

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Not ever?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Master Sisyphus is dead, Lernea."

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

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

"Don't do that."

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

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

"I know, that's why I do it."

"You're such a child," replied Lernea with disdain.

"Says the one who can't accept defeat!"

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

"This isn't about winning or losing, by Skrala! You can't be that daft!"

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

"Oh, really now that's just so typical, trying to put the blame on me like we're still meddling with the master's spellbook!"

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

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

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

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

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

"Mother made mistakes as well in her reign."

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

"We're only a minute apart, you stupid-"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lernea grinned and straightened her hair before she mused mostly

to herself:

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

"The fact is, you're a spoiled brat if I've ever se--"

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

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

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

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

"It's him," said Parcifal and Lernea nodded affirmatively and added, "There's no mistaking that breath."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What say you now, thief?"

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

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

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

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

"Sir! Terribly sorry, but you forgot your articles, sir!"

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

"That's because those aren't his either!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Inside the Sniggering Pig, there was ample candle light from chandeliers on the high ceiling, as well as candles and lamps on each and every table where people had still not passed out. A powerful mix of heavy scents dominated the air; rye, ale and roasted meat. The tables were mostly occupied by rowdy gangs of shady-looking sailors; everyone seemed to be having fun judging by the spillage on the floor, when the music suddenly stopped. The hubbub of laughter and loud conversation filled the emptiness until a rather tall and lanky fellow appeared at the far end of tavern, on what seemed to be the stage where the band of musicians sat. Parcifal's eyes had the chance to search the room for a moment. There was no sign of the thief.

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

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

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

"Guys.. That was a joke."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That sounded like a, uhm.. A poop joke. 'Flush' him out like the little, uhm, shit he is! Oh, my!"

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

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

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

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

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

There was no drum roll. The man on stage eyed the band and waved his hands. Then came a drum roll and the signature cowbell. The crowd though wasn't paying attention; they kept drinking and singing rowdy songs, mostly containing obscene lyrics about unicorns and the priest's daughter. There was a voice of dissent though that rose sharply above the cacophony:

"That's bloody lie!"

It was the thief, all flustered, standing up on his toes to make

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Balls!" they said in one voice and everyone was suddenly holding something that could kill, maim, or hurt like hell, most prominently forks, knives and the odd cutlass and pistol. Parcifal stood in the midst of them all, perhaps fifty or sixty men the lot of them, half of them still conscious. She gave Lernea a look of determined despair and grasped her sword with both hands, ready for what seemed to be a sudden, uneven fight to the death. Lernea nodded to her sister without a word and loaded her bow with an arrow. In one fluid motion, she was already aiming at the thief's head from a very comfortable distance; she couldn't miss.

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

"Jambalaya everyone! I'm buying!"

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

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

Lernea lowered her bow and strung it behind her back. She walked over to her sister, being very careful not to tread on someone or



someone's heaved insides, spilled beer and other assorted spots of trouble that could be found on the Sniggering Pig's floor in abundance.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

where you're from."

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

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

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

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

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

"Yeah, where's our money runt?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You mean you're a thief."

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

"How do you know which one's which?"

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

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

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

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

"Right. As I said, the money's turned into jambalaya for everyone."

"A coin-purse full of gold? That should be enough to buy this place!" exclaimed Parcifal with disbelief.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Mos' def, Cap'n."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That's our money, sirrah," said Lernea, the word 'sirrah' filled with as much disdain as possible.

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

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

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

Ned replied through gritted teeth:

"My act is not shit."

"What smells that bad then, eh?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Parcifal got up on her feet lazily. She picked up Encelados and

sheathed her sword, staring at Ned with a hurt look.

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

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

Lernea suddenly looked deeply disappointed, almost heartbroken, as she held an arrow in one hand and her bow in the other, her shoulders sagged. She shook her head, put the arrow in her quiver and the bow across her back before she pointed a finger at Parcifal and said with a numb voice to no-one in particular:

"It's her fault, you know."

"Oh, by Skrala, grow up," came Parcifal's terse reply, scowling.

"She could've cut him down with that first strike, if she was any good with that sword."

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

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

"Let Svarna guide your father to the Eternal Light and Skarla's heavenly abode."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It still is just money," said Winceham with a sneer, before he

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

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

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

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

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

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

Parcifal interjected with a nod of approval:

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

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

"I beg your pardon, milady, but surely, you're sorely mistaken."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Spoken true, sister."

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"My father has a name, Winceham."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You're acting like the man has a personal army," said Parcifal in disbelief.

