

Party of Five

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Book III

a fantasy novella by

Vasileios Kalampakas

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

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

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

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Foreword from the author

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

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

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

Sincerely (I do mean it),

Vasileios Kalampakas

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

– Athmoor Radaniel, from his personal journal

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

Wet sand.

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

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

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

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

She saw the white bunny rabbit to her right, the way her head lay; Bo was munching on a small brush of salt-weed 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 salt-weed bushes. Lernea squinted at the bunny with a puzzled, weary look. For all she knew and cared for, a talking bunny made as much sense as a magical, fire-spouting one. What felt weird was Bo appeared to be female. That wasn’t a life-threatening situation, Lernea knew; she’d just come out of one alive and well. And quite wet, she added as an afterthought. She sighed and suddenly wished for a steamy hot cup of Chamoleon: she could almost smell it too.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You’re funny! Better than Ned!”

“I’m serious.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Just for appearances?” 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.

“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 glum quality.

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

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

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

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

“Twelve.”

“What kind of kids go whale hunting?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I thought you sneezed.”

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

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

“No, I felt full, that’s all.”

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

“Was that you again?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ned sold him as a slave, remember?”

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

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

“Why are you, my dear lady Teletha, screaming to no-one 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. No-one had time to move, but nevertheless the ship came to a jarring, abrupt halt with a grinding noise reminiscent of millstones and sliding tomb doors. Nobody was hurt, but they nonetheless couldn’t pry their eyes of the ship’s prow. There was a bronze-and-marble statuette of a luscious half-gorgon, half-mermaid decorating it. It was voluptuously sculpted, sexually suggestive and quite terrible to behold.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Wot?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Is this really not a dream?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Would you mind, not really doing that?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

and a few words:

“What is it that you require of me?”

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

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

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

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

“One-hundred and seventy five, Boss.”

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

“Inference broken. Stimulate.”

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

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

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

“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 autothaumagator,” Tark said and lowered Winceham’s feet from the helm forcibly.

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

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

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

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

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

“That won’t work either.”

“How do you mean?”

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

“Such as?”

“A debriefing is in order.”

“You mean questioning.”

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

“Are we prisoners?”

“Not exactly.”

“Are we guests?”

“Not quite, no.”

“What are we then to the Human League?”

“Information assets. For now.”

“That doesn’t sound very welcoming.”

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

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

“The Tallyflop Incident.”

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

“A Thaumaturgic Event Displacement. A TED.”

“Do you have a name for everything?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s my job, that’s what it is.”

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

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

“Why is that?”

“Because you’re amateurs.”

“You haven’t seen me perform then.”

“Perform what, exactly?”

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

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

“How can you tell?”

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

“No, not really.”

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

“How are the two connected?”

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

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

“Because someone has to do it.”

“But why does it have to be you?”

“Why not me?”

“That really doesn’t make any sense.”

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

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

“No.”

“I thought it was funny, anyway.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Judith will handle your lot.”

“What does that mean?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Why didn’t you say so before?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You're not a spy?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You mean like, involving aether science?”

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

“What if that fails?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So, you’re hiding as well?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s not her fault, Tark.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No. If he moves his Guardian onto an Assailant’s tile then all the outbound Runners will be cut to pieces. I’ll never be able to summon another Army like that. And it looks like

this will be one of *those* games,” Theo said nibbling at a fingernail.

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

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

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

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

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

“Let’s just say, for the sake of argument, you were afraid, for some reason - well-founded or not - afraid a particular set of events might occur in the future. Like taking an arrow to

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

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

"I, for one, Miss Testarossa, am agreed. I am quite agreeable a person, after all," he said and threw away the tiny umbrella with the intention of sending it overboard. Instead, it

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Could you do that someplace else?” Theo said while the captain extended a hand blindly to receive his flying, re-

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

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

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

"What's so special about this game?"

"Everything!" the captain roared, and Theo nodded, intently fixed on the game-board.

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

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

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

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

Lerneia nodded with a frown, while the captain let the barbed comment sink in. After seemingly observing a mo-

ment of silence, the captain spoke again:

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

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

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

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

“What?”

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

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

“It’s good to know you’re keeping tabs,” Lernea said and went off to find Bo. Perhaps she just wanted to converse with Lernea in a slightly more secluded spot - the ship of-

ferred plenty of those.

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

"Whose turn is it?"

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

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

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

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

"You do not sound inebriated."

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

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

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

"That sounds more like an excuse, actually."

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

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

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

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

had just passed it and emerged on the fancy, nice side of the map.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“By using magic?”

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

“That’s all it took?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Because, he’s lied to us.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I can’t believe this! Master Sisypus, I thought you were dead! We saw the carriage go up in flames!” Lernea shouted with a mix of giddy excitement and barely-held tears.

“Appearances can oft be deceiving. Apart from my crew of course, which has really passed on to the great beyond, I’m afraid,” said the elderly man smiling gently. His hazel eyes

gleamed with intelligence and his face beamed with mirth. It was a joyous occasion for the two of them.

“But, how? Why this charade?” Lernea asked of him with a wary look.

“Desperate times, my queen. I had to be sure. Deceitful foes abound.”

“Where is this place? And however did you end up here?”

“This place?” Master Sisyphus repeated incredulously and began laughing merrily, before getting hold of himself. “My dear Lernea, you never were good in geography,” he said and pointed at the faint mountainside behind the fishing village they were bound for. “That is the north-eastern face of Mount Ytamos, itself the first great mountaintop of the Sacred Ridge.”

“You mean to say..” Lernea managed to reply in a whisper before her voice trailed off into a gasp.

“We’re in Nomos, my queen. You’re home,” Master Sisyphus told her and a tear left her eye like the overflow of a wet dam.

The walls of the Marvelously Rotund and Equivocally Reassuring Grandiose Official Hall of Endearment were basically rotund and ostensible too large for the common eye to perceive. Yet it was simply one of many similar halls if not in name certainly in capacity dotted around the Naval Intelligence Bureau building in Rampatur City, itself one of many government buildings of varied shape and uniformly huge size to be found in the very center of the city. From the outside, the Naval Intelligence building looked like an even, totally opaque block from which a huge flag of the Human League was unfurled, drooping over the north face, above the diminutive revolving door entrance. It was identical to any

other government building and no-one in Rampatur seemed to pay it the least amount of notice, even if everything it shadowed was made cooler. As in, the temperature dropped because of the huge shadow.

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

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

In front of them, at what was probably judged to be a safe but not too impractical distance sat the Impromptu Intelligent Committee on Matters of Intelligence Missions Gathering Intelligence and Whatnot. There was even a wooden sign carved with those exact words sitting on a bleak, wooden desk where the members of the Committee rested their crossed hands. They were all dressed in nondescript white robes. Only the older man among them wore a fine-wrought silver

chain around his neck from where a small curio hang. Their desk was filled with all manner of scrolls, maps, and papers which were being scrutinized. The sound of shuffling papers reverberated across the gigantic empty space of the hall which appeared to have, oddly enough, excellent acoustics.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tark turned to look at Ned with a smug grin and rolled his eyes, nodding ever so slightly in a comforting manner. Ned

simply remained silent; he looked at Judith who appeared deadly bored and tired of the proceedings, even though they hadn't officially started. Parcifal stared back at Ned and he could see only see the kind of look that meant it was all his fault to begin with.

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

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

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

"That's a sharp 'C', Mr. Maroon," interrupted the old woman, her eyes firmly fixed on Tark with a cold stare.

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

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

"The Office of Naval Intelligence had set out specific tasks for operation Shining Ogre, agent. Though according to the Mary Righteous autothaumagator, a great deal of hostile combatants perished and a significant blow was dealt to the infrastructure of the foreign party involved, one cannot simply do away with the fact that the main objectives for this mission were not met. As such, your standing here before

this committee has been deemed necessary to explain yourself more fully as to the nature of the difficulties and circumstances that prevented you and your associate to complete your mission to the letter,” said the man identified as Mr. Maroon and cleared his throat, the loud noise amplified by the hall’s acoustics.

“Indeed,” added Mrs. Razzmatazz coldly.

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

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

“Indeed, it is not,” said Mrs. Razzmatazz with a voice trailing with venom. Tark seemed largely unperturbed by what the committee at large was implying. He had the look of someone who had heard similar things in the past once too many and was largely bored, though he did try to look humbled and civil about everything. Ned on the other hand had a giant frown, and though he felt like no expert in lawyer lingo, the whole thing looked suspiciously like a trial and it looked

like before anything was even going to be mentioned about him and Parcifal, Tark was in deep trouble.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Why hasn’t the thaumaturgic containment device mentioned in your report retrieved?”

“Because it probably blew up.”

“I see. Why wasn’t the aetheric crystal formation retrieved for analysis?”

“Because it probably blew up as well.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ignorance in the face of the law cannot be supported in any case, assistant agent.”

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

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

drop the silly code-names?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We’re wasting valuable time. Lord Kennelsey, please. If you must, consider this a special, extreme case.”

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

with a whisper:

“They’re dry humorless husks. They’re hardly real people,” he said and Lord Kennelsey addressed Lord Trixiparson without the least bit of emotion in his voice:

“Please note agent Cicido has been found in contempt.”

“Damn acoustics! The name is Augustus! Augustus Tark!”

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

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

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

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

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

up veins on his neck.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“By Skrala you will hear me now!” Parcifal shouted on the top of her lungs, demanding everyone’s attention. The echo of her cry had not died down when she spoke again, all the eyes and especially those of Mrs. Razzmatazz for some peculiar reason firmly fixed on her.

“I am Parcifal Teletha, scion of the Teletha House, Princess Regent and Captain of the Gardens of Kingdom of Nomos. I am human by birthright and noble by way of my standing among the men and women of my kingdom. I be-

lieve in goodness and fairness in all things, and I find you lacking. My sister is missing and she has perhaps passed on.”

“Now, this is highly irregular ”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“These aliens you speak of lent the Human League an invaluable hand in precarious times. Instead of being so detached and uppity about this debacle we should seize the op-

portunity and make them honorable allies in pursuit of common goals.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“There will be order!”

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

“There was a point in appointing this committee, which through your frantic disregard for etiquette and proper security guidelines has turned this prestigious intelligence committee into a facade!”

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

“Ah, nuts! Hell, she’s right,” shouted Tark and pointed a

finger at Ms. Rose. Ned didn't like the way the old man Lord Kennelsey seemed to be taking everything.

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

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

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

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

"There will be order on the floor!" shouted Lord Trixiparson, the words reverberating across the hall with a stentorian quality. Lord Kennelsey seemed to be frozen for a few moments, hardly breathing. He contained himself and against his feelings on the matter, obliged to due process.

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

"Dissolved?" asked Lord Trixiparson in disbelief, his

eyes searching for Lord Kennelsey's eyes in vain. The old lady known only as Mrs. Razzmatazz nodded, took a lost look at Parcifal and sighed before getting up and taking her leave. "Indeed, what a shame," she said with disdain.

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

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

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

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

"You don't strike me as the social type, Lord Kennelsey."

"I've been playing this game a lot longer than you think, Madame Chancellor."

"It's not a game, really, Lord Kennelsey."

"But there will be a loser."

"The place is yours for the taking."

"Oh, trash talking each other, aren't we?" Tark interjected putting himself between the line view of Lord Kennelsey and Lady Govida. The old man had to move his head slightly,

trying to keep eye contact. Tark would shadow his motions, not very much unlike a juvenile prankster would.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Which is a pretty uncertain, quite intangible notion, be

mindful of that,” Lady Godiva said, still wallowing in Tark’s arms like a woman madly in love.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Mr. Tark, please. Focus,” Lady Govida told him sternly. “I love it when she bosses me around,” Tark whispered and Ned furrowed his brow, the picture of Tark as the hard-boiled intelligence operative in his mind slowly turning into a dreamy, soft-spoken, love-stricken fool. Something which Ned disapproved of, at least in principle. But there were much more serious talk going on.

“We need the approval of the House of Commons, as well as a sponsor in the Lord Privy’s Office before we get

anything serious done,” Lady Govida said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Well it was huge, and made mostly of crystal. It was built with something bad in mind, that’s for sure,” Tark replied. Ned commented with evident sarcasm, “That’s really insight-

ful,” his head bobbing up and down slightly. “Thank you,” Tark replied, the sarcasm lost on him.

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

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

“Princess Regent in exile,” she corrected her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“By all means, go crazy!”

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

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

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

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

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

Ned offered with some hesitation.

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

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

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

They left the ghost ship with its skeleton crew in a nearby alcove, protected from view by the steep, sharp mossy cliffs. From then on the walk to the village was an easy, refreshing trip which they began as soon as they set foot on land. Lernea offered thanks and praise to Svarna for guiding her home, and kissed the ground, quickly realizing the picture in her mind did not match the taste.

The salty breeze mingled with the smells of green grass and mush, wet ground. It brought a heartfelt smile to Lernea to be back home, even under the very unusual circumstances. And it was a true wonder in itself that her mentor, friend and caretaker, the man who had been to her more than the grandfather she had never met, was alive and well, despite what she had seen with her eyes.

Theo felt the cold climate bite at his linen robes. The southern seas were warm, and space had been generously temperate and comfortable. But the northern reaches of Nomos offered a cold, harsh climate, suitable for the hardy locals, but not so friendly to anyone else. Except Bo who was covered in fur and was quite excited at the prospect of munching on northern, exotic grass; brushes were rare and flowers even rarer, but they provided a challenge with inter-

esting, mouth-filling rewards. She delightfully hopped along, sampling what freshness the outdoors of Nomos had to offer.

Lernea was decidedly not asking Sisyphus a lot of questions; she was content knowing that there was time enough to get up to date on matters of importance. And there were quite a lot of those, Master Sisyphus had told her, but his philosophy was that the slow, careful approach, always offered more time to think and analyze. Those in turn, offered more choices of action, and considerably more ways of egress out of nasty situations. Which was, how he had by a combination of good fortune and clever planning, avoided turning into a crisp.

“Am I the only one who is cold?” Theo said, shivering slightly, to which Lernea simply nodded and Master Sisyphus replied:

“You’re quite the exotic type around these parts. It’s quite reasonable to feel cold.”

“Well you don’t seem to be wearing much. And Lernea’s leather can’t be that warm inside.”

“You’d be surprised how much heat the body generates. It’s all a matter of insulation, really. Though I disapprove of Lady Teletha’s outfit, it is practical and efficient.”

“Then why do you disapprove, Master? You always taught us utility is essential.”

“It doesn’t need to be enticing to the senses. Not in that way,” the old man said and winked.

“Master!” Lernea gasped with a tiny shock of guilty joy written across her face.

“You might be my queen, and I might have taught you since your childhood, but I am not blind. I actually think you’ve grown into more of a woman somehow over these past few weeks.”

“I haven’t thought about it, but there’s a shred of truth in that.”

“You can tell me all about it when we rest properly. I have my share of stories as well. A lot has happened, and not much of it is any good.”

“I’m afraid what stories I have to tell are in the same vein as well, Master. It’s been a wild ride since we left Nomos. But I think I’ve met some good friends.”

“She means us,” Theo said and pointed awkwardly at Bo and him, before adding “And then there’s Ned, and Winceham too.”

“Winceham? That’s an interesting name. Somehow makes me feel hungry,” mused Master Sisypus. Lernea added with a soft voice:

“Parcifal is with them. Only Svarna knows where they are now. At least, I think they’re safe. Last I saw them, they were flying away in a ship, trying to flee a scene of terrible destruction. It was nothing like I had ever thought possible, Master. You should have seen it, you would know better.”

“Flying away in a ship, you say?”

“I know it sounds crazy, Master. But there’s so many new, strange things we’ve come across. Things that seem to defy logic.”

“I wouldn’t go so far. Logic is a pretty difficult thing to break.”

“Still, I’m glad you taught us to be open-minded, Master. We couldn’t have hoped to cope with so much.”

“You were raised to be queens, my dear Lernea.”

“I was raised to be the tribe’s doctor. Can’t speak for Bo, I don’t think there’s much of a career choice for bunnies,” Theo said out of turn.

“I was referring to the Teletha sisters,” Master Sisyphus said, eying Theo with a powerful frown that made the elf shy away. Master Sisyphus whispered to Lernea then:

“Is he really a sorcerer?”

“No, his sister, the bunny, is the sorcerer.”

“The bunny is a sorcerer?”

“It did come as a surprise. But you’d be surprised at what she’s capable of. Her prowess with wielding fire reminds me of Parcifal, really.”

“She’s not.. She’s not dragonborn, is she?” he asked in a worried whisper.

“I wouldn’t know. She’s stuck in that bunny form,” Lernea replied and Master Sisyphus face became contorted as if the world weighed upon it. “We need to know more about her. Can she talk?”

“Only if you kiss her.”

“Very demanding for a small animal.”

“I meant, she has to kiss you before she can talk to you in your head. It’s disconcerting at first, but it has certain advantages.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” Bo sent in her mind even as her nose wrinkled in search of a damp spot of a certain kind of grass.

“Sounds capricious,” Master Sisyphus said dismissively.

“Tell the old man I wouldn’t kiss him in a million years,” Bo sent and Lernea simply nodded smiling awkwardly.

“I bet she’s telling you something right now, isn’t she?” Master Sisyphus asked, but before Lernea had time to make up an answer, he provided one himself:

“I’m sure she’s impressed by me.”

“I wouldn’t think so,” Theo offered. “She just told me she hasn’t had a laugh like this in ages,” he added with an

innocent smile, while Lerneia stabbed him with a frantic look.

“Oh, really? I find her lack of taste disturbing,” Master Sisypheus said and promptly greeted a passing fisherman.

“By Skrala, it’s a joyous day, isn’t it?”

“Svarna’s light guide your way, Geronimo. How was the harvest?”

“Rich and plentiful. I’ll be making a batch of potion as soon as my visiting niece and her husband settle in.”

“Greetings, friends. Your uncle’s been a real boon to the village.”

“I can only imagine,” Lerneia said, her gaze alternating between a glower at Master Sisypheus and a frantic sign at Theo. Both of them were equally impervious to the eye signaling.

“I didn’t know marriage was that simple,” Theo said with what amounted to a lopsided grin. The fisherman looked at him with a squinting frown and Master Sisypheus tried to allay any qualms about the elf:

“He’s foreign. Hardly speaks the language,” he whispered while the villager made a motion with his head and asked in a whisper, as not to sound overtly offending:

“What about the hair, and those ears? Gods, that hair.”

