

Party of Five

October 22, 2012

a fantasy novella

by

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

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

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

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

"No, we can't go back Lernea," replied Parcifal with a sigh and a shake of her head, her piercing gaze stuck somewhere beyond the rosy-red horizon.

Lernea nodded with raised eyebrows. She noticed Parcifal's strange, angry look and knew it wasn't the right thing to do but asked her anyway:

"Not ever?"

Parcifal turned her head slowly around and gave Lernea a stabbing look before answering coldly:

"Not as long as the Jangdrivals are in power and the Unseen Council remains in place, not while the Eleven Pillars stand and the Noble Eagles fly above the Skarlas, no." Lernea put a finger on her lip and with a puzzled frown asked again:

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

"You vex me, sister. Never means never."

"Well, didn't master Sisyphus always say, 'never say never'?" replied Lernea with a hesitant smile creeping up

on her lip. Parcifal's visage turned suddenly sorrowful, like a noble, sleek and gray statue.

"Master Sisyphus is dead, Lernea."

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

"Get it right in that little thick skull of yours, Lernea. We, are, never, going, back, to, Nomos. Never!" she shouted, a lone finger rapping at Lernea's breastplate with an audible clang on the beat of every word. Lernea's eyes wandered to her chest for a moment, before her face reddened and her breathing became more pronounced, her nostrils flaring up. She pouted her lips and said icily:

"Don't do that."

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

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

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

"You're such a child."

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

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

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

"You're the one that got us into this mess in the first place, remember?" said Parcifal with arms crossed on her chest.

Lerneia flailed her arms wildly around her while moving about nervously.

“Oh, really now that’s just so typical, trying to put the blame on me like we’re still meddling with the master’s spell-book!”

“Well I’m not the one who married Therion Jangdrival on a whim and got us exiled!” remarked Parcifal with open arms and a mocking smile. Lerneia’s reply was filled with overtones of shock and disgust, her face scrounged up, her revulsion showing in every word.

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

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

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

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

“Mother made mistakes as well in her reign.”

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

“We’re only a minute apart, you stupid-”

Lerneia stopped in mid-sentence even as her mouth began to form the word ‘cow’. She had instinctively flung her arm and was grabbing at what seemed to be a child’s arm, the arm extending into a hand holding her coinpurse.

“Hey.” she said and turned to look almost right behind

her. There was a short person standing there, all dressed up in dark leather and an impossibly blank, expressionless face.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lernea punched him in the gut then; the short little man doubled over, his face flustered. He looked momentarily surprised and awestruck, rather than simply hurt.

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

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

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

Lerneia grinned and straightened her hair before she mused mostly to herself:

“You really can’t get over the fact I was the first born, rightful heir to the throne and all that, can you?”

“The fact is you’re a spoiled brat if I’ve ever se-”

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

She ran after him with Lerneia right behind. With little effort she nudged her way past a couple of bystanders who were having a smoke and grabbed the man by his cloak, lifting him up like a runaway child and handing him over to Lerneia. She grabbed him with both hands from his vest’s collar. The sisters looked positively miffed, if not thunderous. The short little man exploded with indignation.

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

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

“It’s him,” said Parcifal and Lernea nodded her affirmation, adding, “There’s no mistaking that breath.”

The man looked at each of them with an hurtful, presumptuous look and raised a hand before speaking, his eyes closed most of the time in a haughty manner:

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

Parcifal turned her head and looked at Lernea with a raised eyebrow. Lernea looked at her sister and nodded before upending the short man who claimed to be a dwarf and shaking him vigorously. Other than a couple of bored, curious looks, no one seemed particularly inclined to question what has happened.

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

“Aha!” said Lernea gleefully, while her sister shook her head with an uncertain look on her face. The short little man who claimed to be a dwarf and a gentleman was looking at the two ladies in an austere manner, even though he was hanging upside down, his hands crossed on his chest like some sort of human-like bat having a difficult time sleeping. His cloak brushed against the items that had fallen from his person; a small metallic disc with a chain, a gold, flat square tin like a

cigar holder, and a small, thin, stiletto.

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

“What say you now, thief?”

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

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

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

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

“Sir! Terribly sorry, but you forgot your things, sir!”

Parcifal had a moment of clarity and sprang into action, running through the street shouting to her sister:

“That’s because those aren’t his either!”

Lernea stood motionless for moment, idly holding the stolen goods with both hands in her lap. Her lips formed a soundless circle while her eyes shone with a dazzled ferocity.

Realizing they had been duped she dropped everything and ran after her sister and the dwarf - or perhaps a simply very short man - who kept surprising them.

The man shot a glance behind his back and saw the sisters were right on his tail, shoving and brushing people aside as they ran after him. "Fire! Fire! I say, fire!" he shouted amidst the crowds in an effort to cause panic and hysteria that would suit his purpose of getting away. That did not work; the people all around him went about their business, a few casually wondering to themselves where the voice came from. He had to make himself scarce.

"Quick! Into that establishment!" yelled Parcifal to Lerneia, her finger pointing to a large sign, graced by the presence of nearby lamplight. Night proper had fallen and the light posts were being lit up, one by one.