"He does," replied Winceham curtly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It's always a tough crowd!"

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

"I can sing! I'm just more of a comedy performer! Why does everyone say that?"

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

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

them:

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

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

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

"It's more complicated than that Parcifal!"

Ned intervened:

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

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

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

"No. First we need to bury my father."

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

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

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

It was midnight on a moonless bay.

## Part Two

"Are you sure this is the right way?" asked Parcifal who had taken point alongside Ned, Encelados firmly clasped on her back along with her shield, Erymanthos. Tiny slithers of starlight bounced off her glistening armor; the Holy Mountain engraved on Erymanthos

shone fiery red. This far south in the world, the light of the starry sky was good enough for walking without hitting a tree.

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

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

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

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

"I am."

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

"These elves you speak of, what makes you so certain they'll want to help?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I should've ran when I had the chance."

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

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

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

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

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

Winceham stretched. Some faint popping and crackling sounds were heard; he let out a sigh and fiddled with his satchel. After a

while he was holding a small leather pouch and a small, delicate pipe in his hands. Those items seemed to instantly attract Parcifal's attention.

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

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

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

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

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

"Could I . . . Could I have a whiff of that?"

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

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

"Thanks," she said and added: "I'd appreciate the discretion."

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

And then he thought he saw a pair of trembling flames behind a

nearby bush. He blinked and saw the flames flicker wildly, before vanishing swiftly with a harrowing speed.

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

"It's not that rough of a trail. When my sister and I had to go through the trails of Jordenfall though.. That was rough, I'll tell you that. Sheer cliffs, hundreds of feet high, slippery ice every step of the way and bone-deep cold that made your teeth hurt just by breathing." Her face was cringing but her voice carried a bitter sweetness. It was the voice of someone who reminisced better times. Winceham eyed her with a worried look, his brow furrowed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Invincible, really," said Parcifal with a grin.



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

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

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

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

Then as if out of nowhere a robed, hooded and masked man sprang from a nearby bush behind Parcifal and leaned respectfully towards her ear. The man waved his hands and fingers in an elaborate gesture and whispered to her in a thin, gentle voice:

"There is no bunny."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I am Parcifal Teletha, scion of Phedra Teletha and Helios of the Teletha family of Nomos, princess successor and adjutant to the Throne, in exile. Now that my lineage is made known, speak of yours or insult and anger me at your peril."

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

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

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

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

"I'm not delusional! It dug its way up right behind you barely a moment before!"

"Oh, grow up!" said Parcifal dejectedly. Winceham couldn't help but explode:

"I'm a hundred and thirty two years old, this is as grown as I'll ever be!"

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

"By Skrala, stay your loud mouths!"

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

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

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

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

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

"They can see you alright! It's that monster of a rabbit they think I'm making up!"

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

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

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

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

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

"You haven't answered us, stranger," demanded Parcifal, a hint of aggression in her tone.

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

"Shut up!"

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

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

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

"Ned's right. I for one, agree."

Winceham suggested mildly:

"What about the rabbit?"

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

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

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

Winceham cut in abruptly:

"The pointy ears, the fair, weird hair. The silly hood and mask. That's just like you people."

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

"What do you mean, 'you people'?"

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

"Calm down now. What is your name, woodkin?"

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

"My name is Hanultheofodor Trypthwifidyr."

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

"Take us to your leader!"

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

\* \* \*

They passed a series of crests and low hills shrouded in ever-thickening bush and tall, wide-trunked trees. The savanna forest had indeed turned into a jungle proper, full of mangroves and palm trees, thick grub and lush flower plants blocking their way.

'Theo', which was how everyone called Hanultheofodor for practical purposes, knew the terrain well enough to avoid the thicker parts, but occasionally he had to use his machete to cut a path through. The air smelled of sweet but deadly flowers and acrid sweat as the wetness of the place became bothersome.

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

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

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

They walked silently, taking care not to step on something that

could bite back, each one lost in their own thoughts, for their own reasons. At length, Theo asked Parcifal:

"So none of them followed you?"

"None that we could see, no."

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

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

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

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

"You are the illusionist you are referring to, I'd wager?"

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

"Not really, no," replied Parcifal with a weary voice.

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

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

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

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

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

"It's just a bunny, Winceham. Leave it be. There are far worse

things that may roam about."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You don't know what to expect from Hobb. It does make sense though; they sent a mob after us, but we weren't there. As long as we're out of the picture, Hobb will have the Sniggering Pig to himself anyway. As far as he's concerned, we've turned tail and ran, never to show our faces again," Ned told Lernea, who in turn asked:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Something evil lurks nearby."