“Accident at birth. My niece is such a soft-hearted girl,” Sisypheus said smiling in a condescending manner.

“That birth accident part could be true,” Theo said nodding, and walked past without care, looking at the sky, waiting for the weather to change. Right beside him, Bo hopped and skipped along, soaking up the moss-laden scenery with a gluttonous gleam in her eyes.

“Svarna guide your path, bookkeeper,” the fisherman said and nodded perfunctorily before walking away, gazing over his shoulder with a wrinkled forehead.

“Thy hooks be sharp, fisherman,” Master Sisyphus called out to him before Lernea said with some introspective hurt in her voice:

“A queen of Nomos reduced to a bookkeeper’s niece. Why so, Master?”

“As it is the norm these days, secrecy, deceit and counterfeited is essential for survival. Plus, a bookkeeper has unfettered access to all public records, libraries and the like. One is also expected to be rather parsimonious in social dealings, lead a solitary, isolated existence and keep to his books.”

“Which is a facade for..” Lernea said with a hint of expectation and a keen gaze across her eyes:

“The Resistance, my lady,” Sisyphus replied in a whisper and motioned with a hand for Lernea to lead the way. She stood there for a moment, transfixed as if the words sounded suddenly, all too strange.

“Resistance? Against who?”

“Well, the Jangdrivals, naturally,” he replied sotto voce, indeed confused in a rare occurrence.

“Master, my wedding was to bring the old lines together. The Jangdrivals had other ideas; their House usurped the Throne, but still..”

“Whatever do you mean to say, my lady? The Jangdrivals are dirty, lying traitors, the kind that draw no lines except death marks.”

“But still, they treated me and my sister with a modicum of respect; they spared our lives and the lives of our banner-men. Isn’t that so?”

“That might be true. But throwing a fist, be it gloved in soft silk or in bare white knuckles, is still a punch to the face.”

“But a Resistance, you say.. To fight among brothers and sisters, to fight amongst ourselves.. It must be wrong, I have

no other word for it.”

“The Jangdrivals are a plight to the people; they’ve tripled the amount of labor levy and have placed a firm grip on free trade and the crafts. A great good deal of artisans have been sequestered to the Royal Grounds, to work on a huge walled monument of some sort. A gift to the land, they’ve called it.”

“And the people can take no more of this? They find their rule abhorrent? An affront to the Gods?” she said with a rush of expectant despair.

“Not quite. The consensus among the people is it was high time someone built something grandiose and memorable, a true testament to the spirit of Nomos and its people.”

“But what need is there for something to gape at when there is no use for it?”

“The people’s mandate, they have called it. A deplorable bid to wrench the memory of the Teletha House from the peoples’ mind.”

“I’m not comfortable with the reasoning of the people. But I will not condone a bloodbath in the name of my reign or my bloodline. Perhaps, this resistance you speak of might hearken to my words and grow strong without baring fangs to strike against our brothers; Nomos can only lose from such a senseless endeavor. How many strong are you?”

“There’s six of us, my lady.”

“Six thousand strong, then. If only I could speak to them, turn their minds. There has to be a bloodless solution. A third House might even need to come into play,” she said mostly to herself, thoughtfully scratching her chin.

“My lady, you’ve misheard. There’s six of us; maybe seven, counting the bunny as well.”

“Six of us? As in, six persons?”

“That is you, your exotic friend and the bunny sorceress, and my two assistants.”

“Master Sisyphus, in my years under your guidance I would never thought I would say this, but I fear I cannot, in good conscience, pretend this isn’t folly. I would actually go as far to say that you must be going out of your mind to consider this a resistance. We could hardly form a Upskalla team.”

“This isn’t a game though, my lady. Great things have been accomplished by few men.”

“You do need to consider the scale of things.”

“And it would be prudent to consider the timing of the matter. Event move at a maddening pace.”

“I’m not even sure this resistance should take place. If the Jangdrivals are what the people want then-”

“Nuts to the Jangdrivals!” Master Sisyphus said and everyone around them had no choice but to give him an apprehensive, studious look.

“Or fruit. We could send them fruit. A fruit basket would be nice,” Theo said beaming with a smile and Bo’s ears flopped to the ground.

“We’re new here,” Lernea said and the locals went back to minding their own business. “I thought we were trying to keep a low profile, Master,” Lernea said with just a smidgen of aggravation. Master Sisyphus took a few deep breaths before replying:

“I can’t help getting worked up about it all. They did try to kill me,” he said and looked Lernea in the eyes.

“It is the sentimental fool that lets passion cloud his reasoning,” Lernea said, reciting from memory. Master Sisyphus nodded and complemented:

“And however entertaining fools might be, no-one wants their job.”

“Is it because of the silly costume?” Theo asked eagerly, only to receive puzzled looks from Sisyphus and Lernea.

“Let’s go inside. I could use some lunch,” Master Sisyphus said and unlocked the door to his rather plain-looking house. He ushered Lernea in, and they all followed close behind.

The moment she stepped into the house, the smell of roast fish assaulted her nostrils, and she felt a pinching on her neck. Then another one, and another one in quick succession. Her head started spinning and she became oddly aware that the house was being lifted into the sky, as if it was made out of gum. In fact, she slumped onto the floor with a strange smile on her face and lay there, peacefully unconscious.

“Did you see that?” said a shrilly voice with excitement, and a similar one replied in the same vein of enthusiasm, “Pow! All three in the neck! Wait till Master learns about this! We might actually get some cake this time!”

Sisyphus calmly appeared through the door, stepping over Lernea casually. He put his palm on his face, and stood there with eyes closed trying to control his breathing. He said nothing, because he couldn’t think of anything that would capture the essence of his feeling at the time.

“Master! Did you see that?” said the same shrilly, almost childlike voice. The other voice added in a scoffing manner, “Of course he saw that, dummy! He was right behind her.”

“We got her good, didn’t we Master?” said one of the voices, the slightly more enthusiastic one. Both seemed to be coming from somewhere in the roof without a ceiling, the persons they belonged to obscured in shadowy clefts and crevices.

“Weren’t we have lunch first, and then a nap?” Theo asked, right behind Sisyphus. “Now, I’m confused. Is this some kind of custom?” he inquired, and a double-shot of tiny globes of fire flew right past his hair, singing it slightly, to strike at patches of darkness at the roof. Cries of agony were heard before the reassuring thudding of bodies hitting the floor. Bo appeared through the door, eyes flaring, ears pointing straight up, ready for a second burst of flames. Sisyphus made a hand gesture to the bunny. Bo raised her head and looked at him in an uncannily human fashion.

“I’ll handle this,” he said while Lernea’s attackers were lying on the floor, groaning slightly, trying to recover from their fall. They were small-framed, rather short and actually looked a lot like boys in their pre-teens. Bits and pieces of them were still on fire, like tiny candles going out. The smell of burnt cloth filled the room.

“You are idiots,” Sisyphus said.

“Yes, Master Sisyphus,” they both intoned in unison, trying to get up with some difficulty.

“Total buffoons,” Sisyphus continued.

“Yes, Master Sisyphus,” they repeated with downcast voices. They were now standing as upright as they could, their heads downcast. They knew something was amiss but they didn’t dare ask what exactly they had done wrong.

“Incredibly stupid and profoundly inept at the simplest of tasks,” Sisyphus said with mounting ire in his voice.

“Yes, Master Sisyphus,” they droned on, as if they had heard the same words a thousand times over.

“I’m right here, not down there!” Sisyphus shouted, pointing at the floor. The two kids jolted into attention, looking straight at Master Sisyphus, their faces flushed red and their plain clothes charred, sooty and filled with crumbling

holes.

“What where your orders when I left?”

“To make sure that no intruder enters the house,” said one of the boys, while the other one added, “and roast some fish for lunch.”

“Clean up the laboratory,” the first one continued and the other one complemented him, “but be careful not to touch the Polythauma.. Polythamarga..”

“Polythamaturgator!” Sisypus exploded.

“That a one,” one of the boys said nodding, the one still clutching a reed of some sort in one hand.

“Have I not trained you in all manners of sciences, history, and the arts?” Sisypus asked of them in a strangely appealing and calm voice.

“You have Master,” said the boy whose reed was lying on the floor, and the other one asked raising a hand with trepidation.

“Are we having a pop-quiz?”

Sisypus closed his eyes and sighed, biting his lips before asking the boys in a calm, conversational tone:

“Haven’t we already covered the history and lore of the Kingdom’s rulers?”

“Oh! Oh! I know! I know! We’re terribly sorry!” said the boy with the reed clutched in his hand. Sisypus took a deep breath and ran his tongue across his old, creaky lips, nodding to himself in a slight show of relief.

“It’s the twenty-fifth of Thargilio! It’s the Crowning Day of King Menidas of House Pygmalio,” the boy said and ventured into a hopeful smile. Sisypus’s face froze in a shocked look of surprise.

“That may be correct, Damon, but you’re missing the greater picture,” Sisypus said and rubbed the root of his nose

patiently.

“It’s not a fish day, then?” the other boy pitched in half-heartedly. Sisyphus made a sudden reflexive motion; he very nearly leapt at them but managed to contain himself at the last moment.

“The woman lying on the floor.. The woman you managed to drug into a senseless sleep.. Do you recognize her, at all?”

The boys peered at Lernea from a distance, squinting slightly. They both shook their heads with worried faces, realizing their answer would not make Sisyphus happy.

“Doesn’t ring a bell? Never seen her before? Not in one of the many sketches and drawings amongst the books, or the letters in my study, my personal effects, the bloody drawing in my room?”

“She does kind of look like her, Master,” one of the boys said timidly, and the other one added, “One of those sisters you talk about all the time.”

“Fidias,” Sisyphus asked the other boy, “would you happen to recall their name?”

“Tele.. Telemar.. Teledar..”

“Teletha! The Teletha sisters! This is Lernea Teletha, the queen of Nomos in exile, you imbeciles!” Sisyphus erupted into a frenzy and stormed past the boys and straight into his study, slamming the door behind him.

“I would’ve thought a queen would be more popular,” Theo said and smiled awkwardly, while the boys exchanged horrified looks.

“We’re dead,” Damon said and dropped the reed on the floor, while Fidias nodded and added plainly, “deader than a dodo.”

Theo laughed suddenly. “Don’t be silly, dodo’s aren’t dead.”

The boys looked at him with puzzled, worried frowns.

“They are?” Theo asked, and put a finger to his lip, looking confused.

“Will someone bring the queen in here!” Sisyphus shouted from within his study. The boys sprang into action as if pronged with something sharp, while Bo was happily munching on some dried fungi that happened to be lying around on a small table. Pretty soon, Lernea was being dragged into Sisyphus study without much decorum, and Bo was cowering in a corner, her eyes glazed and ready to pop out.

“What do you mean? There’s no elephant in this room, and it’s definitely not pink. No, I’m not morphing into a flying cactus,” Theo said to Bo, and sparing a look at his hands, he added, “As far as I can tell, that is.”

The large auditorium was filled with all kinds of people, dressed in all sorts of garments ranging from the skimpy, adventurously revealing outfits of the Far Negus Arm of colonies and dominions, to the extravagantly posh and stylish attire of the Ritz, the metropolitan heartland of the Human League. For what it was worth, the Ex-temporal Local Authority Council Issue Docket No. 8933 Dash Five had attracted a lot of attention, most of it unwanted.

As the sizzling crowd hummed a collective tune of uneasy expectancy in the air, the same raw feeling of being slightly nervous had Ned almost sweating. Wincham was sitting to his left; his jump from the Mary Righteous had been a resounding success. After they’d met for dinner, he was loathe to disclose details of his exact whereabouts, but

he very eagerly went on to consume copious amounts of everything consumable, including beer, alcohol and spirits. As such, it was no wonder he was grumpy, feeling sick with a splitting headache and itching for a smoke, a small luxury that was denied to him while the vote was cast.

Winceham toyed with his empty pipe wearing a sour expression on his face. Next to him sat Parcifal; her silent manner and grim face afforded her an awesome, deadly-looking gaze. Her eyes scanned the auditorium piecemeal, looking for danger without success. Her gaze though did lock on to the form of the Council members, once they entered the auditorium's stage, dressed in elaborate, ornate, red and black robes, wearing plush velvet hats that looked like furry bloated versions of dead skunk-like creatures, strangely colored but thankfully odorless. They looked rather silly to everyone except for the crowd in the auditorium; the noise died down to the a few careless whispers too suddenly. Ned turned his head and asked Judith in a whisper:

"Are these things on their heads real?"

She shot him a look of troubled puzzlement before answering plaintively, "Yes."

Winceham nudged Ned with his elbow, to get his attention. "I'm having a terrible case of gas. Did you have any of that special du jour?"

"What was the special du jour?"

"That slightly poached crab-like thing that moved and you had to whack it with a hammer."

"That was some kind of vermin that attacked us on our way to the Judith's house," he whispered and suddenly remembered he owed Judith an apology. Winceham furrowed his brow and began counting with his fingers.

"I'm really sorry about last night," Ned said and he was

downright sincere.

“I’m used to much worse. I rarely spent time there - I considered it as much as home as any of you. Still though, how could he do so much.. So much damage in one night? I mean, he’s so diminutive,” Judith said.

“It’s a good thing the fire brigade was so fast to respond,” Ned offered and Judith needed a moment to understand who he was referring to.

“Those people where a passing circus troupe.”

“It could’ve been a great night, though,” Ned ventured with some trepidation.

“Maybe,” she replied and shrugged before smiling thinly.

“Now is not the time for meaningless chatter!” Parcifal hissed suddenly and her eyes met with Ned’s in a strange, awkwardly cold fashion. She was evidently upset; she hadn’t been herself ever since Lernea was drawn in that cataclysmic hole, possibly lost forever. They knew Lernea, Theo and Bo were alive, but where they had ended up was beyond them. There was little they could do, and there were more pressing issues at hand; their home planet was in danger and this was their chance to make a whole lot of difference. It was disconcerting for Ned though not to be able to read through Parcifal’s opaqueness; he didn’t know whether she was so tightened up because she might never see her sister again or because of a whole world being at stake. Still, he was worried about her, and especially that temper of hers.

Ned felt surprisingly calm and reassured. It was as if he knew that everything was somehow going to work out itself. He felt that his new friends were able to hold on their own. And even if they never met again, just knowing they were alive somewhere made him breathe more easily. His mind went to Judith suddenly; there too, was a newly found friend.

He smiled thinly as he ventured a sideways look to the young woman who had saved his life back on Tallyflop; he was about to say something to her when he felt Winceham's elbow poking him through his ribs:

"Did we have any of those things?" the halfuin said, pointing to the council members' silly, furry, hats.

"No, we didn't. That's a furry hat," Ned said somewhat abrasively, which wasn't typical of him. "At least, I think I would've remembered," he added and straightened his back on the plush chair.

"Fancy the lass?" Winceham suggested with a drunken grin, nudging Ned in a childish playful manner.

"Keep your voice down, they're about to start!" Parcial interjected sternly while Ned's eyes widened and his face became flustered. He found the courage to take a peek at Judith; she was shuffling through a stack of papers, completely oblivious to Ned's embarrassment.

"Hear ye, hear ye!" said a man dressed in colorful silken stockings and a frilly, ridiculous costume. His voice was an officious baritone that swept every inch of the auditorium as if a mysterious gale carried it forcefully.

"Docket no. 8933 dash five of the Ex-temporal Authority Council of Rampatur is now under discussion!"

A pair of loud metallic thuds echoed around the vast chamber of the auditorium - it was like sounding a gong, just without all of its brass pizazz.

"The Most Honorable Lord of Mardichoia, Lord Privy to the Seat and Excellent All-Around Protector, Bane of the Grasshopper Swarm, Member of the Order of the Lone Wolf and Herald of Most Excellent Ambassadors, Viscount Fyodor Rabastropotov presiding!" the announcer's voice rumbled throughout the hall and there was a slight commotion

as everyone stood up while the form of a short little man, rather unimposing and quite plain-looking entered the hall and slowly walked up to a long table where various stern-looking figures of authority were already seated.

“Is that the guy?” Ned whispered to Judith. She gave him a slight nod before she went wide-eyed, nodding at Winceham who was but for a breath sound asleep, slumped in his chair. Before Ned had time to do anything about it, Parcifal picked him up from his jacket and propped him straight up forcefully without a moment’s hesitation. Winceham seemed hardly surprised; his face quickly settled into a bland look of boredom and one hand went to his pipe reflexively.

“Now sit!” Parcifal hissed the next moment, in line with what everyone else was doing as the Viscount Rabastropotov settled quietly into his chair. He wore short, white, thinning hair and a bright set of blue eyes that seemed to shine with a strange shimmer at times. His only mark of office was a silver pin against his chest; it was the symbol of the Human League, an open human palm inside a heptagon, adorned with a golden bar and three thin stripes of glistening diamonds.

“Please, let’s get on with this. I have to pickup my granddaughters in an hour or so,” the viscount said with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. The announcer nodded and began reciting from what appeared to be an endless roll of paper:

“Hear ye, hear ye, on the sixty-seventh arc of the Tripunarian Calendar, ether-adjusted to the ninety-seventh of the League Year plus three thousand, one hundred and seventy eight, by all accounts a Monday, the case of the humanoid aliens identified to wit as originating from the world of Laertia, Meniere’s Catalog No. 341-5, northwestern helix, Drovidae Sector, came to the attention of the Naval Intelligence Bureau as related in scroll-file ZYE-0944 where the-”

“For humanity’s sake, we’ll never get over this before the sun turns into a cube of ice. Skip the details,” the viscount said, rolling his eyes. Lord Trixiparton, seated a couple of seats to the viscount’s left cleared his throat and added:

“Sphere of ice, Lord Privy. If I may,” he said and ran his tongue across his lips.

