Failure to comply will result in finding you in contempt, with all due legal penalties applied instantly."

"You will be found in contempt if you keep this up," Mr. Maroon repeated, nodding profusely and Ned resorted to silence once more.

"Indeed, you will," Mrs. Razzmatazz said and shot Ned a look that felt like steel needles piercing his eyes. He felt he had to avert his eyes; it was uncanny.

"Mr. Prussian Blue, may we proceed and let the agent speak?"

"Indeed we shall, Ms. Rose. You may begin," the old man said and motioned Tark to speak.

"What do you want me to say?" Tark said and sighed, looking rather non-chalant and cool about everything. Judith was looking at Tark expectantly, while Parcifal had locked gazes with Mrs. Razzmatazz.

"Why hasn't the thaumaturgic containment device mentioned in your report retrieved?"

"Because it probably blew up."

"I see. Why wasn't the aetheric crystal formation retrieved for analysis?"

“Because it probably blew up as well.”

“I see. Why are there an additional eight hundred and ninety-seven timeshares accrued in your expenses account?”

“It’s what expense accounts do. They accrue expenses, it’s what they’re there for.”

“I see. Why did you let those human aliens interfere with carrying out your mission?”

“If I may, we’re hardly aliens. I mean, we’re not monsters or anything,” Ned said with a lacklustre smile intended to look friendly. Instead it looked jarred, disjointed and out of place with the rest of his face. It wasn’t that he was scared of them or that they looked intimidating; it was their officiousness that made Ned comfortable. Their stuck-up body pose and their intentionally obfuscated language, that was the problem for Ned. Parcifal, on the other hand, seemed to have no problem whatsoever; she looked grim and determined to take on anyone who would try and force something beyond her will.

“That’s it, you’re found to be in contempt of this committee! Mrs. Razzmatazz, please take note that Ned Larkin has been found to be under contempt. The fine is two hundred timeshares, irrespective.”

“Duly noted, Mr. Maroon,” said the old woman icily and made a scribble on a piece of paper without bothering to take her eyes off Parcifal.

“Ned is a bit mixed up about the word ‘alien’. He’s never been to a Human League world before. He doesn’t know. Neither does Lady Teletha, for that matter,” Judith interjected on her own, trying to sound appeasing. Tark shot her a disapproving look and the committee would still have none of that.

“Ignorance in the face of the law cannot be supported in

any case, assistant agent.”

“Neither can malfeasance a priori, your lordship,” Tark commented.

“We are settling matters a posteriori, agent CiCiDo!” exclaimed Mr. Prussian Blue while Tark scoffed “Could we drop the silly codenames?”

“Wait, wait. Did he say posterior?” Ned asked, feeling a bit shocked.

“A posteriori, Mr. Larkin. After the facts,” said the younger woman identified as Ms. Rose. She sounded rather nice and civil, in contrast to her colleagues.

“Ms. Rose, you may not address the alien as a ‘mister’. You will be found in contempt as well,” blabbed Mr. Maroon.

“This isn’t a tribunal, Lord Trixiparson. You have no sway on me. I suggest we move on to the heart of the issue in hand,” replied Ms. Rose. A couple of gasps echoed in the large hall.

“I thought this was a hearing,” Ned said eying Tark suspiciously. “Isn’t this a hearing?” he repeated to the members of the Committee.

“Will the alien please be advised to remain silent until further notice?” said the old man, Mr. Prussian Blue, while Mr. Maroon added, “The fine has been doubled to four hundred timeshares. And you Ms. Rose! Using proper names! Unheard of!”

“I find this whole debacle rather antiquated and needless. There are real issues at hand and we’re being obsessive with etiquette!” she retorted.

“Consider what would happen to the Human League if etiquette was to be disregarded as merely going through the motions!” exclaimed Lord Trixiparson and Mrs. Razzmatazz

added flatly, "Indeed. Consider that."

"We're wasting valuable time. Lord Kennelsey, please. If you must, consider this a special, extreme case."

"We definitely are special. I mean, wait till you meet the rest," Ned said and laughed a bit on his own. "It was a joke," he added with a shrug of his shoulders and Tark advised him with a whisper:

"They're dry humourless husks. They're hardly real people," he said and Lord Kennelsey addressed Lord Trixiparson without the least bit of emotion in his voice:

"Please note agent Cicido has been found in contempt."