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

"Where are you going?" asked Ned with urgency.

"I'll scout around. Need to make myself sparse if I am to strike from the shadows, lad."

"It's a moonless night, there's shadows everywhere," said Ned sounding confused.

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

"How did he do that?" whispered Lernea to Ned.

"He's a thief," said Ned as they warily made their way closer to Parcifal and Theo.

"Retired," she hissed and Ned simply shrugged.

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

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

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

"What is she trying to say?" asked Ned.

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

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

"How is one, better news than the other?"

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

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

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

"I said, it's a bleeding flying lizard!"

To which Theo managed to answer promptly when he finally pushed Parcifal's hand aside. Completely heedless of the need to remain as silent as possible, he made sure to stand up in order to



deliver his point more acutely:

"That's utterly absurd! It's not a lizard, that's a dragonkin pure and simple. It is a fairly easy mistake to make though, since--"

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

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

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

"Jah be with us! That dragonkin--"

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

"That's for being an idiot. You can thank me for saving your life later."

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

"Unto the abyssal chasm I comment thee, beast."

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

"That's one more for me, sister." Lerneia bit back a reproachful answer:

"You had no right for first kill! That's bad etiquette and certainly counts as cheating!"

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

"The dragonkin.."

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

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

Theo chimed in morosely:

"Because that dragonkin was Vulsek, my flying steed. He wasn't evil, just scared."

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

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

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

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

"I'm not sure Winceham has a thing for mushrooms," shouted Lernea and let the string of her bow sing sharply.

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

"Did you hear the joke about the fungus?"

"No, what joke?"

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

Theo suddenly shook with hearty laughter as the joke struck home,

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

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

Lernea sounded demoralized, distraught even:

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

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

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

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

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

"Where is Winceham?"

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

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

\* \* \*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm sorry. That's all, Theo."

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

"About Vulsek? It was an accident," he said without conviction. He was still trying to come to grips with that. When they reached the top, what was left of the village below was painfully in plain sight, fires still consuming small tree-houses, sheds and trees alike. Theo's jaw dropped in an instant, with Bo always by his side, the flames in his eyes dying down suddenly. Lerneia touched Theo's hand gently and told him in an almost broken voice:

"I'm sorry about your village."

Words failed him. He sank to his knees and fell on the ground, as if the last iota of strength had left him. Winceham awkwardly put a hand around his shoulder and said nothing. Ned looked with mounting anger at the burning village, his eyes wandering aimlessly as if trying to comprehend something illogical; the crackle of fire reached them with ominous clarity. Trees had

burned down to a crispy cinder, leaving nothing but ashes and smoldering stumps behind them. Wooden tree-bridges laid in ruins, half-eaten by the flames, the houses at the top of the trees burning away like huge candles, burning flakes wafting in the air like a fiery snowfall.

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

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

"We'll get him laddie."

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

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

"That's not how the saying goes, lass."

To which she replied sternly:

"I do not live my life by rote, halfuin."

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

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

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

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

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

"There are no bodies. There's no smell of charred flesh either."

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

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

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

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

"Fingammon! Jah be with you! Where are the others?"

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

"Why is he different than you?" she asked, clutching Encelados' hilt nervously.

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

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

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

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

"How come you're not dead or missing like the others?"

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

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

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

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

"'Tis true, I know it be crazy, but 'tis true like dem fires. They came in a ship that flew, like da wind could carry it. An octopus

drawn on da sail der was, blood red 'n black," said Fingammon wild-eyed, his hand miming the way the wind blows.

Parcifal spoke her mind:

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

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

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

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

"Buccaneers. The red octopus; that would make it one of Hobb's ship. It was Hobb's men."

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

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

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

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

"There are strange things in this world. Things that one rarely meets when leading a sheltered life like yours, princess."

Parcifal took that comment as an insult and replied accordingly:

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

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

"Golems."

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

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

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

"I wouldn't know anything about a flying ship, but I've read books on the subject."

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

Her sister shot her a look of accusation.

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

"Of course you remember!"

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

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

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

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

"Dem golems took everyone, but dey be lookin' for sometin' dey don't have. I knows."

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

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

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

"What makes you think someone would go into all that trouble for a



fancy amulet?"

Lernea answered that before the woodkin had a chance to:

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

"But what does it do? I've never seen you use it."

"Dat be because I can't, Hanul."