“It’s a figure of speech, it’s not really an issue of geometry,” the viscount replied with an almost apologetic manner. Lord Kennelsey, seated somewhat afar to his right leaned across the long table and spoke: “Lord Privy, we are tarrying here ineffectually. We haven’t even qualified these people as human and here they are, parading across the city, feasting and gallivanting like honored guests at the expenses of the Naval Intelligence Bureau whose dealings remain obumbrated and opaque at best. These people,” he said with an evident touch of scorn and perhaps some disgust in his voice, “have not been properly debriefed, vetted, approved or even tested to be properly human as per the standing standard operating procedure dictates. And it is all at the behest of Lady Govida who has time and again proved to the members of this council the precarious, practically borderline treacherous at times nature of her actions as Head of the Naval Intelligence Bureau. Not to mention her blatant disregard for mere appearance’s sake.”

Winceham’s face twisted into a bizarre grimace of pained disbelief:

“Is he calling us aliens?” he said audibly. “I think he’s referring to you particularly,” Ned said in a misplaced effort to appease the halfuin’s worries and added, “though I wouldn’t take it to heart. I mean, technically -”

Lady Godiva spoke out of turn, attracting everyone’s attention.

“Lord Kennelsey does have the propensity to steer the discussion to his opponents’ personalities and not the real issues at hand. We are on a war footing, whether we like it or not, and my personal life is no-one’s concern. If that ever came to be of import, what of our liberties, our civility? What of the common people we have sworn to protect? Our responsibilities leave no room for discussing of frivolous issues. What needs to be addressed here is not a council members personal life, but the Ygg, who have become a credible, rising threat to the well-being of the citizen of the Human League.”

“I haven’t tried my wiles on her yet, and still I’ve stirred up quite some turmoil. My irresistible charm has worked its magic, I see. Again,” Winceham said with a grin, clutching the pipe in his teeth and looking smugly suave. “It’s not you, it’s Tark,” Ned said shaking his head. “This is serious. It has nothing to do with you,” Parcifal said dryly and Judith voiced her concern:

“Will you please stay silent? I’m liable for all of you. This is serious business, I could get in serious trouble if you keep this up.”

“Just do that, please,” Ned said in pleading whisper to Winceham and Parcifal.

“I can’t help it if I’m that good with women,” Winceham apologized in earnest, and right before Parcifal was about to employ physical means, Lord Kennelsey’s voice boomed:

“Trust! Trust, fellow council members and citizens, is the real issue. Lady Godiva cannot be entrusted with those responsibilities she so vividly claims to be her top priority. How can we trust someone so frivolous with her public image, a person of wild and unseemly behavior, who struts around the City of Rampatur like an infatuated child, all glitter and smiles, spending her time in the arms of an agent of the Bu-

reau, for everyone to see. How can we trust that woman to take decisions that affect the lives of millions of Human League citizens, when she's obviously partial to Augustus Tark!"

"The good Lord Kennelsey obviously has no real facts to present to this assembly, and instead tries to smear the efforts of the men and women of the Naval Intelligence Bureau that have consistently provided the Human League with invaluable insight into this new-fangled threat. I will not go into the depth and breadth of the threat that Lord Kennelsey's fixation with what happens in people's bedrooms might entail for the safety of the Human League at large. It is perhaps of paramount importance in his own mind, but I have yet to see an army of lovers amassing their forces against us. We do have proof of the Ygg and their sinister plot to covertly infiltrate known habitable worlds and insidiously turn their populations into mindless thralls."

"It is no wonder Lady Govida so shamelessly admits her malfeasance to appear impervious to scrutiny. It is of course a sure sign of growing increasingly power-hungry and arrogant, which are indeed dangerous traits for a person entailed with such sensitive responsibilities. She keeps on purveying all about this Ygg threat without one solid piece of evidence. What we do have to go on is hearsay and imaginary reports from the man who is shamefully intimate with the Head of the Bureau. Isn't it beautifully convenient that this so-called threat has been identified by the man this woman is bedding?"

A hubbub rose up from the crowd. The last words of Lord Kennelsey seemed to have shocked quite a lot of people.

"Seriously, this attack on my credibility is Lord Kennelsey's futile and desperately embarrassing effort to sway this council and the public towards his own election bid in

the coming months. If there is one thing Lord Kennelsey is known for, is his long-standing service to the Human League as chancellor and treasurer, secretary to various bureaucratic offices and highly profitable positions which have time and again proved vicariously indispensable to emptying our coffers in order to shuffle cartloads of paper off-world,” Lady Govida retorted, with a slight grin. Lord Kennelsey peered at her through slit-like eyes but did not lose his calm:

“Isn’t it satisfying to hear Lady Govida use the same line of reasoning against me? It is said, imitation is the most sincere form of compliment, and I thank her for that. But it is not I who seeks to spread lies and disinformation to befuddle and daze the public, wary of my pompous ways. My service to the Human League is a matter of public record; and if I were as arrogant and self-aggrandizing as Lady Govida, I would consider myself proud to have served fully and to the best of my ability the Human League through means rather less glittery and awe-inspiring than Naval Intelligence hearkens to be, but every bit as important to the cohesion of our confederacy, if not more so.”

“Lord Kennelsey, this jabber of ours is of no real interest and importance. It is not a political debate but a public hearing where decisions need to be taken and approved before the public, which we all are here to serve dutifully. As it stands, I shall forgo further answering to your fantasies as if they were credible enough; Lord Privy, I now wish for the humans returned from the Tallyflop mission to present their case.”

“Surely Lord Privy, this is highly irregular. We assume these people, if we could call all of them that, to be humans but -”

“I said, I need to pick up my granddaughters. It’s been kind of boring, really. Will the folks from, Laertia was it,

stand up and be heard?"

"All of us?" Ned stood up from his chair shyly and asked the Lord Privy in a shallow voice that was barely heard.

"Wasn't there three of you?" the Lord Privy asked counting with a finger. "I'm right here," Winceham said grumpily, barely visible from where the Lord Privy sat.

"Right. The short fellow."

"Is that a problem?"

"Not really. I mean, I can imagine it might be tough at times reaching for cupboards and such, but we do have stools."

"They're practically mocking this deliberation!" Lord Kennelsey interjected, pointing at Winceham irately.

"When strangers meet, great allowance should be made for differences of custom and training," Lady Govida offered in a reconciliatory manner.

"I've heard that before. Seems just about right in my book," Winceham replied and bowed slightly to her. "Thank you, Mr. Abberbottom."

"The Third," Winceham added.

"This is a travesty! Lady Govida, before our very eyes is exchanging niceties with people who have hardly identified themselves, for which we have nothing to go on other than their word."

It was at that point that Parcifal took to the stage in a blatant breach of conduct. Another rush of whispers rose from the crowd.

"I am Parcifal Teletha, of the Teletha Clan, 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," she said for everyone in the audience hall to hear.

"She's really serious about that stuff, isn't she?" Winceham told Ned, looking a bit worried Parcifal might actually go off in a sudden rampage at any moment.

"She is," Ned said and looked at Judith who was at a complete loss for words, looking positively unable to try containing the situation. Before anyone in the council had time to demand an explanation, a team of guards that had remained motionless like statues appeared, cradling their halberds in a defensive stance, surrounding the large table where the council sat. Parcifal addressed them:

"Stay your hand, soldiers of the Human League. I have no quarrel with you or the council, and I offer no threat. Hear me out, citizens of the Human League, before you take it upon yourselves to cast me down," she offered loudly, standing proudly with Encelados firmly in its hilt, her arms wide open.

"As any man or woman would care to admit, I take pride in my heritage, my people and my world, which I have only recently come to realise is one of many. But I am no fool to demand of you that I be treated like nobility, or in any special way. I replied as any of you would if insulted; for a person who does not stand up for himself is someone dangerous to everyone else as well. For if it comes to that, would he stand up for his brethren? Would he stand up for what is right and fair?"

People in the crowd nodded. The council remained silent and Lord Kennelsey made a move as if he was about to begin an outcry, but the Lord Privy motioned with a flick of his wrist for him to just leave Parcifal be and hear her out. He studiously complied, even though it was plainly obvious he

was seething inside.

“My home is in danger. My people are at the mercy of these insidious monsters. My sister is missing along with trusted comrades because of the Ygg. Their insipid designs are grandiose and their fanaticism is unrivaled. They will stop at nothing and they will go on forever, until the time they are wiped out, broken to last one. They have the means and the dedication to see their nightmarish dreams come to fruition. They want to control and enslave every living, breathing, thinking creature across the stars. I have seen their ice-cold eyes stare back at me with the maddening shine of abyssal evil; they have no regard for life, nor are they capable of compassion. They are the embodiment of mindless terror, and soon they will come for you as well. As it is, they might very well be right here, among you, watching, listening, waiting.”

Those words raised a sudden throbbing noise of surprised disbelief. The uproar was too much for Lord Kennelsey.

“Fear, uncertainty and doubt! This alien, who we know nothing about, wants you good people in disarray, chasing after shadows! She is nothing but an insidious instrument in a well-contrived ploy of Lady Govida’s making! It is preposterous to hear such lies spewed forth and expect us to believe them based on nothing but good faith!”

“If you do not trust your own people that have gone in great lengths to uncover as much as possible about the scourge of the Ygg, then I find it no surprise that you’re so eagerly willing to disregard our warning as mere lies. But I am offended that you seek to besmirch me in front of your citizens instead of listening to the harsh, unsettling truth: My homeland is in danger. And yours as well.”

“Evidence! A thousand words cannot move a greased-up wheel.”

“A sad choice of words, Lord Kennelsey,” interjected Lady Govida and beckoned into the shadows. Augustus Tark appeared shortly, dressed in an all-leather suit, similar to the suit Judith wore, holding a slightly over-sized satchel. A pair of robed men appeared, pushing a weird contraption on wheels, all sorts of weird machinery and brass fittings cobbled together in an eye-jarring fashion.

“This is highly irregular!” pointed out Lord Trixiparson as if remembering to add something of zero importance to the proceedings. Everyone ignored him, their eyes set on the strange machine.

“This is a Thaumaturgic Neural Correlator. It is a highly experimental device that has been secretly under development for quite some time. Even though revealing it to the public poses a certain security risk, it is deemed appropriate that we uncover it in the eyes, and ears, of the public.”

“You have gone to great lengths to deceive the public, Lady Govida,” Lord Kennelsey said and addressed the crowd: “These sort of spurious devices are nothing but elaborate ways to leech funding for other, much more mundane yet luxurious personal purposes. What sort of evidence can this machine hope to provide, other than fizzling sounds and blinding, obnoxious lights?”

“This,” Tark said and opened the satchel, letting the head of an Ygg drop to the floor boisterously.

The crowd gasped and the hall reverberated with panicked cries of abject horror, drowning out Lord Kennelsey’s attempts to laugh off the machine.

“It is merely a prop!”

“Looks authentic to me,” Winceham told Ned who nodded affirmatively with a furrowed brow, looking over his shoulder to the now restless crowd.

“Order please! There will be order! I need to pickup my granddaughter soon, and I’ll have none of that!” the Lord Privy boomed in a surprising fashion. Lady Govida shot Tark a slightly reprimanding look and explained:

“Please, do not worry. It is mostly harmless and quite crucial. Mr. Tark, if you please,” she said and nodded while the crowd was still in an uproar. Tark picked up the Ygg head with a total lack of good taste and etiquette when it comes to severed dead things and place it on a small pedestal on the strange machine. The crowd reacted with a sudden silence. The two male assistants fiddles with some obscure controls and the machine came to life with a buzzing, ominous, reverberating sound. The crowd physically recoiled in their seats, but heir eyes were glued to the machine. A few sparks and rivulets of lightning flew in the air around some parts of the machine and in the next moment, the head opened its eyes, revealing their deep blue-in-blue color.

“Humans!” it cried, the tendrils around its maw writhing with spasms.

The crowd was shocked into a frozen silence. Lady Govida rose and addressed the Ygg head in an officious stern manner.

“Who are you?”

“We are Ygg. We are all and one,” it said in a bizarre, jarred fashion, as if trying to breath through a no longer existent throat.

“What is your purpose? Why did you attack and threaten to kill one of our own? What was your purpose on Tallyflop?”

“Kill. Enslave. The will of the mind. The purpose of life is to end.”

“What are you plans?”

“End life. Usher in the eternal void.”

“We wish to parley. We do not wish you harm. We are willing to leave you be if you reciprocate.”

“Parley? Leave us be? Reciprocate?” the Ygg said in a puzzled, drowsy, voice that crackled.

“We wish to negotiate.”

“There is no meaning. We are legion. We are one and many. Resist and be obliterated. Obey and your husks will be celebrated as vessels of the void. Your mewling, pathetic voices will praise the void and the will of the Mind. The Ygg are chosen. Your dying breaths will serve as vibrant chords in the symphony that is to come. Your -”

The voice died down as soon as the head’s eyes flickered wildly before it sagged into being consistently lifeless once more.

“What kind of trickery is this?”

“It’s thaumaturgy, highly advanced in fact. Notably indistinguishable from trickery for someone so profoundly lacking in the understanding of science such as yourself Lord Kennelsey. This is your proof. Straight from the Ygg’s mouth, as well, if you’ll excuse the pun,” Tark said, grinning wildly, making sure that it was apparent to everyone he was enjoying himself immensely.

“I propose that a small strike team is dispatched to the world of Laertia, currently under immediate threat from an Ygg cell that is threatening to turn the world into one huge slave camp to further increase their capacity to wreak havoc. It is in the interest of the Human League that we deal with this threat efficiently.”

“Efficiently, you say? Well if this threat is supposedly real, and these creatures are as populous as you lead us to surmise, dear Lady Govida, isn’t it a mockery to ask this of us? A small strike team? Just one ship and your beloved

Tark? These aliens you have so willingly accepted into our fold without good and just cause? Ridiculous!”

“Your point being, Lord Kennelsey?”

“My point, Lady Govida,” Lord Kennelsey said with cold mocking undertones, “is that we know nothing of their disposition, their forces or their capabilities. And if it is one thing we should not let ourselves fall for, is your machinations in using up resources for a wild goose chase, just so that your enamored agent Tark can have one of his many holidays. Such matters must be dealt decisively, in full force and with the care and organization that the Human League has strove for over the thousand of years of its existence. Several scout vessels would be needed to collect information on this imaginary enemy of yours, as well as support vessels, at least a legion of armed men with their troop transports, pickets and destroyers to provide cover for such a fleet and last but not least, a flotilla of battle-cruisers to provide field support and be able to engage such a supposedly powerful enemy with more than just an upper hand.”

“I motion for Lord Kennelsey’s petition to be approved!” Lady Govida said, and the crowd unanimously sent the walls chiming with a resounding “Aye!”. The council members hesitantly raised their hands in approval, and the Lord Privy said in a loud, officious voice:

“The motion is approved,” he shouted and then nearly whispered to Lady Govida, “I really need to pickup my granddaughter, or I’ll never hear the end of it.”

“This preposterous! I was merely suggesting the foul thinking that -”

“This is politics, Lord Kennelsey,” Lady Govida said with a thin smile, and Winceham couldn’t help but ask Ned:

“Does this mean I can have a smoke now? I’m bloody

well ready to explode.”

Master Sisypus and Lernea were sharing some mead together with some cuts of smoked fish. The smell was overpoweringly homely to Lernea, the rough wooden table felt almost alive to her touch. A few negligent rays of sun shafted down from what little cracks and holes lay in the roof, warming up the make-shift laboratory just the right amount to make it feel welcoming despite all the strange apparatus lying about, looking menacingly unfathomable and uncomfortably pointy.

“You’ve had some interesting times by the sound of it,” Sisypus said while picking a hefty slice of fish. “More than I could hope for, I’m afraid,” she replied with half a smile.

“And you say your sister is probably a million miles away, out there, in the stars?” Sisypus intoned, examining the slice of fish as if looking for some sort of defect.

“Along with the others, yes. Literally though, they’re somewhere out there, plowing through the stars,” she said, her gaze reaching for a slither of sky visible through the patched, thatched roof.

“Must have been a wonderful surprise, traveling in space,” Sisypus said and began nibbling on the morsel of smoked fish, treating it as a rare delicacy.

“At first it felt exciting, but then it felt rather dull. And then it was exciting again, but only because I thought we were going to die,” Lernea replied in earnest and drank from her cup; the strong mead made her body shiver and her face twitch. Sisypus swallowed his bite and offered Lernea an explanation:

“Such is the way of riding the waves of life, Lernea. You’ve just embarked on the Dromos, life’s great boat, that’s

why it can feel jarring at times. Might get sea-sickness as well, somewhere along the journey.”

“It’s all happening too fast. I rarely have Svarna’s guiding light with me. It’s as if I’m shooting blind, Master.”

“Life is short, considering what we mortals wish to leave behind. But do not search for the Gods in vain when it is your own heart and mind that can find the way; do you imagine what would happen if Svarna had to guide everyone? Gods, we wouldn’t be able to take a piss in the middle of the night without divine intervention!” Sisyphus said with mirth. His words made Lernea genuinely smile; she almost felt like a child once more. “And don’t call me Master; I’m not your Master anymore, my Queen,” Sisyphus said smiling before his face turned a bit sour: “Besides, I do have new apprentices.”

“Damon and Fidias?” Lernea asked, her hand reaching for her neck reflexively, where the darts had left a few barely noticeable marks.

“Them. Orphans, naturally. Capable, eager and willing, skilled and showing great promise. But not the sharpest tools in the box.”

“I’m sure you’ll work on them.”

“I’m afraid they’ll have to grow wits as well as a feet or so in height too soon for comfort.”

“I still think this is revolt is ill advised,” Lernea said and reached for her cup, shaking her head in a sombre fashion.

“There’s things you don’t know about the Jangdrivals. Things that only recently have come to my attention. Like this,” Sisyphus said and produced Theo’s crystal from a pocket in his robes. It looked every bit as perfect as the last time Lernea had laid eyes upon it; there was a faint cloud of lights dancing in its very heart, casting rays filled with an

arcane glow, forming intricate geometrical patterns. Lernea was instantly awestruck and nearly drowned as her mouthful of mead had suddenly found a route through her nose.

“By Skrala’s might!” she sputtered while coughing and spitting the rest of her mouthful. “Where did you find that crystal?” she asked with terrible urgency in her voice, wiping her lips as she did so.

“Fished it out of the water. It was what guided me to you and that small island. I didn’t want your friends to see this,” Sisyphus said shaking his head slightly, a meditating look on his age-worn face. “I know you have bonded with them in the fires of battle, but they seem.. Strange,” he added, the last word rolling in his mouth as if it had an entirely new meaning.

