

# Party of Five

February 24, 2013

Book III

a fantasy novella by

Vasileios Kalampakas

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

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

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

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## Foreword from the author

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

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

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

Sincerely (I do mean it),

Vasileios Kalampakas

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

– Athmoor Radaniel, from his personal journal

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

Wet sand.

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

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

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

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

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

“Good, you’re awake.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You’re funny! Better than Ned!”

“I’m serious.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

“You’re in hiding, aren’t you?”

“That’s right. Have been for years.”

“From who? Why?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Twelve.”

“What kind of kids go whale hunting?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I thought you sneezed.”

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

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

“No, I felt full, that’s all.”

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

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“Was that you again?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ned sold him as a slave, remember?”

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

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

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

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

“My sister?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Wot?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Is this really not a dream?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Would you mind, not really doing that?”

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

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



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

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

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

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

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and a few words:

“What is it that you require of me?”

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

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

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

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

“One-hundred and seventy five, Boss.”

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

“Inference broken. Stimulate.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That won’t work either.”

“How do you mean?”

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

“Such as?”

“A debriefing is in order.”

“You mean questioning.”

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

“Are we prisoners?”

“Not exactly.”

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“Are we guests?”

“Not quite, no.”

“What are we then to the Human League?”

“Information assets. For now.”

“That doesn’t sound very welcoming.”

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

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

“The Tallyflop Incident.”

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

“A Thaumaturgic Event Displacement. A TED.”

“Do you have a name for everything?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s my job, that’s what it is.”

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

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

“Why is that?”

“Because you’re amateurs.”

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“You haven’t seen me perform then.”

“Perform what, exactly?”

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

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

“How can you tell?”

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

“No, not really.”

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

“How are the two connected?”

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

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

“Because someone has to do it.”

“But why does it have to be you?”

“Why not me?”

“That really doesn’t make any sense.”

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

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

“No.”

“I thought it was funny, anyway.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Thaumaturgizing your request,” voiced the ship with mellifluous tones.

“Excellent. We’ll be landing shortly, I suggest you gather your people and let them know.”

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

“Yes?”

The answer sounded more like a question.

“Well, you reserved a table for five. Are you offering us a night out? Like a welcoming gift?”

“Good gracious, no! That would’ve been impertinent and quite frankly, what gave you that idea? I’ve been in the field for months. I’m having a blast tonight. All sorts of debauchery in mind.”

“What about us?” Ned demanded with a sharp frown.

“Judith will handle your lot.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you need to co-operate.”

“I’ll co-operate alright. Just as long as we’re treated properly.”

“What about her?”

“Parcifal is strong-willed and proud. She’s like a hurt, caged animal right now. You never know when she might lash out.”

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

“What do you mean? What kind of trouble?”

“He’s humanoid. Not human standard.”

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“Why is that important?”

“Because he’ll be considered an illegal alien.”

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

“That’s not the official take on the matter.”

“Why didn’t you say so before?”

“It’d be pointless as there was no place to drop him off.”

“And now there is? You just said he’ll be treated as an alien. Aren’t there any short people in the Human League?”

“That’s an entirely different subject. We’re on the clock. I’m doing you a great favor just by letting you know. It could get me into a lot of trouble. Lose my job, get shot and all that kind of trouble.”

“You won’t buy us dinner, but you claim you’re willing to risk getting shot?”

“Let’s not get all chummy all of a sudden. Dinner is one thing; getting shot is a professional perk anyway. Think of it as extending a professional courtesy.”

“But I’m a performer. You’re a spy.”

“Things seldom are the way they appear to.”

“You’re not a spy?”

“Are you seriously expecting me to answer that?”

“What is this stuff you’re putting on?”

“It’s a F.U.L.L. Retar.D, mark two.”

“It doesn’t look retarded. ”

“It stands for Flight Updraught Linear Linen Retardation Device.”

“What does everything have to have a stupid name?”

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

“Well, what does it do?”



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

“What if the magic fails?”

“Oh, there’s no magic included in this one. It’s a simple aetheric device.”

“You mean like, science?”

“That’s the thing, yes.”

“What if that fails?”

“Then I’m told you have very few moments in which to become religious.”

“Where are you going?”

“I need to jump.”

“I thought you were coming along!”

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

“So, you’re hiding as well?”

“Hiding is a harsh term. Obfuscating my whereabouts is more preferable.

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

“Your point being?”

“I need you to do me a favor.”

“There’s nothing you could possibly offer that would entice me into blindly disregarding orders and the law, putting myself in even more trouble.”

“That would be true. I wouldn’t jump just yet if I were you, though.”

“Why is that?”

“Because Winceham stole that glorified parachute a while ago.”

“Which means I’m wearing what exactly?”

“His backpack.”

“Why didn’t I notice?”

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“Misdirection.”

“Well played. You knew about this,” he said and stared at Judith aggravated.

“It’s not her fault, Tark.”

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

“You could hurry things up, couldn’t you?”

“I might be able to.”

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

“I see.”

“No need to worry; he has enough sense to leave enough for dinner.”

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

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

“What that meant to witty?”

“Yes, it was.”

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

END OF BOOK III