"Damn acoustics! The name is Augustus! Augustus Tark!"

"Add a five hundred timeshare fine for violation of the Currathers Apocrypha and Alimentary Act to Mr. Tark," Lord Kennelsey said calmly while Lord Trixiparson nodded profusely, the pen in his hand flying.

"You can put it in my expenses tab," Tark said with a grin. Lord Kennelsey pointed a very calm finger vaguely in Tark's direction. His inflection and the slight bump in his voice were very telling; he was actually stark raving mad even though he did a fine good job at appearing relatively disinterested in the whole affair.

"Now listen old chap. You've wasted hundreds of thousands of Bureau timeshares, gallivanting accross the galaxy with dubious results and a smug attitude against real and proper authority. Your missions always end up in some kind of blunder or shameless explosion. You're hardly making inroads as it is in what has been deemed to be the biggest threat to Human League sovereignty since the Bourne-Again Shell incident. And you have the audacity, rather, the gall, to make light-hearted attempt at humor at the expense of this Commit-

tee?” he said with a deadpan, flat voice.

“No really, just put it in my expenses tab,” Tark insisted and Lord Kennelsey’s eyelids flickered in aggravation. He even cocked his head sideways.

“This is highly irregular, even for a field agent!” Lord Trixiparson yelled, his red hot temper showing in the stuck-up veins on his neck.

“Indeed it is,” said Mrs. Razzmatazz who was now smiling at Parcifal surreptitiously.

“Please gentlemen, the enemy is out there!” shouted Ms. Rose and pointed a finger in a vague outwards direction. The guards sprang into action with a loud assortment of clattering sounds, aiming their halberds at a phantom target.

“I was being figurative!” yelled Ms. Rose and buried her face in her palms.

“Guard! Stand at attention!” yelled Lord Trixiparson with practiced familiarity and the guards assumed their previous, mute position with a machine-like speed and precision.

“Can they play dead as well?” Ned said with a bright smile. Lord Trixiparson looked at him through a half-open eye.

“What are you now, a comedian?” asked Lord Kennelsey without the least bit of sarcasm.

“Actually, he is, but rather bad at it,” Tark said out of turn. Ned looked at him with a furrowed brow full of hurt.

“Now that’s just too harsh a critique,” he said shaking his head in disappointment, before turning to face the committee. “Listen to this: A dwarf, an elf and twelve monkeys go into a barber’s shop..”

“By Skrala you will hear me now!” Parcifal shouted on the top of her lungs, demanding everyone’s attention. The echo of her cry had not died down when she spoke again, all

the eyes and especially those of Mrs. Razzmatazz for some peculiar reason firmly fixed on her.

“I am Parcifal Teletha, scion of the Teletha House, Princess Regent and Captain of the Gardens of Kingdom of Nomos. I am human by birthright and noble by way of my standing among the men and women of my kingdom. I believe in goodness and fairness in all things, and I find you lacking. My sister is missing and she has perhaps passed on.”

“Now, this is highly irregular”

“I am not finished, you overrated teller,” Parcifal said and gasps filled the hall, yet everyone seemed too shocked to so much as cough up an answer, especially Ned.

“The horrible Ygg are a scourge and a menace to free beings everyone, and perhaps their machinations have already claimed hundreds of woodkin, two dear friends and my loving sister. I was witness to the power they beheld, and I know first-hand their death-defying commitment to whatever sick and twisted cause they serve. They’re dangerous fanatics that need to be put down. And here you are, safe and sound, a million miles away, bickering about form, without substance. I find you repulsive and weak.”

The committee fell into a shocked silence, gasping without a sound at Parcifal’s brusque calling out.

“That’s a fair assessment,” Tark said filling in the awkward silence.

“You speak a fair truth, Lady Parcifal. I wish I could have been so straightforward to begin with. It is always good to be reminded of one’s fallacies and wrongs,” said Ms. Rose and raised herself before she gave Parcifal a curt nod and a slight bow.

“Preposterous!” cried Lord Trixiparson and Mrs. Razzmatazz added with flaring nostrils, “Indeed!”

“Bowling to an alien, Ms. Rose! I would have never -” said Lord Kennelsey before being interrupted stiffly by Ms. Rose.