“I know the feeling, master, and it’s entirely understandable. In fact, strange doesn’t even begin to describe those two,” Lernea said with an involuntary smirk. Sisyphus put the crystal on the table and laid his hands on his knees, his gaze wandering at the door of his study, as if peering through it.

“I’m afraid I have become perhaps jaded when it comes to people now-days; I can’t speak for the bunny, but animals aren’t behaving like they used to either. Svarna’s light might still shine true and bright, but I can feel it on my skin and in my bones; this crystal here is much more than it looks like,” he said and furrowed his brow, taking a deep, pensive breath.

“I know it’s important, Master. The Ygg went to great lengths to get their...” Lernea’s mind clashed with her tongue before she could find the word. “Hands?” Sisyphus suggested and Lernea countered, “Hands, claws, tendrils...” and shrugged.

“These Ygg, are evil beyond measure, you say?”

“Skrala would not rest until the last of their kind was but

a memory; Svarna would not sleep and she would keep the light of day burning, if only to fend off the darkness of their ways,” Lerneia said shyly, her face grim and demanding.

“Then we need to know what this crystal is exactly. It certainly made me go out there and search for it once my tatar device spotted it. And it did lead me to you.”

“The what?” Lerneia asked, vaguely reminiscent of some cryptic devices that were always off-limits to her and her sister as children.

“The thaumaturgic attunement and radiance device. I thought we had covered its use extensively when I was tutoring you, my queen,” Sisyphus said with a rather friendly smile that looked like it could still turn teacher-gone-mad in a second.

“Ah, yes. Well, naturally, of course,” Lerneia said, feigning that she’d come to remember every little bit about it.

“Never mind, learning is a on-going process in any case,” Sisyphus said before shouting, “Damon! Fidias!”

A few moments of silence ensued; nothing but the sounds of birds chirping outside was heard. Then the door to Sisyphus study swung open wildly, the two boys breaking a sweat and panting, very nearly standing on top of one another.

“You called us, master?” Damon said, wearing a worried frown that looked like it was worn most of the time.

“Do I need to dignify that with an answer? Had I not called you, would you be standing here, asking stupid questions?”

“One stupid question, then,” Fidias said as if to correct his master, his eyes searching for a place to hide, awaiting the impending scolding. Sisyphus said nothing for an awkward moment and then flung his cup against Fidias with a flick of his wrist. Fidias dodged the cup expertly and remarked in

quizzical, rather than impertinent manner:

“What was that for?”

“That was for testing your reflexes, as well as creating another stupid question, thus proving me right and you wrong. Again. You have to think smart, not just sound like it. Now, start up the Tellerator machine,” Sisyphus said with a sigh.

“The Tellerator?” Damon asked hesitantly, looking exactly like someone who wished he had misheard. Much to the boys disappointment, evident in their miserable faces, Sisyphus remained adamant.

“The Tellerator machine. And hop to it,” he insisted while the boys sprang into action, raising the lid of a hatch on the wooden floor and lowering a small ladder. Soon, they disappeared in the basement busily. Lernea offered quietly:

“Don’t you think you’re running the boys a bit too harshly, master? They’re so... Young,” she said finally after searching for the word and it sounded a bit peculiar to her as the word came back to her ears. It felt so long ago that she and Parcifal were in their place, yet it now seemed like another life entirely.

“They’re brimming with life and energy, their minds are like a sponge - somewhat dry though, I’ll admit - and their heart is still pure. It’s the best time to run them hard and harsh. From then on, living through life will seem to them like riding a horse - only natural. Hasn’t it been that way with you?”

Lernea considered that for a bit. She raised a brow and replied earnestly:

“I can’t really tell. I mean, I’m still learning and I’ve seen thing I can’t even recall I had ever dreamt off. I sometimes shudder to think that I was the Queen of Nomos, even for just one day, and knew so little. It makes me doubtful, un-

easy,” she said looking troubled. “But I plow on, nonetheless. With a little help from Parcifal, and my friends,” she said and shrugged, suddenly aware that she hadn’t heard or seen Theo and Bo ever since she’d woken up.

“Doubtful and uneasy; that’s what keeps us on our feet!” Sisyphus said enthusiastically. “I’ve done a great job, don’t mind me saying,” he said with bright, smiling eyes and added, “I’m sure Parcifal’s turned out just as fine a woman as you have in the past few weeks.”

“She sure can handle her sword well,” Lernea said smiling warmly.

“And who can argue with a blade of steel such as Encelados, eh?” Sisyphus said laughing, only to be interrupted by the voices Damon, his head barely popping out of the hatch:

“Master, the Tellerator machine is working,” the boy said. The disgruntled voice of Fidias was heard as well, muffled as it came from further inside the basement:

“Easy for you to say, you don’t have to keep pedaling now, do you?”

“Well it was your turn, wasn’t it?”

“I told you, I don’t remember!”

“Idiots! Work the extra pedals Damon! I’m going to need as much power as possible!” Sisyphus said decisively and picked up the crystal before he himself stood up and made to walk to the hatch.

“Aren’t you coming, my lady? There’s a great deal of findings to be made,” Sisyphus said but Lernea was already heading for the door.

“I think I need to catch up with Theo and Bo. They tend to get lost a lot. After all, I’m typically their host here, aren’t I?” Lernea said with a warm smile.

“As you wish my lady. I’ll send word when I’m done,” Sisyphus said and bowed slightly.

“I’ll volunteer!” said Fidias, his voice echoing faintly, before Sisyphus began his descent to the basement, closing the hatch behind him and making sure he was heard.

“Oh, you’ll wish you hadn’t. Pedals! Pedals!” he demanded while Lerneia closed the door behind her and headed outside, where a cold, sunny afternoon so much like the ones from her childhood seemed to beckon.

Winceham was craning his neck upwards, trying to fit the whole length of the ship in his field of vision, but that wasn’t possible. It wasn’t possible for any of them from that up close to see the HLS Magnometriton in its full glory. Judith had been assigned to be their liaison with the ship’s commander but so far, they’d seen no-one to liaise with and they were simply waiting, sitting down at the docks of Navy Spire Thirty-Seven where the fleet had mostly assembled.

Ned seemed to be in high spirits, and Parcifal was absorbed in watching over the lively preparations. Winceham was idly getting ready for a smoke, and Judith looked weary, even glum.

Below them lay more than a thousand feet of drop to the streets and shops of Rampatur City, while all around the horizon the peaceful countryside with its low-rolling hills and golden brown farmlands lay inviting, yet so unbearably in stark contrast to all the activity around them.

There were hundreds of men and women loading up the ships with provisions of many kinds, some of which were fairly basic like dried food; for the larger part though, it was the cannon-shot and all sorts of strange colourful pellets of some sort that seemed to demand the utmost care. There was

quite quite some noise from all the activity, but not it wasn't overbearing. The sound of buffeting winds rushed by them from time to time.

"What are those?" Ned asked Judith pointing a finger at the pellets. Judith breathed deeply before answering with a slight feeling of guilt:

"I cannot tell you that."

"Come on lass, it's not like you'd have to kill us if you told us lass," Winceham said in an off-beat way, getting ready to light up his pipe with a local variety he was eager to taste, more doubly so since he had acquired the particular pouch of tobacco by virtue of his trade skills, namely, he'd stolen it from an unsuspecting, though evidently quite well-off man in the streets of Rampatur City.

Judith turned her head and looked at the halfuin with a seriously bland expression; a slight shake of her head and a minuscule shrug of her shoulders only meant that she had no comment on that; which only meant it was true and she would have to kill them if she told them. Ned appeared rather hurt than shocked.

"I thought we were in this together. I thought you trusted us," Ned said with a taut face before turning his head away from Judith in a childlike manner. "I thought you trusted me," he said in what amounted to little more than a whisper.

It was Parcifal, and not Judith that spoke next. "This isn't about you, Ned. Or us, even. This is about her. She's getting cold feet, that's all," she said with a frown. "I can only hope you realise what's at stake here," Parcifal told Judith, in an almost scolding tone. Judith's eyes flashed not with anger, but with the glimmer of an innocent, hurt pride.

"I realise much more than you think you do, lady Teletha. Bear in mind I'm still an agent of the Human League, sworn

and dedicated to serve under its laws and edicts. I'm merely following orders; I have no quarrel nor wish for one with you and your friends. And although I can sympathize with you and your cause, I have to maintain a level-headed attitude. I cannot be anything other than dutiful and impartial; otherwise I might hurt you without it being my intention, I assure you," Judith replied, turning her stare at Ned and seeking his eyes which were locked on dead ahead at the Magnometriton's hull.

"You're saying you helping us might cause us trouble?" Winceham pondered making a sour grimace; the quality of the tobacco he had sequestered so tactfully was being put into serious question.

"That's right. I wish I could answer all your questions, and I wish I could help you more. I sometimes wish I had nothing to do with any of this but for me now, there is no other way. Try to understand; I wish there was time enough and the freedom for me to explain, but I can't do that right now. We will be going into battle soon, and that is no time to question and wonder," Judith said, mostly for Ned to hear. "I will protect you to the best of my ability, but I have orders I need to follow. Don't make me choose, Ned," she said and looked at the others with a truly sad pair of eyes. "Or any of you. My loyalty defines me, it's what makes me useful. It's what keeps me going," she added, trying to sound apologetic, in a sense.

"What if you need our protection?" Ned told her rather coldly.

"Then I wish you'd lend it heartily," she said and shot Ned an honest, proud look. It was Parcifal who stood before Judith, the wind ruffling her short hair, her face unperturbed in any way, and told her:

“I can’t speak for the others, but I understand a soldier’s loyalties cannot be divided. It would mean her ruin one way or the other. I appreciate your candid manner; it is more than most would offer though less than I would wish. Be it so, I shall stand my ground next to you, sword in hand, to face the common enemy as long as it is your wish as well.”

Judith nodded solemnly to Parcifal, while Ned shook his head slightly. Winceham shrugged before coughing wildly, his body shaking; he roared and grumbled for a few moments, before clearing up his lungs and throat. A hearty glob of mucus and spit left his lips and landed a couple of feet away, and onto a pair of nice, shiny boots.

The boots belonged to a tall, almost gaunt man with a smart beard and mustache, who looked rather prim and elegant in his suit, full of decorations and shiny bars and medals, without being chest-heavy because of them. He was wearing a captain’s cap and owned a set of piercing black eyes; by his side stood an attache, a rather short fellow with a face seemingly built for smiling, which was what he was doing even as he reached for the captain’s boots with a piece of cloth.

“Captain Elsenior Jones?” Judith asked briskly, to which the captain replied while still eying Winceham as if he were an impossible curiosity.

“Why, yes. I presume you are agent Judith of Naval Intelligence. And this is the infamous Alien Trio?” he said, nodding ever so slightly.

“I speak for all when I say that calling us aliens is an insult, captain,” Ned said out of turn, looking stern but not angry. The captain replied in kind, even as his attache had cleaned up the glob of spit; realizing the piece of cloth had been rendered useless, he tossed it expertly without the captain noticing. Winceham offered a slight bow of apology and

the attache just shrugged it off with a grin and a thumbs-up, which only served to confuse the halfuin.

“I wouldn’t know, sir; it’s in the Navy’s line of business to insult each other. We find it endearing,” the captain said and smiled warmly.

“Of course, rank has its privileges. Sailors and officer’s alike face corporal punishment if they trash-talk to the higher ranks. Unless it’s ‘Keelhaul’ day,” the captain said in a flat, uninteresting voice. “I have orders that consider you, Mr. Larkin,” the captain continued pointing at Ned with a playful finger, “as vice-admiral in-commission, to lead this fleet in victory. Here’s the sealed envelope containing the fleet disposition, rules of engagement and the like.”

“What?” Ned asked as if he hadn’t heard clearly. Everyone, wore the same look of surprise, except Winceham who was focused on the short, uncannily familiar Mr. Bodine.

“The Human League has offered you a war-time, temporary commission as vice-admiral, Mr. Larkin. It would be really rude to question that.”

“But, on whose authority? I wasn’t briefed on this!” Judith complained brusquely. Ned was at a loss for words for a moment, before he turned and looked the captain in the eye.

“Very well, captain. How soon can we cast off?”

“I’d say a couple of hours at the earliest.”

“Make that an hour at most. Leave behind anything non-essential. Round the last of your men. If that means leaving men behind, so be it.”

“Ned, what are you doing? You haven’t got a clue about these things!” Judith insisted, speaking her mind freely.

“What’s to know? It’s all about following orders. Isn’t that right, captain Elsenior?” Ned asked of the tall, perhaps too proud captain.

“Of course, sir. If I may be so bold, sir?” the captain asked.

“Go on,” Ned said, seemingly wearing the authority of a vice-admiral admirably well.

“What ship will you be boarding, sir?”

“Which one is the largest, most powerful ship available in this fleet?”

“That would be the HLS Bellerephon’s Quagmire, sir. But we’ll meet with it shortly before nethersailing, in space.”

“Please escort agent Judith on Bellerephon’s Quagmire once we rendezvous with it. She is to relieve the captain and assume command as soon as possible.”

“Very well, sir.”

“What is this Ned? What do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m giving you a chance to watch after our backs. I’m trusting you, perhaps with too much. But I don’t look worried now, do I?” Ned said, and licked his lips nervously.

“Sir? Will you be boarding the Magnometriton?”

“Is there a ship called Mary in the fleet?”

“Yes, sir. The HLS Maryland. It’s a Gadfly-class picket. Mighty fast ship. She’s one of our best scouts.”

“Is the captain any good?” Ned asked captain Elsenior who remained silent for a while.

“To an extend. By certain definitions. He is known to be rather reckless. He does have a history of insubordination. Has lost three chances to progress; but he has won a number of combat merits.”

“Insubordination?” Ned said thoughtfully before he let a thin grin grow on his face. “Excellent choice then. Captain, I believe that’s all I need for know. Thank you and bon voyage.”

“Thank you, sir. But if I may, can I suggest something?”

“I’m always open to suggestions.”

“You might want to cuss more around the crew. Makes them feel everything’s normal,” he said and nodded briefly before saluting with an open palm, fingers strung together in a vee shape.

“Right. Carry on, captain,” Ned said and added with a suggestive frown, “damn you, you worthless mussel-bag of vomit?”

“Excellent, sir!” the captain said enthusiastically, turned about and headed for the boarding stairs. The short guy hanging around the captain followed behind, giving Winceham a knowing, mischievous look.

“I wish I could remember, but I swear I’ve seen this fella before,” Winceham said while Judith looked at Ned with a deeply furrowed brow, hands crossed against her chest irately.

“You can’t do that.”

“I just did.”

“This isn’t some game.”

“I take matters very seriously. I am, after all, the vice-admiral.”

“I don’t know who decided to make you leader of the fleet, but we’ll be lucky if this just doesn’t turn into a catastrophe.”

“Why don’t you worry about yourself first.”

“Is this something personal? You’re not taking things into perspective here Ned. There are countless lives at risk here and you’re acting all high and mighty all of a sudden.”

“Is that a problem?”

“Does it matter if I think of it as one?”

“No. You have your orders. Take the Bellerophon’s Quagmire. Await instructions. That’s all you need to know for now,” Ned said and Judith simply shot him a wild-eyed look and went up the stairs to the Magnometriton in a heavy,

hurt silence. Parcifal wore an earnest look of bewildered confusion. She leaned on Ned's shoulder and whispered, even though it was impossible for someone to overhear in all the hubbub.

"What exactly, are you doing?"

"I haven't got the slightest idea."

"It was all an act?"

Ned shrugged and nodded, sighing.

"Pretty convincing. You're not half as bad as I thought. At least when you're not telling jokes."

"It's kind of a hard time to work on my comedy."

"If you think about it, this is starting to look like a joke. They hardly thought of us as humans, and now they're entrusting you with a whole fleet of ships? Don't you find that strange, Ned?"

"I find it horrifying. But whatever's going on, there's a job to be done. And an act someone wants me to put on."

"What about Judith?"

"She'll be safer in that big ship. And if she really means it, she'll be best suited to help us if the need arises."

"You've really thought this through, haven't you?" Parcifal said, her eyes fixated on the afternoon sun.

"Not by an inch. But I play on instinct, anyhow."

"I can't remember if we've been dead piss-drunk together or not. I keep getting these strange flashbacks but everything's fuzzy," Winceham said mostly to himself.

"What are you talking about?"

"Mr. Bodine."

"Who is that?"

"That captain's attache."

"What attache?"

"The short fella who cleaned up his boots."

“Wince, are you eating some of those mushrooms again?” Ned asked the halfuin feeling genuinely worried for his well-being.

Master Sisyphus was juggling a number of dials and levers of an arcane design in an expert, controlled fashion. Whirring sounds and the occasional clanging noise reverberated throughout the intricate machine as he handled it with attention to every detail, feeling his way to the mysteries of the crystal under scrutiny as it revolved slowly in a receptacle which glowed with a multitude of lights.

The two boys, Damon and Fidas were both pedaling hard on a doohickey made of leather belts and iron cast wheels connected in a complex way to the tatar device. Sweat ran down their foreheads freely, their faces flush red.

“Are we done yet, Master?” Damon ventured, panting.

“Be silent. This is delicate work! Keep pedaling!” Sisyphus replied hastily without turning his focus away from the machine. “This is fantastic. The thaumaturgic levels are nothing like I have ever seen,” he murmured audibly.

“So much for being an expert,” Fidas said under his breath. To his dismay, Sisyphus overheard the comment, even though he was evidently enthralled by the study of the crystal.

“Haven’t I been definitive about being a smart ass, Fidas? Triple chores for you tomorrow. That involves fetching water from the spring.”

“That’s ten miles away!” the boy complained painfully and slowed down the pedaling. The tatar device began flickering, becoming unstable.

“More pedal! Don’t slow down, not now!” Sisyphus urged the two boys and Fidas groaned, pedaling back up to speed. The flickering stopped and the machine resumed its

normal, still unsettling noises.

“If that seems to be the case, then... By the Gods, I need to write this down. Keep pedaling!”

