

Party of Five

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Book II

a fantasy novella by

Vasileios Kalampakas

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

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

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mail me at this address if you want to: kalampakas@stoneforger.com

Cover artwork by

Padibut Preeyawongsakul

padibut@gmail.com

~narm at deviantart.com

Foreword from the author

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

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

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

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

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

Sincerely (I do mean it),

Vasileios Kalampakas

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“All this.”

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

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

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

“Why not?”

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

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

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

She said, or rather announced with a beaming voice:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ned exclaimed on cue:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You keep making these remarks about my singing.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Where, exactly?”

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

“What are we looking for, lad?”

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

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

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

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

“Exactly!” shouted Ned, while Theo exclaimed:

“Bo sure looks excited!”

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

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

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

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

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

“Well said, lad.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

risome, yet controlled voice:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We’re being boarded!”

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

“Yer bein’ tooed.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Never underestimate the small folk, lass!”

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

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

Winceham gave the goblin a curt bow and replied congenially:

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

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

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

“Maybe next time.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

swering.

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

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

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

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

“That’s irrelevant.”

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

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

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

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

“The ship’s being impounded.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

asked with a barely constrained shout:

“Meaning?”

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

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

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

“But you’re bloody wrecking it!”

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

“It’s one bloody size smaller then!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ally understand what he was talking about.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Are you sure?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

told her:

“It’s better than the alternative.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I can’t find Culliper.”

The metal chair that had flown the ‘Mary Whatchamacal-

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

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

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

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

"To find a drink."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

stained with dried, green orcish blood.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ned realised it immediately then, and Lernea voiced it.

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

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

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

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

“Since when is everything your fault?”

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

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

“Are you referring to me?”

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

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

“What are you doing?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That means, they don’t have Theo.”

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

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

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

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

“That still doesn’t mean much,” said the halfuin.

“We’ll have to find out what it means ourselves then,” said Ned.

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

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

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

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

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

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