“These aliens you speak of lent the Human League an invaluable hand in precarious times. Instead of being so detached and uppity about this debacle we should seize the opportunity and make them honorable allies in pursuit of common goals.”

“Allies?” asked Mr. Trixiparson with a deeply furrowed brow, as if he had never heard the word before. The same kind of confused wonder was in Lord Kennelsey’s voice as well. “Goals?” he said and waved a pondering hand.

“Weak vocabulary?” Ned said out of turn and everyone afforded him a disapproving glance. The humor was if not that bad, of an entirely bad timing.

“I’m willing to forego the insult to my person and my entourage if you’re willing to aid us in our quest,” Parcifal said sternly but not unkindly to Ms. Rose, who replied without hesitation and a curt nod:

“I hope our aid will be forthcoming and beneficial to both parties. May it be fruitful,” she said and Parcifal nodded and bowed in kind.

“Entourage? Now we’re her entourage?” Ned asked pointing a finger at Parcifal while Judith suggested, “Let her handle this, Ned. She seems to be swinging this your way.”

“What about my way?” Tark demanded with a somewhat hurt voice. Lord Trixiparson’s voice boomed:

“There will be order!”

“There has been too much of that lately, I’m afraid. The Ygg don’t play a fair, orderly game, Lord Trixiparson.”

“There was a point in appointing this committee, which through your frantic disregard for etiquette and proper secu-

rity guidelines has turned this prestigious intelligence committee into a facade!”

Lord Kennelsey had exploded; he was acting quite out of character, seething with anger, a flush red color taking over his leathery old face.

“Ah, nuts! Hell, she’s right,” shouted Tark and pointed a finger at Ms. Rose. Ned didn’t like the way the old man Lord Kennelsey seemed to be taking everything.

“This is most irregular,” repeated Lord Trixiparson, looking severely heart-stricken while Mrs. Razzmatazz averted her gaze away from Parcifal and in a dramatic fashion stared outwards, as if terribly disappointed at everyone, and especially Parcifal.

“Indeed. I motion for all charges to be dropped and these people to be given citizen status, provisional, as well as a special dispensation as Naval Intelligence contracted personnel, for an unknown amount of time to be extended or made permanent by a Tactical Hearing of the Intelligence Bureau, a Lord Superior’s Constabulary Notice or a Lord Privy’s Ruling,” Ms. Rose announced to everyone in an officious tone that indicated she meant every word.

“Lord Privy? Seriously? As in, a john?” Ned asked and Tark thought about it before answering with a nod, “Well, not exactly but you’re quite close. Funny, isn’t it?”

“I knew you were just being the hard audience type,” replied Ned with a casual, borderline smug attitude while Tark suggested with a wave of his hand, “I was talking about this committee thing, actually.”

“There will be order on the floor!” shouted Lord Trixiparson, the words reverberating accross the hall with a stentorian quality. Lord Kennelsey seemed to be frozen for a few moments, hardly breathing. He contained himself and against

his feelings on the matter, obliged to due process.

“Lady Govida has put forth a motion,” said Lord Kennelsey with a clear, loud voice. “This committee is now hereby officially dissolved,” he said with a feeling of disappointed guilt creeping in his voice.

“Dissolved?” asked Lord Trixiparson in disbelief, his eyes searching for Lord Kennelsey’s eyes in vain. The old lady known only as Mrs. Razzmatazz nodded, took a lost look at Parcifal and sighed before getting up and taking her leave. “Indeed, what a shame,” she said with disdain.

“What? This is it? No vote, no decision-making, no time-squandering? No never-ending debates and what not?” Ned asked, and looking around he saw Parcifal was looking just as befuddled, even though one couldn’t easily tell from just her furrowed brow and sharp gaze. Tark and Judith on the other hand seemed quite lacking in surprise, as if the sudden helpful outcome was no surprise to them.

“This isn’t politics,” Tark said and walked over to where Lady Govida stood. Lord Kennelsey and Lord Trixiparson took their leave as well, their faces shadowed in a grim look of defeat and irritation. Lord Kennelsey wouldn’t take his eyes off Lord Govida his gaze rather unbecoming in a revengeful way and Lord Trixiparson pointed a finger at Ned and told him sternly:

“You’re still paying up those timeshares.” Lord Kennelsey told Lady Govida with a raspy voice that was as if another, broken, hateful man had suddenly taken his place:

“This will not stand. I have friends in higher places than yours, Madame Chancellor.”