“We know!” Fidias groaned again, his voice brooding from the physical effort, only to elicit Damon’s weary eye and a thorough, disapproving shake of the other boy’s head. Master Sisypheus was engrossed in finding a clean piece of scroll and a pen in what undoubtedly was a mess of a laboratory, pieces of equipment lying about in various states of working order, ranging from nuts and bolts to full-blown monstrosities ready to go if one dared to use them. Still though, a simple writing apparatus complete with paper and ink wasn’t easy to find under a heap of books, plans, designs and thingamajigs.

“Will someone get me a pen and a piece of paper? A scroll? Anything, at all?”

“But we’re pedaling, master!” Damon said with a strained voice.

“Bah! What good are you two when you’re most needed?” Sisypheus wondered and shuffled at various desks and shelves at random. Before long, he found a suitable piece of scroll, that had only been used in the most rudimentary way; an old shopping list with enough room in the back. He picked up a jarred piece of a broken glass tube, very much like a sharp-tipped pen and dipped it in a nearby pool of dropped, always-wet ink.

“It will have to do. This could prove the greatest discovery ever!”

“Could you hurry up, master? I can’t feel my legs anymore,” Damon asked petulantly. “I’m burning up inside, I think I’ll throw up,” Fidias added morosely.

“Would you have it on your heads if the world crumbles away and the universe is engulfed in the eternal flames of

destruction?” Sisyphus asked the boys in all seriousness even as his hand scribbled down in a muddied, dense script, notes, numbers and designs that seemed to make no sense. The two boys barely had the energy to venture a miserable look at each other.

“This will change everything. At least, everything that matters,” Sisyphus said staring at the piece of scroll he had just finished writing down. He put the piece of glass dripping with ink down on the machine, and simply stared at the crystal in awe.

“Can we stop now? Please, master,” Damon said even as the lights on the machine began flickering on and off alarmingly once more.

“Haven’t we discussed the merits of perseverance, Damon?” Master Sisyphus said even as a terrible cracking noise thundered above them, followed by a series of thuds and howls. It sounded like a whirlwind had ripped the roof of the house. Sisyphus looked up, as if the noise was unsettling only in the way a pesky rat might be.

“Boys, how do you feel about some extra points in combat orientation?”

“We’re kind of beat, to be perfectly honest, master,” Damon said as his pedaling slowed to less than a walking pace, while Fidias had given up entirely and was resting his chin on a handle of the pedaling apparatus. “I want to go to sleep,” Fidias murmured drowsily, right before the wooden planks above their heads was ripped apart by half a dozen blue and black claws. Through the gaping chasm, tendrils writhed and squirmed like living things with a mind of their own, reaching for the two boys.

“I’m afraid that’ll have to wait. Pole-arms! On the double, boys! Cover!” Sisyphus said and reached under his robes,

uncovering a minuscule repeating crossbow with unusually sharp cone-shaped bolts. The boys fell on the ground instinctively, the clawed hands and tendrils hitting nothing but air. Sisyphus had an easy enough target, a blue-black mass of flesh that was stuck half-way into the basement. He let fly his shots wildly, turning a crank that reloaded the crossbow in less than a second. All the bolts found their target; the monsters seemed to feel and acknowledge that they'd been hit, but it didn't seem to slow them down.

They ripped another whole section of flooring and just when they were about to jump down, they began trembling uncontrollably, faint rivulets of milky fluid oozing from where they'd been stung. The next moment, they exploded like a toad on a hot summer's day, without warning, in a messy, gory fashion, milky blood and pieces of tendrils and arms flying in all directions.

"That wasn't supposed to happen," Sisyphus said puzzled, while the boys reappeared, each armed with a wooden training pole-arm easily three times as tall as them. Lernea popped her head through the flooring, milky stuff dripping from her dangling hair.

"Master, we need to move. Right now," she said urgently while behind her Bo shot past in an amazing flying leap, shooting fireballs that left a sizzling sound long after they'd flown into a couple of directions.

"Not the training pole-arms! The real ones!" Sisyphus exploded in anger, while tucking the crystal and the piece of scroll safely under his robes.

"But master, you said we weren't ready," Damon countered in a confused fashion.

"Ready or not, you'll have to do," Lernea said and reached for an arrow in her quiver before standing up and away from

the hole in the floor. The sounds of battle echoed down below, as otherworldly cries rose up from numerous directions.

“You heard the queen, boys. Consider this a pass if you live,” Master Sisyphus said, making sure to pickup his old, venerable quarterstaff before pulling down the small wooden staircase and climbing it in a hurry.

“If we live?” Fidias wondered and Damon shrugged. “You don’t suppose this is just another elaborate test?” Fidias said, as they too climbed the creaky staircase, wielding the pole-arms in a cumbersome manner, very much like fishing poles. What they saw at ground floor, left them speechless.

The roof of the house had been ripped apart, as if shaved off. The walls had mostly turned into rough patches of still standing wood and bodies of the same hideous black-and-blue monsters that had attacked them lay everywhere.

The bunny that had only barely singed a couple of locks off their hair, was hopping about, letting go fire-bolts with dead-eye accuracy at the ranks of the approaching, abyssal foe that the boys had only believed existed in nightmares, of the worst sort. Lernea was picking her targets wisely, covering for Bo, and Theo was levitating a foot or so above ground, holding his hands against his ears, as if trying to block out everything from his mind.

“What happened?”

“I went to search for Theo and Bo. They were out fishing on the docks, with little success if I may add, when the whole village turned on us,” Lernea answered flatly.

“Turned on you? Where did those monsters appear from?”

“The villagers, were Ygg in disguise, every last one of them.”

“Is it possible that you brought them here, my lady?”

“No way that I can think of.”

“Then they were here already. Waiting...” Sisypheus let his voice trail off.

“We need to carve out an escape path. I’m not sure we can take all of them head on,” Lernea said and let fly an arrow at nearly point blank range right in the head of a flying Ygg who had bad ideas about her welfare.

“Excellent tactical analysis, my queen. But on the strategic side, if those Ygg were already here, lying in wait... That only meant they were waiting for you, and that crystal,” Sisypheus told her as he stood by her side, reloading his crossbow with spare bolts from a cupboard-turned-armory.

“What did you find out?” Lernea replied as she nocked another arrow in her bow, waiting for a good target to approach them. Bo was having a blast, literally but was too busy turning Ygg into crispy stumps to even send a thought on the matter.

“Their father,” Sisypheus said nodding at Theo and Bo, “he’s alive and well, but hiding. He knows what the Ygg are truly after.”

“That information was inside the crystal? Who is he?”

“A very talented, ingenious individual by the name of Athmoor Radaniel. What’s even more important, he’s marked a way for us to track him down.”

“What are the Ygg after?”

“The Netherspring.”

“What’s so important about that thing?”

“Everything!”

“I suggest you take some kind of cover, master.”

“Why?”

“Theo is right about ready to blow them all to pieces.”

“He can do that? How?”

“Something called Rho.”

“Did you say Po?” Master Sisyphus said and Lernea replied with a shake of her head and said ‘Rho’ once more. Only, no matter how loud her shout, her mouth seemed to simply open and close, in a slow, languid fashion, the sound of the compression shock that expanded from Theo visible in the air, blanketing everything in all directions.

And indeed, just like a stone makes waves when it lands on water, so did the power of Rho reverberate in a radius all around them, the Ygg writhing in sudden, terrible agony before their heads exploded in a gory mess of milky blood, pieces of tendrils and cerebral matter flying about, leaving their bodies to slump hard against the ground, exactly like a puppet whose strings were torn away.

“I hope to the Gods Master won’t make us clean this up,” Damon said under his breath before Theo collapsed on the floor with a thud.

“The rest of the fleet should be arriving in the vicinity of Laertia within the hour, Mr. Larkin. Shall I signal the Magnometriton?” the short, thick-set captain of the HLS Maryland asked Ned, eagerly waiting for a reply. Ned was surveying the starry landscape with an intricate eye-piece that only served to make the distant stars a tad less brighter. Nothing remotely strange registered; instead, the world of Laertia rotated slowly, filling most of the star-scape with its blue, white and green hues.

“Not yet, captain. I don’t see anything strange. It’s just that I’d never fully realised how beautiful home was,” Ned said thoughtfully and turned to look at the captain with a furrowed brow. “Have you noticed anything strange, Mr. Peelpot?” he then asked the plump little man whose uniform

looked about ready to burst. The captain of the HLS Maryland gave the matter the short time of attention it required and formulated an easy enough answer: "We're running low on beer, sir, and as any half-competent sailor will tell you, that could prove to be troublesome. A beer-disgruntled crew is no laughing matter; I'll check the stores personally."

"I was under the impression that, with the ship being so small and all, there's very little crew involved. In fact," Ned nodded at Winceham who was shooting craps with a small gang of sailors under the main mast of the Maryland, "there's the whole lot of the crew right there. They look disgruntled all right, but I wouldn't suppose it's because of the beer," he pointed out as another wave of boos and awfully uncharming swearing rose out from a half-dozen men who seemed to be having a suspiciously long-winded streak of bad luck, while the captain disappeared below deck in a show of swiftness that his plump body belied.

"Seven times in a row? Again?" cried one of the crew. Judging from the look on his face, even if he was probably not very well versed in statistics, he knew there was something terribly lucky about winning seven times in a row, again. And everyone knew, luck always runs out in the end, not the other way around.

"Is seven a bad number for you? How about eight?" Winceham said with a provocatively smug grin, just about ready to throw another round of the dice. Another one of the crew rose up to his full height, which was a little more than twice Winceham's diminutive, halfuin-standard size. He placed a very haunting look of bad things waiting to happen on him, but Winceham continued unfazed.

"Bets? Anyone? No?" he asked around, more comfortable-looking than a pig rolling in mud. He received

no reply and just as he was ready to pick up the small pile of coins resting on the ship's floor, the tall, heavy-set sailor who otherwise looked like a nice fellow, withholding the fact he could crush a man larynx single-handedly, told him in a rather calm yet threatening way.

"No ya don't."

Winceham cocked his head sideways and looked at him the way kids look at obnoxious neighbors. "These are my winnings. You know what winnings are, don't you?" Winceham said as he made to gather the small shiny golden pile in his cupped hands.

"You're a thief," said one sailor through gritted teeth.

Winceham laughed a polite little laugh before making a gesture with his hand, implying that was no secret to anyone.

"And a liar," another sailor added with some more bravado.

"Now I won't have any of that name-calling. First and foremost, I'm a gentleman and I demand some satisfaction to my honor," Winceham said in a passionate voice even as he began sweeping the coins with the cup of his hand off the ship's deck and into his money pouch. Everyone of the sailors had lost money. A lot of money that perhaps equaled half of a month's pay. Which was a quarter of their drinking money. Which was a lot.

One of them took the dice into his hand for the first time since Winceham started shooting, and felt them in his hands. Then he held one up and turned it round and round; they looked like perfectly ordinary dice. He shot one down on the deck; the dice hopped and spun, and fumbled and sat in one of its faces with a seriously ponderous wobble. The face had the crude drawing of an anchor.

"Anchor. Again," he said and looked at Winceham,

through angry, red-shot eyes.

“I wouldn’t hope to explain to you the intricate workings of a game of luck, but it is quite possible to become confused. Especially someone like you?”

“What’s that mean? Someone like me?”

“A sailor?”

“You playin’ us for a fool now, eh?”

“Fools are a lot more fun, even the bad ones.”

The group got up on their feet and huddled around Winceham, just about ready to unanimously vote on giving him a silent treatment of the old soap in a sock. Ned demanded their attention, in his most conversational tone of voice: “Now, gentlemen, I’m sure we’re all a little uptight about the mission and all.”

The men slowly looked at Ned with a curious kind of gaze, the kind people might think lizards look like when copulating. It was eerie and uncomfortable, but it somehow got their attention for a moment, only to have Winceham pull them back in:

“See what I mean? Even the bad ones are kind of fun.”

“Yer in fer a world o’ pain, shorty lad,” the tall muscle-bound sailor said and grabbed Winceham by his leather jacket, and whisked him into the air with just one hand. Winceham looked down upon the tall sailor and the men who nodded approvingly of what their idea of justice looked like.

“Now, let’s not make any hasty decisions,” Ned said and added with a generous smile and a show of his hands, “Have you ever heard of what happened when a pirate captain and a parrot happened upon a genie in their lifeboat?”

“What’s a genie? Is it some kind of cod?”

“No, it’s this mythological magical being, you see you usually have to rub a lamp and then...”

“Rump of the lamb?” another sailor asked mildly confused.

“No, no, you see this genie, you make a wish, and the captain wished for the sea to turn into rum?”

“Why would anyone want that?” the tall guy said, Winceham still in his grasp.

“Right. That’s stupid,” someone else said and the others agreed heartily, nodding in mumbling unison. “Where would we pee then?”

“Or take a dump? Think o’ the waste,” another one asked indignantly.

“Oh. Guess you’ve heard that one before,” Ned said to himself mostly and another sailor, the eldest of the crew, the one who had misheard earlier, did so again.

“Rump, did you say? Wot’s going on? Is there lamb on this ship?”

“Oy! We wants some of that lamb, right now!”

“Aye!” the crew cheered unanimously, cradling mops and brooms, as well as ropes and knives, and all the assorted tools any sailor finds indispensable, like smoking pipes.

“Could you be so kind as to hold me up a little higher, now?”

“Nah, I’m not kind enough,” the tall sailor said grinning. Winceham replied after weighing in his options for a moment. “That’ll have to do then,” the halfuin said and kicked hard and high, aiming for the sailor’s jaw. Instead, he missed and his boot connected with the sailor’s nose; a crunching sound was heard and blood spurted, some of it spilling on his boot. The sailor growled with pain and the next instant, a shout was heard from someone in the crew:

“It’s a free-for-all!”

Fists began flying and various instruments of seamanship found new use as bruising, head-crushing implements. Stools and pegs were in good supply and eagerly used as well. Ned hadn't realised how easy it was for a gambling issue to escalate into a full-fledged fist-fight. They had only been out to space for a day, and yet the beer had run dry, and the crew was already fighting amongst themselves.

"Wince? Stop monkeying around! These people are trying to help!" Ned shouted, only to receive a muffled answer a little while later, "But it's my money now!"

The rest of Winceham's voice trailed off into a dusty cloud of fists and brawler's growls. He was well into the fight, and Ned knew that the captain of the HLS Maryland should be taking things into his hands sooner rather than later; unfortunately he discovered the captain was ostentatiously drunk, trying to steer the ship by using a strange mechanism that included a dead fish and one of those dangerous-looking, multicolored cannonballs. He was having difficulty keeping the dead fish level on the rolling cannonball.

"What the hell happened to rigor mortis, eh? Bloody useless fish. Throw'em out to dead space, I say!" Captain Peelpot urged no-one in particular, and Ned sadly realised he was all alone, at least until the rest of the fleet arrived. Ned took the helm into his hands, smiling all the time at the captain who was looked at him with a wild-eyed look of confoundment and asked him:

"Is that you, Melissa?"

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Peelpot. I'd say I'm flattered, but I wouldn't be telling the truth now, in any case."

"Come to me, my bristling sea-wench, smelling of salty toffee, wet like the breeze and hotter than my stovepipe!" Captain Peelpot cried and throwing the dead fish aside, tried

to grab Ned with arms open-wide and kiss him.

Ned was very nearly taken off-guard and side-stepped the drunk-like-a-bat captain at the last moment; he put out his foot and tripped him, but as Captain Peelpot was going down, he reached out a hand and grabbed Ned down with him. The prospect of being fondled on the deck of a very fast picket by a drunken captain of the Human League did not appeal to Ned who held on to the helm, making the ship roll with him abruptly.

The ship swerved violently and changed attitude and course as if some gigantic hand slapped its sides; and it was at that exact moment that Ned saw a blinding flash of purplish light fill the void of space above them, casting pinkish shades all over the ship. A great swath of light, like a flaming torrent of pure energy had missed them by a couple of seconds, Ned realised, and just a look made everything so much clearer and darker at the same time.

A huge oblong shadowy shape, stony black and flashing blue at times, was looming at an ever-decreasing distance, struts of jutting rock laden with bizarre crystal constructs. It was sort of terrible ship, shaped like a malevolent arrowhead of grim, dark stone and it was clearly on a collision course.

“Melissa? I’ll be gentle. Come hither, tis’ not alcohol you smell but after-shave,” Captain Peelpot said groggily, as if in a dream, one hand searching for a long-lost cup and the other

“We’re under fire and on a collision course with a big black –” Ned urged him and was interrupted before having a chance to explain the situation.

“Say nothing more!” Captain Peelpot yelled as if waking up from a terrible nightmare, demonstrating surprising clarity and brio. “Mr. Peppersplotch, man the C-taser turret! Mr. Roolgoolie, give me maximum sailing speed and Mr. Wool-

dredge, will you put the halfuin down? He's a guest! Report to Mr. Galloway when the battle is over and detain yourself for conduct unbecoming of a sailor," Captain Peelpot said in an orderly, commanding fashion, though still somewhat slurring his words. Ned was pleasantly surprised because they were still uncharred and alive, and the Captain seemed to know his stuff.

"I thought you were dead drunk," Ned told the Captain with an approving smile, even as he gave the helm another random swing and push and the ship dived and swerved erratically, avoiding another swath of purple light, bright as the sun and wider than the main mast of the Maryland.

"That I am. Drunker than a dead dodo, sir, but blast me to pieces if I'll lose her!"

"That's a whole lot of devotion for a ship. I must admit it's admirable Captain but let's be realistic!"

"I was talking about Melissa," the Captain said and shot Ned a glazed-eyed look that made him flinch instinctively. The Captain swerved the ship around and with the crew finally taking their places and Winceham panting on the deck, searching for his pipe, the Captain screamed in a maddening show of the power of intoxication:

"I'm coming for you, Melissa! Full speed ahead, bear down all guns on that piece of flying rock!"

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Ned suggested, feverishly trying to find a way out of almost certain oblivion.

"Of course not! If we we were sure, we wouldn't be out there, caught in that God-forsaken storm, Melissa! Oh, Melissa!" the Captain said almost crying.

"Right, I thought so as much," Ned said and punched Captain Peelpot in the face, bringing him down on the deck, harmlessly but certainly painfully unconscious. Another

great column of purple light missed the ship proper by a few feet, evaporating the top of the mast without so much as a sizzle.