"Of course you can, you're the elder priest. You taught me Choujou yourself. Surely there's -"

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

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

Theo's eyes narrowed, his voice became shallow:

"You mean.. I'm adopted? My parents weren't eaten by trollsharks?"

Parcifal turned around and saw Theo's expression of puzzled shock. She had to bury her face in her palm silently. The others looked at each other awkwardly, but no-one said a word.

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

"What are you saying?"

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

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

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

"You have the Choujou as well, Fingammon."

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

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

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

"Dey searched everytin' first. Den dey put chains in me people, and flew away like dey came. I couldn't see dem, but me could hear. I heard a man's voice say dey be back, to search wit da hound, 'e said. But de other voice I heard, dat was no man's voice," said the Elder and shook his head from side to side ominously.

"Well, any suggestions?" asked Lernea.

Parcifal broke her silence:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lernea shook her head before she replied flatly:

"I'm tired of running, woodkin."

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

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

"A flying ship," said Lernea.

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

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

Parcifal answered her own question before Lerneia could answer:

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

Clouds were gathering. It was a hazy morning.

### Part Three

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

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

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

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

"It's not easy, is it?" said Ned, speaking from the heart. Theo

did not look at him, but simply remained silent, gazing outwards into the sky. Ned walked over him, and sat himself down on the bedrock beside Theo.

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

"I'm sorry for your loss."

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

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

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

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

"What was your father like?"

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

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

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

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

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

and help you father'".

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

"That sounds.. Well, awful. At least, I never knew my real parents. I knew there was something funny about the skin color of everyone else, but I just thought I'd pick it up while growing. I never thought I was... Found," he said as he swallowed hard and let his voice trail off, his head lowered moodily. A smile crept up on Ned's face. Theo's naivety was bordering on stupidity as Parcifal would have it, but in his mind, Ned saw a child in a man's body, and that somehow reminded him of himself once more. Strangely, he felt that didn't bother him at all.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ned furrowed his brow and said loudly:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Theo asked him:

"You're a bard? What kind of instrument do you play?"

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

"I know it's a little hard to play most omens, prophecies and tales with just a beating drum, but I believe it has great potential. Maybe if more bards got together and everyone played a different instrument, I could be, you know, supporting their music with beating the drum. And then we could tour, get the crowd rolling. It could be amazing," said Ned with childish excitement overrunning his voice.

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

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

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

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

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

"Maybe, maybe. We'll see, when all this is over. Maybe we could try it together."

Theo shook his head with a frown. "I don't think that would work. I mean, I'm terribly bad at that sort of thing. I once sang in a feast, and the coconut milk went sour for a week. Plus, people tell me I have a really bad sense of humor," replied Theo and Ned realised with a scowl that Theo liking his jokes wasn't necessarily a good thing.

"Oh, well. That sounds... Well, we'll think of something."

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

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

"Oh, it's you," said Ned and relaxed, while Theo tried to apologize:

"We were just talking, Mr. Winceham."

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

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

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

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

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

"You didn't see that, did you?"

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

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

"Doesn't all this waiting get to you?"

Suddenly, a shadow seemed to toy with the clouds at a distance.

"There! It's coming out of the clouds! See its bow?" cried Ned and pointed to a hazy part of the clouds where the shape of a small ship began to take form. Theo stared for a moment and nodded fervently:

"I see it too! And that red blot! The red octopus on the sail! It's them!"

Winceham said mostly to himself with a scoff:

"As if there's a boatload of ships flying in the clouds. 'Course it's them!"

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

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

"Of course!"

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

"Of course it'll work! Have faith, Theo," said Ned and squeezed Theo's arm reassuringly. He then turned around and saw Winceham filling his pipe without a care in the world, watching as the flying ship's silhouette became clear in the horizon.

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

"What are you still doing here?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Is your rabbit allergic to water like yourself?"

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

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



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

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

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

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

\* \* \*

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

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

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

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

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

"What about the halfuin?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That was a misunderstanding! His eloquence, the-woodkin-not-from-around-these-parts, Hanulthetryftidor whats-his-name, had me thinking there were monsters in there," said Winceham and even behind the bearskin, his muffled voice made it easy enough to picture him stabbing Theo with an aggravated look.

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

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

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

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

"Right, so I'm to blame for being a hot-blooded halfuin while this lad is still a--"

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

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

"The Hound," he said with a feeling of awe and mounting anger as his eyes could not peel away from the three-headed canine, abnormally large, its skin sleek-black like the darkest of nights.