“You don’t strike me as the social type, Lord Kennelsey.”

“I’ve been playing this game a lot longer than you think, Madame Chancellor.”

“It’s not a game, really, Lord Kennelsey.”

“But there will be a loser.”

“The place is yours for the taking.”

“Oh, trash talking each other, aren’t we?” Tark interjected putting himself between the line view of Lord Kennelsey and Lady Govida. The old man had to move his head slightly, trying to keep eye contact. Tark would shadow his motions, not very much unlike a prankish juvenile would.

“Field agents! Bah! There’ll come a day your ilk will be the laughing stock of the intelligence world,” he said pointing an exasperated finger at both Tark and Lady Govida, before turning about and leaving briskly.

“Would want to upstage your kind too soon, old chap,” Tark retorted smiling to Lord Kennelsey’s back. Pretty soon, the other members of the committee had faded away in the deep, encrusting shadows of the hall.

“Now that was a nice comeback line, Tark,” Ned said. Tark grinned and replied, “I know. It’s actually older than him,” he said and clicked a phantom trigger in the direction of Lord Kennelsey in a playful, childish fashion.

“Oh, Augustus, I missed that flippant manner.. Those boyish charming looks,” Lady Govida said with a sigh and a blinding smile, her chest heaving up and down with every breath. She and Tark exchanged a fleeting look of discovery, before engaging in a passionate kiss, hands twirling through each other’s hair, their bodies colliding almost awkwardly.

“Wow. That’s pretty slick,” Ned whispered to himself mostly, genuinely impressed and a bit jealous. Judith cleared her throat beside him.

“You seem impressed,” she said and Parcifal added with a slight snort, “He’s an impressionable young lad. Aren’t you, Ned?” she said raising a brow.

“Well, it’s rather smooth turning the tables like that. I mean, we’re off whatever hook we might’ve ended up on. That was some level-headed diplomacy, right there, Parcifal.”

“You’re good at changing the subject, I’ll give you that. And that wasn’t diplomacy. That was the bare truth.”

“Which is a pretty uncertain, quite intangible notion, be mindful of that,” Lady Godiva said, still wallowing in Tark’s arms like a woman madly in love.

“I’m aware of that, my Lady. I sincerely hope that your interference is rightly justified, and not simply part of an elaborate show, or just a favor to a loved one.”

“Oh, never mind about Auggie, we can keep it professional when we need to. Can’t we Auggie?” she said and looked at Tark with a sweetly intoxicating gaze. He simply nodded, as if mesmerized.

“Auggie?” Ned asked in a whisper, to which Judith simply sighed and shrugged. She shook her head and tried to say something, but she was at a loss for words.

“Right, then,” Lady Govida said and pushed Tark away gently with one hand. “No, I meant every word. I think this is a great opportunity to uncover ways to strike at the heart of the Ygg and end that threat before it grows beyond containment into a full-scale war,” she said in a professional, dry manner.

“Ah, she’s so.. Ebullient, isn’t she?” Tark said with a gleam around his eyes and a smile that betrayed his emotions for Lady Govida easily.

“You two are an item, then?” Ned asked and Tark nodded thoroughly, “Oh, we go back. We do.”

“Mr. Tark, please. Focus,” Lady Govida told him sternly. “I love it when she bosses me around,” Tark whispered and Ned furrowed his brow, the picture of Tark as the hard-

boiled intelligence operative in his mind slowly turning into a dreamy, soft-spoken, love-stricken fool. Something which Ned disapproved of, at least in principle. But there were much more serious talk going on.

“We need the approval of the House of Commons, as well as a sponsor in the Lord Privy’s Office before we get anything serious done,” Lady Govida said.

“Excuse me, is that a real thing?” Ned asked with a bit of hesitation. “What, the Lord Privy’s Office?” she queried.

“Does that have anything at all to do with an outhouse or something similar?”

“In a manner of speaking that would be true, but not specifically so. It’s politics, basically.”

“Time is of the essence here. We need to find my sister, Lady Govida,” Parcifal asked with a gentle, almost pleading tone.

“As well as the magical bunny and the elf, I’m sure. They seem to be in possession of information that could prove pivotal,” Tark added.