“I’m not running away,” Ned murmured to himself, clutching the hem tightly, even as he heard Winceham complaining coarsely, still searching for his pipe: “How can anyone have a decent smoke in peace around here?”

Bo was leading the party in nearly complete darkness. She’d lit her eyes just so that there was enough light for them not to trip badly or fall into a suddenly wide, gaping, deep chasm.

“What about traps? There could be traps lying around,” Theo whispered with a hiss. Master Sisypus answered in a lecturing tone of voice:

“These old mines had been used for safeguarding thousands of refugees back in the Warm Age. No-one but sages and the odd adventurer ever roamed these tunnels again.”

“What if they set traps?” Theo asked sounding rather concerned.

“I thought elves can detect traps. It’s supposed to be like a sixth-sense,” Sisypus replied, and elicited Lerne’s laughter.

“Next thing I hear, they can see dead people as well,” she said grinning in the dark.

“Well, can’t you all? I mean, don’t you see dead people? Like the mariners in the ship?” Theo said in all seriousness.

“Those were phantom constructs. They came with the ship, actually,” Master Sisypus said with a gruff undertone.

“In any case, even if we can detect traps, I wouldn’t know what to look for,” Theo said and shrugged.

“You’re not supposed to look for them, they just spring to mind, if you’ll excuse the pun,” Sisypus argued.

“I can detect traps, but I need reagents,” Bo sent to Theo and Lernea who instantly asked out loud, “Carrots?”

“No,” Bo sent, like her feelings were hurt. “Never mind,” she sent and continued to hop in advance, quietly.

“You’re talking to the bunny, aren’t you?” Damon said from the back.

“Be silent,” Sisyphus told the boy sternly.

“Yes master,” both boys intoned with a knowing monotone.

The party continued on, through roughly cut tunnels and natural crevices. The tunnel system was filled with caves, large and small; housing room and storage space indeed, by the looks of it. They hurried by, following a twisting and turning path as directed by Sisyphus who seemed to have recorded the whole arrangement in memory. He gave simple, short directions at every junction, and Bo hopped along in silence.

The boys weren’t exactly restless but they could be heard whispering idly from time to time. Invariably, Master Sisyphus turned and gave them a look, which somehow penetrated the nearly complete darkness and made the boys fall silent once more. There was even the hint of a shudder when they realised there would be serious reprisals when the proper time came.

“We’re here,” Master Sisyphus said gravely, looking up into the rocky ceiling.

“Are you sure, Master?” Lernea asked.

“Of course I’m sure,” Sisyphus said and poked the ceiling with his staff to emphasize. “This is old, nay, ancient rock. It’s where the old cistern was carved out.”

“Then the drainage plug must be nearby,” Lernea said nodding to herself. “Bo, lights,” she said and the next instant

the cave filled with light. The vision that filled everyone's eyes made them freeze in place, holding their breaths. Everywhere around the cave walls, there were strange, egg-like things clinging on to the rock and dirt like clams. Even in the stony pillars that held the ceiling, interspersed around the cave, these odd eggs lay, scaly and fish-like in appearance, yet trembling and pulsating like living things.

"By Skrala, what are these things?" Lernea said with a hushed voice.

"They look like eggs of some sort," Theo noted and nodded enthusiastically to himself.

"An infestation. A hatchery of some sort. By the Gods, these Ygg are a devilish plague. We must move swiftly. Imagine what would happen if these things hatched," Sisyphus said with a furrowed brow.

"Something would grow out of them?" Theo asked plainly, unfazed.

"Precisely. More Ygg," Sisyphus replied and cautiously moved forward. "There's the plug, that circular plate of metal over there," he said and pointed with his staff to a manhole in, jutting out of the ceiling at the end of a metal pipe a few yards away. "We need to get to the Walled Garden. It is where the so-called monument is being constructed. Does everyone remember the layout? We need to move like shadows. If things get out of hand and we're forced to fight, make it quick. Whatever lays in the Garden, must be destroyed. Speed is of the essence. Do you understand, Theo and Bo?" Sisyphus asked eying the elf grimly.

"I think I do. Just get there, right? Bo says she does as well," Theo replied, squinting his eyes as he focused on some particular egg for no reason.

"My queen?" Sisyphus asked Lernea and she simply nod-

ded with understanding.

“Damon, Fidias, stay close,” Sisyphus prompted but did not receive the usual reply from his young apprentices.

“Boys?” he asked once more and looked behind him only to discover they weren’t where they were supposed to be. A quick look around the cave unveiled their presence; they were poking a couple of the eggs with their daggers, giggling and toying with each other, as if the eggs were just one of many curious toys.

“Blasted furnaces!” Sisyphus shouted, his voiced raised to an echoing din. The boys froze, realizing they’d done something wrong. Their heads drooped, even as one by one, the eggs started sprouting open, like a peeled fruit.

“That’s strange, isn’t it? They seem to be sensitive to sound.”

“Really, now? Not exactly helpful right now,” Lerneia said and drew her bow, nocking an arrow deftly in the process.

“I was merely pointing out a possibility,” Theo insisted, oblivious to the ever-mounting danger.

“You’ll be fetching water until after you’re dead! Move!” Sisyphus said and the boys sprung into a running spree, like a pile of hot coals was shoved down their backsides. At the same moment, the eggs opened up fully, each one revealing a tentacled larva the size of a large rat, arrayed in dark, glistening scaled, hundreds of pseudo-pods writhing as they emerged and began crawling around the floor and the walls of the cave, menacingly drawn to the party.

“Quickly! Theo, stand under the plug! We’ll climb on top of you and then pull you up!”

“Why me?” Theo complained.

“You’re the tallest! It only makes sense!” Lerneia said and shot an arrow, piercing a few of the hatchlings in one

go, their tentacles writhing in a frenzy before dying out and falling limp.

“What about a rope?” Theo suggested even as Bo’s eyed flared up fully and she began hurtling fireballs at the hatchlings with frightening ease, engulfing them in flames a dozen at a time.

“Where would we tie down the damned rope? By Svarna, think for a moment!” Lernea shouted irately as she reloaded her bow.

“I am thinking! Yelling never solved anything now, did it?” he said even as Master Sisyphus climbed on his back.

“Stand still now!” he shouted as he turned the manhole a full circle, unscrewing it and tossing it down on the floor.

“Be careful with that!” Theo said even as Bo hopped around stylishly, seemingly having loads of fun spouting fiery death and turning the Ygg hatchlings into a crispy mass of ugly vermin.

“You’re not helping, Theo,” Lernea said through gritted teeth, letting loose another shot at a mass of hatchling crawling uncannily around the ceiling, making them fall down on the cave’s floor like monstrous droppings.

“Well, I haven’t been used like a ladder before, I wouldn’t know how to help now would I?”

“Just stand still!” Sisyphus said pushing himself upwards through the manhole, his feet wobbling on Theo’s shoulders for a moment before he found some handles inside the pipe. The next instant, he disappeared inside it fully.

“Get them off me!” Fidias shouted as one of the hatchlings had grabbed on to him, writhing its way up on to his shoulders. An arrow flew past his ear piercing the minutely-sized horror, felling it onto the floor.

“Hurry, you idiots!” Sisyphus’s voice was heard with a

metal ringing to it, slightly muffled yet every bit as commanding as ever.

“You told me to stand still!” Theo complained with a confused shout.

“Not you, them! Throw me the rope!” Sisyphus yelled, while Bo kept most of the hatchlings at bay, their dead, charred bodies forming an ever-narrower ring around the party.

“We don’t have any rope, master!” Damon replied, looking confused and arguably scared.

“Not you! The elf!”

“Me? I don’t have any rope,” Theo intoned, sounding surprised, even while Lernea was grabbing on to him, propping herself up.

“You just proposed using a rope a minute or so earlier!” Sisyphus yelled.

“I was merely suggesting we could have used a rope,” Theo replied with a maddening calmness.

“Skrala lent us strength,” Master Sisyphus said and sighed, even as Lernea climbed along the pipe.

“Hurry, boys!” she said, urging them to climb on Theo’s back as fast as possible. The ring around the party was menacingly narrow, only a few feet of clear ground between Theo and the writhing mass of Ygg hatchlings.

“What if they’re friendly? Maybe they just want to be pet. And fed,” Theo suggested musingly while the boys both scrambled on top of his shoulders like frightened children would on the bark of a tree.

“They want to be fed alright!” Lernea shouted as she reached for the boys’ hands, hanging upside down, Master Sisyphus holding on to her legs, using his body as a counterweight, his feet propped against the lip of the manhole pipe.

The boys extended their hands and Lernea caught onto them, pulling them up slowly with her arms, grunting from the effort.

“What have you been feeding these kids?” she exclaimed through gritted teeth, while Master Sisyphus replied in earnest “They just keep getting into the pantry at nights!”

“It wasn’t us, master!” Fidias proclaimed as they rose through the pipe and onto the bed of the old cistern, a huge empty walled expanse with barely enough light to see each others face.

“We were only trying to feed our cats, master!” Damon explained as he collapsed on the cistern’s bed, panting.

“Cats? You have been feeding cats from the pantry? Haven’t I told you not to feed the animals? Especially around the laboratory?”

“I think I can feel them crawling up my legs,” Theo said sounding rather uncomfortable while Bo hopped his way up on top of Theo’s head and into the pipe, easily reaching the cistern proper.

“Hurry, brother!” she sent to him and Theo raised his hands but he couldn’t reach out to Lernea. There was a small gap between them.

“I can’t reach you,” Theo protested. “By Svarna’s seven-starred crown, just jump!” Lernea urged him even as half a dozen hatchlings clung on to his robes.

“Right, jump!” he said enthusiastically and did so, his hands latching on to Lernea’s. With a straining effort she pulled him slightly upwards, before he could put one hand on a handle and feel his way up. Bo took care of the hatchlings with small pulses of fire shooting forth from her eyes, burning them to a crisp one by one without even singeing Theo’s hair. The next moment, Theo was lying down on the cistern’s bed,

hatchling-free. Right behind him, a couple or so hatchlings crawled their way up, hundreds or so following right behind them.

“The manhole cover! The plug!” Lerneia said alarmingly, pointing at the gaping manhole.

“Idiots! Must I think of everything?” Sisyphus said and slapped the boys across their faces.

“Oh, right,” Theo said and without moving a muscle, he closed his eyes and the manhole cover lifted itself from the ground and floated easily upwards, crushing a number of hatchling as it firmly closed the manhole and screwed itself into its locked place.

Bo took care of the last few hatchlings that had time to crawl through. A collective sigh of relief echoed around the huge empty space.

“By Skrala, you could do that? Lift things into the air?” Lerneia asked Theo, sounding positively miffed.

“Well, yes. It’s Rho,” Theo replied and shrugged.

“Why didn’t you lift us all up then?” she said with a quarrelsome voice and slapped him in the arm in a rare fit.

“No-one asked me to, honestly. You just told me to stand there,” Theo replied matter-of-factly.

“Well, by Skrala, take some initiative once in a while.”

Theo thought about that for a moment and nodded.

“Alright. I’ll take care of the bats then,” he said and pointed at the lips of the cistern’s walls, where dozens of blue pinpricks of light flickered on and off, growing in size and numbers with each passing moment.

“Bats?” Master Sisyphus asked, the furrow in his brow carried over uncannily in his voice.

“Those aren’t bats,” Lerneia said and a piercing, monstrous shriek reverberated, echoes of doom following in its

trail.

A sleek, fiery streak of light, metal and wood hurled itself across the sky of Laertia. Close behind it like an incessant hound on its mark, was the jagged hulk of an Ygg warship, shooting hooks and chains to grab the HLS Maryland, which wobbled uncertainly but always managed to steer away at the last moment.

Winceham was at the helm, while everything around him wrangled with the overpowering noise things make when they're about to be torn up in pieces.

"Ned, lad! If you have any brilliant ideas, now would be a good time!" Winceham yelled, his pipe perfectly destroyed by a beam of light that would have proved unseemly fatal if it were to stray a few inches closer to his head, the stem of the pipe still stuck on his lips.

"Nothing fancy, but it would help if you could land someplace where we can hide!" Ned replied from the deck, where he was helping the crewmen take out a fire that threatened to burn down the main mast. The ship's hull glowed with a warm, at times fierce orange and silvery light as they entered the planet with a speed far superior to the one the ship had been designed for. Unfortunately for them, the Ygg behemoth which closely resembled a sharp flying mountain or a jagged stone spear-tip had little trouble keeping up.

"I can't see a bloody thing lad, we're still going too fast! It's all a blur!"

"Try to find some clouds to hide in!" Ned shouted back as they kept pouring buckets of sand used as ballast on the main mast, with little success in keeping the mast from turning into a cinder. "And try to keep her steady!" Ned added from a prone position on the deck, after a sudden violent lurch

had sent him and four other men off-balance. A wide beam of purple, eldritch light thick as shadows shot by the ship's starboard side, right beside the ship's waterline, filling the air with a reverberating, fizzing and crackling sound.

"You mean you want us dead?"

"I mean keep her flying in the same direction! We need to spot the Kingdom of Nomos!" Ned urged Winceham even as he was getting back on his feet.

"What am I looking for then?" Winceham shouted over the raucous din of the ship falling apart and the turbulent, violent entry into Laertia's skies.

"Mountains, I guess!" Ned replied with a bucket loaded with sand in his hand. "Parciful!" he shouted out, his eyes searching for Parciful frantically. He saw her then, at the stern of the ship, perched inside a huge throne-like enclosure, like a bird in a cage with a pretty hefty-looking cannon attached to the cage. Then the whole assembly she was using through all sorts of levers intricately connected to a whirring, rotating mass of cogs and rods, shook in its entirety as a violent, blinding, multi-hued colored fireball shot forth from the cannon's muzzle in a show of sputtering fireworks. A moment or so later the shot landed at the Ygg ship, tearing down a jutting rock spire and stripping it away from the main ship, crumbling in the air as the turbulent air wrecked it to pieces. The Ygg ship seemed to have noticed, trying to swerve a moment too late, but only barely; it answered with a massive volley of violet bursts of raw energy in a square-grid pattern, its source a neatly packed, shiny mass of rough-hewn crystals.

"Incoming!" Parciful shouted for everyone to hear, before urging the cannon's crew: "Reload! Make it look like your lives depend on it!"

"I thought they do, missus. Don't they, Mr. Tinkerery?"

a crewman asked earnestly even while loading of the multi-colored balls into the cannon. “Oy boyo! Shut your mouth and do your job, or there’ll be no rum for you next shift!” replied the crew-master, expertly unfazed even as a violet ray of death ate away crisply at his sailor’s hat. He nevertheless tipped whatever remained of his hat to Parcifal who let another well-aimed salvo the instead she felt the tap at her knee.

“Parcifal!” Ned yelled, running towards her, the mast behind him snapping in two like a badly burned fire log, just when Winceham put the Maryland in a violent downward spin. The sudden lurching motion threw everyone off their feet, except for Parcifal who was tied down in her cannon cage and Winceham who held on to the helm like the last mug of beer in the universe, his body going flat, in line with the deck. The rest of the crewmen were very professional about it all and simply held on to anything they could, their expressionless face a testament to their seamanship and complete ignorance of danger.

“Reload!” Parcifal urged the cannon crew and shot an angry look at Ned who was barely able to hold on to the ship from her cage. “What is it? I’m in the middle of a battle!” she said with a piercing, fiery gaze and a voice filled with proud echoes.

“Well... I don’t know what to say, really. I’m sorry. I... I hadn’t noticed,” Ned said apologetically, looking surprised and abysmally hurt, his eyebrows twitching and his eyes rolling.

“This is exactly what I mean when I say you could use some lessons in sword-fighting, Ned. Now please, try and keep the ship steady,” she said while another tap on her knee made her pull on the firing lever, and another fiery ball of light and destruction was hurled against the Ygg battleship

and missed. The Ygg ship was steadily closing in and this time replied with a salvo of hooked chains and anchors flying in an lopsided arc, aiming to land and latch on to the HLS Maryland. Ned exploded, completely unaware of a deadly mass of iron in the shape of an anchor flying his way:

“Are you completely out of sync with reality?! It was sarcasm! I was being sarc-”

Parcifal jumped out of her cage and pushed Ned away with all her might; they both tumbled and fell freely for a moment before the Maryland uprighted itself at the last moment, crashing them hard against the deck as it entered a thick mass of cold, snow-laden clouds, completely obscuring the ship.

“You’ve trusted the dwarf to fly the ship, haven’t you?” Percifal asked even as a strange, sudden silence fell around them in tune with the extremely dense fog that only allowed one to see as far as his hands could stretch.

“Halfuin, please! We are distinct race, descendant from the dwarves of old. We’re not as thick, mind you,” Winceham said from somewhere probably nearby.

“Thick as bricks, then?” Percifal intoned as she got up, trying to orient herself. The crew breathed a collective sigh of relief. The crew-master’s voice rang above the others:

“All right lads! Five minute break, have a swig if ya feel like it,” he said and a round of cheers went up.

“What are you doing?” Ned’s voice echoed around the fog, the ship wobbling uncertainly as it limped through the cloud.

“We’re taking a break, sir,” the crew-master responded kindly enough.

“We’re in the middle of a deadly fight, you can rest when no-one’s trying to kill us!” Ned retorted with ire.

“Well, there’s always someone out there that might want

to try and kill us, sir, so we figure, any chance for a break's as good a time as any."

"Besides, union regulations," Winceham added and a tiny spark a moment later flashed from somewhere nearby. A tiny fire started going and Winceham was having a smoke.

"Dredge me down and drag me along the sand! What are you doing?"

"I'm having my break," Winceham said as if trying to explain something to a deaf person.

"Since when are you union?"

"Joined up right before we left Rampatur. Really nice benefits."

"Mutinous traitors!" Parcifal said and unsheathed Encelados, its blade glowing with a dim blue light.

"Now hold on a moment, we're just having a five-minute break, per the Navy's charter and our union's regulations," the crew-master said from somewhere close.

"And you think now is a good time for a break? A huge flying rock hurtling after us, having torn this ship almost asunder, and you take a break?" Ned asked with every bit of sincerity in his voice.

"Why not? Now's as good a time as any, isn't it Mr. Abbermouth?" the crew-master said, and Winceham replied with laughing voice:

"I wouldn't say no to a swig of rum any part of the day."