“What of the woodkin?” Judith interjected and Tark replied brusquely. “That is an entirely different matter.”

“You’re saying they’re not important, it’s what you’re saying,” Ned said with a sudden fluster.

“I’m only saying it’s a different thing. What matters, is the crystal,” Tark said, emphasizing his last phrase.

“You say that crystal was in the possession of the elf, originally?” Lady Govida said with a thoughtful look on her face.

“His name is Theo. Well, Hanultheofodor, but we call him Theo. What’s so important about that crystal anyway?”

“The Ygg were drooling over it. They said it could have advanced their designs by decades. Good thing it’s probably blown up in that catastrophe.”

“Designs like that crystal mechanism in Tallyflop?” Lady Govida said and Tark nodded. “What was your assesment of that thing?” she asked him.

“Well it was huge, and made mostly of crystal. It was built with something bad in mind, that’s for sure,” Tark replied. Ned commented with evident sarcasm, “That’s really insightful,” his head bobbing up and down slightly. “Thank you,” Tark replied, the sarcasm lost on him.

“That wasn’t the only one; we’re getting similar reports from other places,” said Lady Govida with a wary expression. She addressed Parcifal:

“Lady Teletha, I take it you are a noblewoman from the Kingdom of Nomos.”

“Princess Regent in exile,” she corrected her.

“I stand corrected. That sounds awfully convenient. We just received word from Laertia; your homeplanet in fact, that is. The Ygg are building one of those crystal machines right there.”

“Where, exactly?” Ned asked while Parcifal shook her head, not wanting to believe what she was hearing.

“Nomos, I’m afraid. That’s up north, isn’t it?” Lady Govida said, turning to point at Ned who in turn nodded affirmatively.

“How is that possible? This has to take precedence over everything. I will not see my people enslaved by these monsters!” Parcifal said angrily, real emotion pouring out from her voice.

“Calm down now, Lady Teletha. You’re not mistaken; in the morning, we’ll have to secure the funding and means for a full-scale assault on the Ygg at Laertia,” Lady Govida said flatly, before adding with a weighty measure of confidence, “We need to show them our hand; make them understand we

do not take ill behaviours lightly.”

“What if you show your hand too early? I’m no expert at cards, but I’ve seen many a folk lose every piece of coin on them when they least expected to.”

“There’s always a risk involved, Mr. Larkin. Isn’t that right, Tark,” Lady Govida said with a mesmerizing stare.

“Right,” Tark said nodding with a stupid grin on his face.

“I approve of this course of action, but every minute spent talking instead of acting could prove disastrous!” Parcifal urged.

“My dear Lady Teletha, I assure you, this thing is unraveling with lightning speed for Human League standards. Could you put some trust into my efforts?”

“I do not believe there is much of a choice there, Lady Govida,” Ned said out of turn and Parcifal nodded.

“A perceptive young man. Judith, will you be able to accommodate Mr. Larkin and Lady Teletha as guests?” Lady Govida said before bowing to both Ned and Parcifal.

“Certainly, Lady Govida,” Judith said following a curt nod. “If you’ll excuse us,” Lady Govida said and beckoned to Tark with a surreptitious finger, her oddly lithe and supple figure for a woman of her age and authority gracefully hidden under her robes.

“Should I use the expenses account?” Judith asked Tark, to which he replied:

“By all means, go crazy!”

“Well, that’s actually a good idea. With all the stress, and the weariness. We should take advantage of this. Tark certainly will be,” Ned offered. Parcifal shook her head.

“Are you proposing we engage in festivities at this hour? It certainly is frivolous. I wouldn’t expect more, to be frank.”

“I’m not frivolous. I’m only suggesting there’s nothing better to do than wind down a bit. Plus, we’ve got a dinner reservation for five, and we need to meet with Winceham.”

“Some good food would be welcome,” Parcifal accepted with some reluctance in her voice.

“And maybe Judith could bring a friend, is she’d like to. I mean, if there’s someone important you’d like to bring along,” Ned offered with some hesitation.

“I’ve got nothing planned for tonight,” said one of the guards behind them, his voice covered in a metallic ring through his helmet’s visor.

Everyone, just looked at him with a blank stare, as if realising for the first time he could speak, his fellow guards included.

“Wot? A man’s got a right to eat. Right?” he said and he really meant it.

END OF BOOK III