"They're trying to kill us and you're having a break!" Ned said, trying to fully realize the concept and failing.

"The penalty for mutiny in time of war is summary execution!" Parcifal yelled and thrust Encelados blindly towards the crew-master. Ned saw a flash of silver then and feared for the worst. Before he had time enough to speak a word, the fog lifted as if some giant hand pulled away a huge cover,

and what they could now see, was something they didn't have time to imagine.

An Ygg was standing between the crew-master and Parcifal, Encelados protruding from the monster's belly, its blue-on-blue eyes flickering with their dying light, and all around them on the deck of the ship, a host of Ygg was a couple of feet away from having their tentacled mouths on everyone's heads.

"Break's off, lads!" the crew-master yelled and a moment of grumpy near-silence was followed by a sudden realization that in the flick of an eye gave way to a proper mayhem.

"Yagh! Yagh!" the Ygg soldiers roared through raspy, abyssal throats and lunged against everyone.

"By Skrala's might, begone to the void that bore you!" Parcifal screamed and with one easy swing of Encelados she cut clean the head of the nearest Ygg.

"All bets are off lads!" Winceham screamed and took out his daggers, tumbled swiftly on the deck and stuck an Ygg in the lower back, white blood sprouting profusely. The Ygg turned around and with a throaty yell lunged at Winceham, its tentacles writhing morbidly. Ned went for his crossbow and loaded a bolt, before realizing the Ygg warship was right in front of them, an array of glowing lights brightening up like a demonic spider's head ready to spout its venom.

"Helm! Evasive!" Ned shouted even as he took hasty aim against an Ygg hurling itself against him.

"Wot's that, sir?" replied the crew-master sounding confused, the cutlass in his hand weaving a path of white blood in front of him.

"Move! Move the ship!" Ned cried in anguish before springing into a sprint for the ship's helm.

He was too late. The Ygg warship let a volley of bright

crackling energy rays head on in the Maryland's bow. The arcane crackling energies flashed violet and bored through the HLS Maryland easily, ripping holes in its wooden and metal hull, small and large, leaving a spatter of destruction in their weight.

The ship keeled slightly to its left and began a whimpering free-fall, bereft of the force that kept afloat. Pieces of its hull began falling apart, as the insides of the ship bolted and sprung, tearing it apart like a badly wound-up toy.

"Let Svarna's light burn through your evil!" Parcifal screamed with fury, lending herself to an onslaught amidst half a dozen Ygg, their claws eager to meet her.

"We're going down!" Ned yelled even as he felt the deck below his feet remove itself.

"No retards?" Winceham asked in free-fall.

"Afraid not, boyo," said the crew-master falling away, letting his cutlass fly away as he dived down to the ground without sounding overly concerned.

The whole ship fell finally apart with a loud cracking, whipping noise and everyone fell down to meet a certain death a few thousand feet below, the remaining Ygg floating in the air, like harbingers of certain death, chanting in praise of their void master.

"Yagh! Yagh! Ygg shototh!"

Parcifal folded her arms and fell downwards like a brick, surpassing everyone else who were haplessly tumbling in the air. Their eyes were sharp and clean, bereft of fear. Ned had closed his eyes, his legs splayed and his arms wide. Winceham was trying to steady himself in the air, fumbling for his tobacco pouch; remembering his tobacco pouch had been cut in half, he rolled his eyes and folded his arms, beginning to tumble fuzzily once more.

Then Parcifal yelled with all her might:

“By Skrala’s might and Svarna’s fervor, Gods of the Mountain, lend me the ancient form!”

Her body began to transform; her skin became taught as her body began to swell and grow. From her back, a leathery protrusion grew into an ever-expanding tail. Her chest became swollen and her sides writhed as if a newborn was about to kick and scream its way out. Her face was cast in a reverend agony, while her feet and hands began to grow talons. Her clothes were ripped apart even as her head became elongated, her forehead becoming a bony, enlarged plate. Her nose turned into a snout and her skin turned into a leathery, deeply-scaled hide, red and orange, the colour of fire.

In the span of a few heartbeats, she had turned fully into a dragon, red and fiery, with large powerful wings flapping mightily in the sky. She turned and swept in the air, feeling for the currents, before she began to pick up the falling crew one by one, letting them gracefully land across her spine.

“Swear to any gods, living or dead, I ain’t having no mushrooms no more, never,” Winceham whispered mostly to himself as he twisted his head around to see Parcifal, in her dragonform, twist in the air gracefully and clutch Ned easily in one of her claws. He then saw her coming for him, swooping down like a majestic predator. He was confused, feeling unsure whether or not he’d been kind enough to Parcifal for her not to rip him apart, possibly claiming it was only a mistake afterwards.

She caught him expertly in the air and he was swept upwards as she rolled and banked, moving away from harm’s reach, dodging a violet, scorching ray in the last moment.

“Dear me, I didn’t know you could do that!” Winceham cried with mixed feelings of amazed joy and sheer terror. It

was oddly soothing to hear Parcifal speak in her dragonform, her voice deepened but not wholly changed:

“There’s still some fight left in me, halfuin!” she said and tried to smile, though the effect was more akin to a cringing wall of teeth the size of a man’s fist.

“Watch it!” Ned cried, pointing at the Ygg warship, descending down onto them like a rolling mountain.

“I can’t outrun them! Hang on!” she said and started swerving hard, left and right even as fresh volleys of death rays failed to touch her.

“It doesn’t look good now, eh boyo?” the crew-master said, the air rushing past them with buffeting force.

“Depends if those shots land on target,” Winceham said and pointed feebly at a swarm of multi-colored fireballs, whirling in the air above the Ygg warship.

“It’s the Bellerephon’s Quagmire! It’s Judith!” Ned screamed overjoyed.

The bow of the mighty Human League warship appeared out of the clouds forcefully, shredding its fluffy face with a belligerent fury. The shots landed on the Ygg warship with terrible destructive force, shuttering rocks and crystal spires, chipping away at the flying fortress of rock like powerful, huge chisels.

“Hurrah!” the crew yelled, erupting in cheers and searching for their caps and hats to wave, realizing they’d lost in them in the fall.

“Too soon for comfort,” Parcifal commented and nodded with her dragon head to a flotilla of several Ygg ships, equally distasteful and menacing in design, only smaller. At about the same time, the Human League flotilla appeared out of the cloudscape, close behind the Bellerephon’s Quagmire.

“Think she’ll make it?” Ned said nervously.

“She’s a big ship, she’ll be fine,” Winceham said idly.

“I was talking about Judith,” Ned retorted, while Parcifal added:

“You should start worrying about us for a change, Ned Larkin,” she said somewhat angrily.

“Thank you for saving us, Lady Teletha,” Ned said with a smidgen of sarcasm and added, “But we’re fine now, the fight’s up there!”

“There’s fighting down there as well,” Parcifal replied with what could have been a grin, and folded her wings, dropping faster towards the ground.

“What’s that big crystal down there? Is that a lake?” Ned asked, his voice strained against the wind.

“I don’t know, but yes. That’s the Pristine Lake,” Parcifal replied with worry in her voice.

“What about those dark spots down there? There’s hundreds of those, aren’t there?” Winceham asked in turn.

“Nine and half out of ten, this doesn’t bode well,” Parcifal said while Ned said with a terrible realisation in his voice:

“It stands to reason, these are Ygg. And if those are Ygg, those spots smack in the center fighting them off, they must be...”

He let his voice trail off, and Parcifal shouted with righteous fury:

“Sister! Hold on!”

“Would you mind not tensing up? These talons seem quite sharp,” Winceham said uncomfortably and saw the ground, the lake and the huge crystal rushing towards him with alarming speed.

Theo was standing in the middle of a rough circle formed by the rest: Lerneia was down to her last few arrows, and

Bo couldn't shoot her fireballs fast enough and barely had enough thaumaturgy left in her to hop around. Damon and Fidias were using their slings and blowpipes to little effect, while Master Sisyphus was quietly contemplating their situation. Everyone's feet were wet, except for Theo who was hovering above the waters of the shallow lake uncannily, as if praying solemnly. Around them, hundreds of Ygg were closing in, marching instead of charging, as if they were biding their time, reveling in the promise of the coming slaughter.

"Master, are we going to die?" Damon asked Sisyphus with a slightly guilty look on his face, his voice revealing the expectation of punishment. Fidias looked at Damon then with a sorrowful grin, his green eyes having lost their childish gleam.

"If it comes to that, there couldn't be a better place, friend," Fidias said and reloaded his sling with a pebble from the Hallowed Lake, letting it fly hard against an Ygg a few yards away. The pebble struck the Ygg in his mouth, whereas it begun choking and convulsing, before crumbling down onto its clawed feet and splashing in the lake. Others quickly replaced their fallen kin and followed in its steps.

Damon first and then Fidias felt a harsh, bony thing hit them hard against their cheeks, followed by a slapping sound. It was Master Sisyphus, who had shown them once again the back of his hand, while the rest of the party kept tightening the circle around Theo as if partaking in a silent, slow dance with death itself, every movement sombre and unique.

"No-one dies!" Sisyphus exclaimed and his face instantly returned to an unusually calm look of deep introspection. He then looked at the sky, and noticed that higher up near the clouds, a dozen or maybe more dark spots were being brilliantly lit from, flashes of light of various colours dousing

them in a flame-like appearance. Then he noticed the flapping wings of a red dragon, and his thin, craggy lips curled into a tight smile.

“We’ve got company,” Sisyphus said with an unseemly brilliance in his voice.

“We know that already,” Lernea said and looked behind Theo, exchanging a knowing glance with her former Master and mentor. She knew then he wasn’t talking about the Ygg - he looked up and saw the large red dragon coming down right on top of them, behind her, higher up into the clouds, strange-looking blots that were probably some kind of ship, literally having a blast.

For a moment she thought when it was the last time she had seen a dragon with her own eyes; it felt strange. She then saw the dragon coming straight at her, she saw the shine in those terrible glowing eyes, and all the people the dragon carried along and knew it was Parcifal.

“It’s Parcifal, master!”

“In full dragonform, no less!”

“Your sister is a dragon?” Bo sent to Lernea’s mind, sounding exhausted yet awestruck at the same time.

“Dragonkin, actually,” she replied while letting fly the last of her arrows, striking an Ygg straight in its maw, the arrow sticking out from the back of its grisly neck.

“But your twins! Why didn’t you turn into a dragon? You’d think it would be an unfair advantage?”

“I chose the other Path! Now’s not the time! We still have a fighting chance with Parcifal!”

“What about that dwarf and the strikingly uncharacteristic young man she’s carrying with her claws?” Sisyphus asked, pointing with his staff.

“Winceham and Ned! Everyone’s here then? I don’t

know how or why, but I'm sure there's a reasonable explanation," Lernea replied full of smiles, even as she drew her short sword, preparing to meet the first wave of the Ygg, in hand-to-hand combat.

"Well, I'm pretty sure there's no need for an explanation right now!" Bo sent, and perched herself on Theo's shoulder, huffing and puffing from the exertion, feeling her powers nearly spent.

Parcifal spat a gush of fire from her snout, engulfing a row of Ygg in writhing flames, their raspy throats letting out otherworldly growls of dying pain. Her attack cleared some space in front of Lernea, while she flapped her wings quickly, breaking hard and releasing Winceham and Ned from a couple of feet into the lake, letting them splash feebly in the water, meeting the shallow bottom of the lake with their faces.

"That's not a real lake, is it?" Winceham said grumpily, feeling his hurt nose, his face dripping with water.

"That's not the real issue though, is it?" Ned added and they both looked at Lernea with a vacant, uncomfortable stare.

"Care to lend a hand? Or did the fall turn your brains into mush?" Lernea said sternly, while Parcifal let the surviving crew of the Maryland disembark from her back. A shot of bright blue light like thunder-flash cut a swath of Ygg down like a reaper's giant scythe. It was Sisyphus, who was looking at his staff with a sad, pitiful gaze. Winceham and Ned got back on their feet, Ned loading his crossbow with a fresh bolt and Winceham brandishing both his daggers, eyeing his next move against the approaching Ygg.

"The Yul-mogur is spent, my queen. Your sister couldn't have made an appearance at a more opportune time," Sisyphus said to Lernea and turned around and saw the Lernea

touch her nose against the red dragon's snout, tears of joy running down her face.

"Sister! I never gave up hope!" Lerneia said, while Parcifal shot her sister a gleaming gaze full of unspoken love.

"I thought I had lost you forever," Parcifal admitted freely and a short moment later urged her sister, "Let us sent these defilers back into the void whence they came!"

"By Skrala's might and Svarna's light, lent us the strength of the Holy Mountain!" Lerneia yelled, rising her short sword up in the air; then the two sisters charged headlong against the oncoming wave of the Ygg, cutting a path through them even as the monstrous abominations tried their best to slash and pierce them with their claws, their tendrils aiming to grab them in any way possible. Lerneia hacked, swiveled and pierced the monsters, while Parcifal swiped with her claws and breathed fire, cutting down half a dozen Ygg at a time.

The sisters were a terrible sight to behold, looking invincible, a powerful nature force of righteous revenge. But behind them, Theo was struggling with an unseen foe, his veins jutting out, sweating, twitching in an uncomfortable half-sleep, inches above the waters of the shallow lake.

"Master! They're so close now!" Damon cried in terror, while Fidias popped up from behind him and stuck the foremost Ygg with his knife. Once, twice and then three times; yet the Ygg didn't fell, white blood oozing from his punctured wounds. As the Ygg was about to lunge at Damon's head, his tentacled maw twitching with the expectation of the kill.

"I said, no-one dies!" cried Sisyphus and struck the Ygg squarely on its head, bringing his staff down with all his might, bashing the monstrous skull, the Ygg crumbling down into the lake with a mute splash. The crew-master of the

Maryland urged his people then to stand fast:

“Rally to me, men!”

“We still have a couple minutes to our break, sir,” one of the men complained, and quite forcibly the crew-master snatched him from the nape of his shirt and told him through gritted teeth:

“File a formal complaint report to the captain, then,”

“But he’s dead sir,” the crewman replied feebly, looking confused.

“See my point?” the crew-master asked rhetorically, nodding intensely.

“No, not really,” the crewman replied shaking his head and shrugging. A moment later the claws of an Ygg were dug deep in his neck, his tentacled maw attached to the back of the man’s head. His eyes twitched and rolled impossibly, his face chock-full of mortal horror, even as his eyes were drawn inside from their sockets, the contents of his head sucked through the Ygg’s maw. A heavy cutlass struck clean against the Ygg, its head rolling while still alive, its tentacles still writhing with the splendor of a fresh kill. The crew-master looked at the Ygg with disgust as its body lay slumped against the empty husk of the crewman who had just asked for his due break.

“Anyone else need a break?” the crew-master yelled and the crew of the Maryland drew their cutlasses, the Ygg crashing against them like a nightmarish tide of blue and black.

“Highly motivated crew,” Winceham suggested as he unstuck his daggers from a dead Ygg, tumbling at the last moment to avoid a deadly claw attack from another. Ned shot his crossbow at point-blank range, felling two Ygg with one bolt. He swerved to the side and dodged a dozen or so tendrils aiming for his waist, before kicking the Ygg hard in the face,

making it dizzy for just enough time to hack at its head with a machete. The first hack dug deep; the second and the third made the killing a nasty, messy affair.

“Needs some sharpening eh?”

“Do they need to be that thick-skinned?” Ned wondered and wiped the machete against the Ygg’s body.

It was at that moment that everyone felt a wave of pressure overcoming them, feeling it reverberate through their bones. They saw the Ygg then tremble, growling in agony for a moment before succumbing to Theo’s powerful Rho, splashing in the water in an outward pattern, like stalks of grass blown against the wind. Theo fell down awkwardly with a splash as well, planting his feet in the bottom of the lake, gasping for breath, sweating profusely.

“That’s it. I need to sleep,” he said in what was almost a whisper.

“Well earned lad,” Winceham said, cleaning his daggers in the murky, white-stained water around him.

“Look!” Ned said and nodded to a small host of riders that appeared out of the small gate that led to the castle proper, from where Lernea and the others before had first appeared in the lake where the giant crystal had been constructed out of the lake’s bedrock, smack in its middle.

“The Jangdrivals,” Lernea said, even as her sister returned to her human form once again, writhing and trembling in a controlled, practiced fashion.

“Their timing is rather, fanciful, wouldn’t you agree, my lady?” Sisyphus said with a deep frown.

“Master, should we shoot them?” Fidias said eagerly, readying his sling.

“Not yet. You’ll know soon enough if it comes to that,” Sisyphus replied.

“Well, I guess you can now have the rest of your break, lads,” the crew-master said and the crew sat down in the shallow water, the water up to their waist as their buttocks touched the pebble-bed floor.

The small host of riders galloped at an easy pace, the horses’ hooves splashing in the water in a strange, perfect rhythm. A man wearing the Jangdrival’s colors over a shiny full-plate armor was at the head of the host, all in all no more than a dozen riders. Beside him rode a banner-man, flying the colours of the Jangdrivals proudly, on top of the Nomos crest, the Holy Mountain, embroidered in gold and silver cloth.

“Halt!” the leader of the host ordered and dismounted, a comfortable few yards away from Lernea and Parcifal. Ey-ing them intensely, he walked towards them at an easy pace, his banner-man close behind. The rest of them remained mounted.

“What are you doing?” Ned asked Winceham in a puzzled whisper, looking at him having a smoke in a borrowed pipe.

“I’m having my two-minute break,” Winceham replied unfazed, forming small circles of puffy smoke with his lips twirled in an ‘o’.

“I don’t think now’s quite the time,” Ned said shaking his head in disappointment.

“Union regulations, lad,” Winceham replied and shrugged.

“King Jangdrival of Nomos now, is it not?” Lernea called in mocking tones, pointing her short sword’s tip.

“Encelados is still glowing, sister,” Parcifal whispered to her sister’s ear.

“I can see that. I can also see your buck naked,” Lernea replied, shooting her sister a disapproving look.

“Well, what did you expect? I was in dragonform!” she

hissed and feeling somewhat self-conscious she asked, “I wonder why Winceham isn’t ogling at me. Or any of them at all, for that matter.”

“I’ve spent my last iota of thauma on a very thin illusion. All the men see you dressed in simple robes,” Bo sent in Parcifal’s mind. She nodded at the bunny in thanks.

“Let us dispense with the pleasantries, Lernea Testarossa,” the Jangdrival said approaching at a slow, even pace.

“Your rule is forfeit. I claim my rightful rule of the Kingdom of Nomos,” Lernea said authoritatively, her face set in stone.

“Laughable,” the Jangdrival replied and with a wave of his hand, the mounted riders circled them all.

“We outnumber you. Your forces are spent. Surrender or perish,” Lernea shouted, looking at the riders in disdain.

“Reality escapes you,” the Jangdrival retorted and added, “Hand us the crystal and your vacant hulks will be of fitting service.”

“What’s going on lad? Hard negotiations?” Winceham said, putting out his pipe in the water and having second thoughts after he realized there was still white blood floating in there.

“I think these are not really men,” Ned replied.

“You’re correct in your assumption, Mr. Larkin,” Master Sisyphus said, standing close by.

“You must be Master Sisyphus. I’m honored,” Ned replied offering his hand.

“Now’s not the time for introductions,” Sisyphus said warily.

“Never,” Lernea said through gritted teeth while beside her, Encelados shone with a bright blue and white inner light in the hands of Parcifal.

“Stubborn animals, humans,” the Jangdrival said and in an instant his body warped and twisted itself violently, revealing the true form of an Ygg, the men in his company doing the same, and the horses transforming into large carapaced abyssal terrors, with large bulging eyes and a mass of tendrils with enormous reach.

“Just when I thought I could have another smoke,” Winceham said and sighed.

“Does that mean the break’s off?” asked a crewman right before he was grabbed by one of the tentacled monsters and swallowed in half.

“Anyone else have any stupid questions, you scallywags?” the crew-master intoned, brandishing his cutlass, before the Ygg and their mounts charged at them.

“This is tactically unsound,” Sisyphus said grumpily. Ned shot a bolt smack against an Ygg’s face - but it was silently absorbed, like the body of an Ygg was made of some sort of sponge.

“That doesn’t look normal,” Ned said with a frown.

“The crystal,” Bo sent to everyone who could hear her, “The crystal! It’s acting up, flaring with eldritch power!”

“The crystal!” Sisyphus said as well, as if he had a sudden realization, and he produced the crystal from his robes, attaching it deftly to his staff’s tip, like popping it into a make-shift receptacle. Bo saw what Sisyphus was trying to do and skipped and hopped towards him, while the Ygg were charging at them in full force. Parcifal readied Encelados while Lerneia stood their ground, never showing whether or not it mattered to them that the Ygg now seemed to be impervious to damage. Winceham got up and put his pipe in his vest’s pocket, looking quite pissed at not being able to smoke in peace. The two boys looked at Master Sisyphus as his lips

began to whisper words they had never heard before.

“What’s the master saying?” Fidias asked Damon.

“I don’t know. It looks like he’s praying,” Damon replied shaking his head.

“Should we shoot our slings?” Fidias asked, readying a shot.

“Maybe it doesn’t matter anymore,” Damon said to his friend and shrugged casually.

Bo jumped right in front of the staff then, at the exact moment a thin, steady line of light not thicker than a hair’s breadth shot through her. And then a surge of power and light created a sphere of magnificent light, crackling with a never seen before force surrounded Bo and Sisyphus. In a frozen bubble of time, the sphere expanded, shining with a light that tore shadows apart, shredding them to pieces.

Once it reached the boundaries of the Ygg crystal, the sphere of light collapsed in a single point centered at Bo. The next moment, a brilliant blinding white light exploded from the bunny, engulfing the lake, the crystal, and everyone else in a miniature sun.

Higher above the lake, in the clouds, Judith saw the fiery explosion of light below her, a massive, terrible sight to behold, blinding her temporarily. Her mind raced with all the possibilities, but she soon realized something momentous had happened.

“Madamme, the enemy fleet seems unable to act. It’s like they’re adrift in the air,” an officer in the bridge of the Bellerephon’s Quagmire informed her.

“Fire for effect,” she said and sighed, unable to tear her eyes away from the shrinking, unbearably luminous ball of whiter-than-white light below.

Ned opened his eyes lazily; he saw a stone-crafted ceiling, rough but elegantly put together, each piece of stone fitting, well-placed. Soft, golden-hued light bathed the room he was in from a wide-arched, paned-glass window which lay half-open. He felt the mattress comfortably hugging his body; he felt tired, his muscles aching for stillness. He heard the chirruping sound of birds at a distance. He put his hands on his belly, above the soft beddings and felt content just by being there. He remembered the terrible white that occluded every other sense, and the thought of perhaps being dead entered his head. He stared vacantly at the ceiling for a moment, uninterested in the sparse fittings of the room; there was a simple bedside table where a jar stood and a low wooden table with an empty candlestick. And that was that.

He then heard the door to the room swing open; the face of a woman appeared through it timidly, as if he was being pried upon. He had no recollection of seeing her again, but her face was elven-like in its appearance. Silver-haired with a face of simple, elegant beauty, she presented herself fully; she wore linen, heavy robes of a dark brown, starkly contrasted with her milky skin. If she had been wearing white, he'd tempted to think once more he had died and this was what angels looked like. She smiled at him tentatively and bringing her palms together awkwardly, she spoke with a girly voice that made her impossible not to like.

"So, Ned. You're awake," she said and nodded somewhere outside the door.

"I'm not dead, am I?" Ned said, trying to get the question out of his head. He propped himself upwards, resting his back on the bed's comfortable pillows.

"No. No, you're not," she said and smiled. Past the door came Winceham with a playful stride, smoking his pipe fer-

vently.

“Thank you, lad,” Winceham said and grinned, looking past the door behind him and grinning.

“About what?” Ned asked him and added, “Who is she?” pointing a finger, before reminding himself of his manners and slightly bowing uncomfortably to her, asking: “I mean, who are you, my lady?”

“It’s Bo!” Theo said with a gleaming smile, entering the room with barely enough clearance.

“Bo?” Ned asked with evident confusion in his voice.

“It’s Bo, and you just won me a good amount of coin,” Winceham said.

“I’m probably just as surprised as you are, Ned,” Bo said and shrugged. She looked at her hands for a moment and added, “Alright, maybe more.”

She then looked at her chest like it had never been there before, which was in some sense true, and said as if it begged belief: “Maybe a lot more.”

“Isn’t she lovely? Look, she’s got hair and everything!” Theo said, brimming with enthusiasm.

“What happened, exactly?” Ned asked, blinking while he tried to make sense of things.

“It’s a long story. There’s a short version, though,” Winceham said puffing at his pipe before adding, with a stream of smoke escaping his nostrils, “We won.”

“And we’re alive!” Theo added without being able to wipe the grin off his face, waving his arms like a boy who has just discovered the joys of a bouncing ball.

“And I’m a woman, now,” Bo said mostly so she could listen to it herself, and twitched her nose as if she was about to sneeze for a moment.

“Now get dressed, lad,” Winceham said as he turned about to leave and added, “you shouldn’t be late for the party.”

“Where are we?”

“Ered Domas,” Bo replied, nodding to herself as if making sure that was the name of the place.

“Which is?”

“A big castle! It’s a lot bigger than a house!” Theo exclaimed and hugged Bo, nearly squeezing her breathless. “It’s even got towers! Isn’t she wonderful?” he said and left the room as well, looking over his shoulder and nearly stumbled on the walls a couple of times.

“Well. Nice to meet you,” Ned said and pursed his lips awkwardly, nodding to Bo who was breathing regularly once more.

“Likewise,” she replied and nodded, looking around the room, as if trying to get acquainted with her new size.

“So... Excited, much?” Ned asked her, twiddling his thumbs.

“It’s been an interesting turn of events, that’s certainly true,” she replied.

Lernea walked in the room right about then like she owned the place, which in essence she did, and shot Bo a look of suspicious contempt.

“You’re not wearing anything underneath these robes, are you?”

“Well, I didn’t know how to put those other things on and -” Bo began to answer before being interrupted with a scoff.

“Inexcusable for a lady, walking around without undergarments! Open to interpretations of the worst conceivable kind for a lady’s honor!” Lernea exclaimed. “And you! Not averting your eyes and ogling a young inexperienced girl, taking advantage of her newly-found body, unable to contain

your urges in a manner most unbecoming of a gentleman!” she added, pointing a finger at Ned, her ceremonial armor clanking as she jostled vigorously.

“What?” Ned asked plainly, unable to understand why he was being shouted at.

“Get dressed! Both of you!”

“But I’m not naked!” Bo whined feebly.

“You are underneath!” Lernea said and looking at Ned, stepped in front of Bo, as if protecting her from a mortal threat. “Shame on you, Ned Larkin!”

“What did I do?” Ned demanded and slid off his bed to protest. He felt a rush of cold air in his nether regions; it was Lernea’s shocked eyes and Bo’s curious gaze that alerted him to the reality of being completely naked.

“Cover your eyes!” Lernea shouted to Bo even as Ned began to feel inadequately embarrassed, his face flush red, and his hands reflexively trying to cover up the offending area.

“What for? I’ve seen everyone naked,” Bo said sounding quite uninterested and left the room with a nod and a weird smile to Ned. “I was a bunny, remember?” she said without turning to look back even as Lernea looked at Ned with a sour face and told him:

“Wipe that grin off your face. Honestly, get dressed,” she said pointing a commanding finger and left the room, slamming the door closed shut behind her.

The large expanse of the dining hall echoed with the harmonious sounds of lutes and flutes. The din of the chattering people wasn’t invasive, pervasive though it was. Ned was feeling a lot more comfortable among normal, yet completely unknown people. He was sitting next to Master Sisypus who was enjoying a cup of mead, his watchful eyes meandering

around the room, and always affording Damon and Fidias who had been assigned as honorary guards to Lernea and Par-cifal a wary gaze that kept them on their toes, even if that did not add much to their overall height.

“So, we won,” Ned began reiterating. Sisyphus nodded and sipped quietly.

“And Bo, the bunny, turned back into a human,” Ned continued, underlying his words by tapping a hand softly on the meat-laden table. Sisyphus nodded once more, after pausing to think for a moment.

“And you don’t remember how any of it happened exactly?” Ned asked with worry in his voice. Master Sisyphus cleared his throat before answering: “What I can clearly remember is that I used the Metathaumaturgic device as a Resonating Amplifier for a powerful disintegration spell, just when Bo got in the way.”

“So you kind of disintegrated her? Along with the huge crystal the Ygg had been built?” Ned asked sounding rather concerned about what had happened to the crystal. He then heard Judith’s voice as she pulled the empty, heavy, thick-built chair beside him and sat down.

“A major victory. Quick, with little to no losses at all. Decisive, informative. Diplomatically convenient. One for the history books,” she said smiling confidently and eyed the table, searching for a specific, choice-cut of meat. “I hear the Dwelvar sausage is quite spicy and juicy, lady Judith,” Master Sisyphus said and smiled.

“Judith!” Ned couldn’t help but say her name, sounding inappropriately superfluous and a bit dumb in his overjoyed response.

“Ned,” she said nodding and reached for a sausage. There were dozens of long, not very practical tables like this one

around the dining hall, but everyone seemed to be in good spirits since food and drink was available aplenty. It was as if the world-eating menace of the Ygg had been but a mild inconvenience long past dealt with.

“That was some very good timing with the Bellerephon,” Ned said nodding, looking at Judith in a searching, gracious manner.

“It was luck, mostly. But I should thank you,” she replied, and took a bite off the sausage, munching at in a manner that would have Lernea baulking.

“What for?” Ned asked with a curious smile.

“For trusting in me. For pushing me to do something I thought I wasn’t supposed to,” she replied after swallowing.

“You mean, commanding a battleship?” Ned asked.

“No. You pushed me into believing in a cause,” she replied earnestly, and took another bite off the sausage.

“Eating my sister’s Kingdom away?” Parcifal interrupted harshly as she came between Ned and Judith. They looked at her with a confused look of mild horror, before she understood they were thinking she was being serious.

“It was a joke,” she said and smiled harmlessly. “Ned should’ve picked it up,” she added.

“Frankly, it was crass and rather insulting,” he replied with a frown.

“Exactly,” Parcifal said and looking rather fresh and shiny in an exquisitely crafted armor of her own, turned about and left. “Have a drink on me. It is well deserved. And try to keep Winceham sober,” she reminded Ned with a knowing look.

“I think she insulted my abilities as a comedian,” Ned said. Sisypus nodded, agreeing. “Yes, thoroughly so. Though I hardly know you, Ned, you don’t strike me as an especially funny person, if you don’t mind my being frank.”

“That’s not true. I am innately funny; but that’s besides the point,” Ned said shaking his head.

“Exactly. The point is,” Winceham said appearing on the other side of the table from underneath it, trying to stand on his chair without toppling it over, “He is not Frank. His name is Sysopas,” Winceham said and blinked furiously, grinning like a horse on a selling display.

“Sisyphus,” the wizened old wizard and scholar corrected him without showing any feelings of being insulted.

“That one, whatever it is, is not Frank. I know a Frank when I sees one, right love?” Winceham said and shot Judith a look that was supposed to be suave and charming, while in effect it was rather disconcerting as it made Winceham look like someone who had spent years trying to recover from a brain injury.

“Hifs brunk, ind’t he?” Judith stopped eating and said with half her mouth full.

“It’s a condition. He’s not exactly drunk,” Ned said and nodded apologetically.

A loud gong was heard then suddenly, its ringing reverberating across the large dining hall. It struck three times, before a loud, stentorian voice announced emphatically: “Now hear ye! Hear ye! Her Magnificent Eminence, First Among Equals, Scion of House Teletha, Protector of the Realm and Ascendant to the Holy Mountain, Queen Lernea, the True!”

As he did so, Lernea appeared from behind a wide-arched doorway, Parcifal behind her, both of them looking exquisite, majestic in their armor while kind and honorable in their demeanor, as they eyed the room with an elevated sense of duty. The guests, hundreds of them, rose from their seats and bowed in total silence. It didn’t look like a sign of subservience; it rather looked like sincere, deep gratitude.

Lernea stood by a thick piece of stone, carved in the semblance of a stool or a low chair placed in the very head of the large hall, but she did not seat. Parcifal stood right beside her, not a step behind. They both scanned the dining hall with bright, gleaming eyes; a thin smile underlined Lernea's words, while Parcifal looked a lot more cheerful than she had been for the past few days.

"It hasn't been that long if we were to measure time by the rising and the falling of the sun. Yet to me, it felt like a long, arduous journey, until I could set foot again in my home; not as a runaway traitor, or an oath-breaking coward, but as the one true rightful ruler of the Kingdom of Nomos," she said calmly, and took a breath filled with relief.

"I stand here before you, and I can hardly recognise most of you lords and ladies. I know though that where your allegiance lies; it lies not in me, and not in my family. It lies in the laws of our great Kingdom, it lies in the rules of the Holy Mountain and the values of our forefathers. That is the very heart and essence of our being, our way of life and our code of honor. For without law and honor, we are but beasts made to look like men. Without fairness and goodness of heart, we are but tools to be used, wielded by our darker nature," she said with a crystal clear, strong voice.

"I came to realise, perhaps too late for comfort, how a far darker thing is out there, brooding, scheming. It is an evil of many faces, but one name: the Ygg," Lernea said and the crowd of guests sounded uneasy, uttering prayers of protection. Lernea paused for a moment before she went on.

"Good fortune and the guiding light of Svorna showed me the True Path; with Skrala's might and the help of my friends, we were able to save our Kingdom, and our world indeed, of an evil that would have seen us turned into mindless slaves

and our world a smoldering wreck, a breeding pit for more evil to pour into the universe.”

The crowd cheered and voices of praise rose up onto the ceiling.

“And that is why I must take leave of my reigning duties, for now. Because I cannot, and will not rest, until this scourge is nothing but a memory, a footprint in the annals of our time. Haste is of paramount importance; there are certain things that have been put in motion which must be acted upon now, lest the tide turns once more against us. I have trust in you to carry on your duties like you have always done, obeying the laws and listening to the heart of the Holy Mountain. We will have the aid of our newly-found allies, bonded in the heat of battle, the proud alliance of human worlds, the Human League.”

A silence filled by lonely whispers dominated the hall. Lerneia sighed and continued, her voice ringing throughout the walls of the dining hall.

“It is thus why I name Winceham Higginsbottom Abbermouth the Third, of House Abbermouth, of the Halfuin race, to be Viceroy in my absence, to uphold the law, and protect the innocent. May the light of Svarna shine on your path, Viceroy Winceham, and Skrala lend his hand where your righteous fist may fall,” she said officiously and left just as she had entered, with Parcifal behind her, having great difficulty containing her laughter.

“What did Lerneia just say?” Ned asked Sisyphus dumbfounded.

“You’re leaving for a place called Noymansland, tomorrow. You need to find Theo’s and Bo’s father; he probably holds the key to the Ygg menace. This is a lot larger than Nomos, Mr. Larkin. You’re in a unique position to possibly

save all life as we know it,” Sisyphus said and ran his tongue across his lips, before downing the rest of his cup in one go.

“Yes, yes, that must be quite important, but did she just name Winceham Viceroy?” Ned insisted.

“I believe so, she did, yes.”

“That’s like almost a king, right?” Ned asked sounding mortified.

“Well, very roughly put, yes,” Sisyphus said and filled his cup from a pitcher, while Winceham fell off his chair and onto the stone floor with a dull thud.

“Why would she do that? Why would anyone do that?” Ned said, sounding irrationally anxious, forming troubling mental images of Winceham as king of anything in his mind.

“Oh, I’m sure there must be a valid reason,” Sisyphus said wiping his lips with the back of his hand.

“Really now? Because I can’t think of any,” Ned said.

“Maybe it’s just a game,” Judith said putting aside her plate, filled with an uncanny number of bones and leftovers. “War is nothing but politics; and politics is a game. It’s just a game, with players of any number of weaknesses and any number of strengths. It’s like we’re sitting on a giant game-board of Po,” she said and let out a burp, putting a hand on her mouth as an afterthought.

“A game of Po?” Ned said and listened to himself as through the ears of a stranger.

“Do you play?” Sisyphus asked casually, readying his pipe for a smoke.

“No, I don’t. But I’m a fast learner,” Ned said and had a sip of mead himself.

END OF BOOK III