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

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

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

Inside the Sniggering Pig, there was ample candle light from chandeliers on the high ceiling, as well as candles and lamps on each and every table where people had still not passed out. A heavy scent dominated the air; rye, ale and roasted meat. The tables were mostly full of rowdy gangs of sailors, and everyone seemed to be having fun when the music suddenly stopped. The hubbub of laughter and loud conversation filled the emptiness until a rather tall and lanky

fellow appeared at the far end of tavern, on what seemed to be the stage where the band of musicians sat. Parcifal's eyes had the chance to search the room for a moment. There was no sign of the thief.

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

And as if on cue, the tall lank man who had appeared on stage cleared his throat loudly and bowed, only to receive a handful of drunken "Show us yer tittays!". Nevertheless he smiled professionally and went on:

"Well, this place is lively, ain't it? Feels like a band of roaming Dwarves would love to come by. Hell, it's not like they're set in stone or anything," he said, grinning widely, posing towards the crowd which hardly noticed anyone was talking on stage. The performer was having a tough crowd. He turned to the band and said in voice right above a whisper: "Guys.. That was a joke," to which the percussionist nodded with surprise and promptly made a half-hearted drum roll and hit a small bell. The sound was more like coconuts banging together. "Thank you!" said the performer on stage, clapping his hands all by himself.

Parcifal, equally oblivious to the bad comedian noticed something else and told Lernea:

"Windows just on the front. That door behind the barkeep is locked and barred. He's somewhere in here. He's trapped!"

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

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

Lernea let out a little laugh, more aptly like a snigger and

put a hand to her mouth. Parcifal eyed her in puzzlement, her brow furrowed. Lerneia replied with a giggly voice:

“That sounded like an, uhm.. Poop joke. ‘Flush’ him out like the little, uhm, shit he is!”

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

“Dwarves, eh? I remember one night, a group of them fellows walks in this very same place. One of them yells, ‘Barkeep! Seven short ones’, to which the barkeep replied, ‘I can see, but what can I get you?’”

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

Spontaneously, half the tavern erupted in fits of laughter, while the other half had been magnetised by Parcifal’s presence. Even if staring at her meant her replying with a stare that could shrivel their scrotum and turn their eyes into tiny glass beads.

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

There was no drum roll. The man on stage eyed the band and waved his hands. The drum roll and the bell finally came but the crowd went on drinking and singing rowdy songs, mostly containing obscene lyrics about unicorns and the priest’s daughter. There was a voice of dissent though:

“That’s bloody lie!”

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

“By Skarla and Encelados, I’ll have my money back or I’ll skewer you for the thieving dwarf you are.”

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

“Every other night, no-one reads the sign,” said the comedian and tried to getting everyone’s attention:

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

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

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

The thief looked at her, grinned, bowed slightly and

yelled:

“Jambalaya everyone! I’m buying!”

The crowd erupted in sudden cheers and howls, while there still was a man who yelled ‘Balls!’ right before slumping down on the floor. The comedian got off the stage, disheartened, and headed for the bar while the band began to play a serene, lute ballad. The barkeep smiled congenially to the comedian and said, “More peppers this time, Ned,” to which Ned replied faintly, “I know, father.”

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

Lernea lowered her bow and strung it behind her back. She walked over to her sister, being very careful not to tread on someone or someone’s heaved insides, spilled beer and other assorted spots of trouble that could be found on the Sniggering Pig’s floor.

“I guess we’re even now, eh?” said the thief, still careful enough to leave some sensible space between him and Encelados.

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

“Well, I’m not the persistent, rush-headfirst, beautiful, foreign lady. I certainly wouldn’t have heard anything of the sort if I were you,” replied the thief with a kind smile. Lernea stood by her sister’s side and lowered her sword before she said with a calm voice:

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

“There, a civil person. With all this tension, I haven’t introduced myself properly. My name is Winceham Higgins-bottom Abbermouth the Third. At your service,” said the small man with slight bow and a smile, before showing the sisters a recently emptied table. Parcifal looked at the man as he had insulted everything holy by Skrala and couldn’t help but shout angrily:

“What, we’re having drinks with the runt now?”

Lernea sighed, took a deep breath and gently took her sister by one arm and walked with her towards the table. She said to her, “Now sister, this calls for some diplomacy. We might as well solve this quandary in a civilized manner. Things might not be exactly as they appear. Mr. Abbermouth seems like a.. Solvent type.”

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

“I thought his breath stank!” exclaimed Parcifal in protest.

“Well, it’s obvious that’s the least of our worries. Mr. Abbermouth here will make sure we’re properly compensated for all the trouble he’s caused us,” said Lernea making sure to stress her last words. Winceham grinned and laid back on his chair before he said:

“The way things turned out, you gals should be actually thankful. These folks live on rotten clams and maggotty bread most of the time; they’d rip you apart and feed you to the

sharks right round the Mangled Horn if they didn't get some of Ned's jambalaya. Perhaps they'd have their way first as well."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yeah, where's our money runt?"

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

"What bloody rule says you go off with our money and then spend it on buying dinner to drunken sailor?" asked Parcifal with mounting anger, while Lernea tugged at her sleeve,

pointing to a tiny wooden plaque on the wall right behind her, next to a broken light lamp.

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

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

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

“Then why not let us face everyone’s wrath and make your way out with the money?”

“Because, I’m a visionary. I’m an opportunist and when I see an opportunity I grab it by the horns.”

“You mean you’re a thief.”

“A thief.. What is a thief, tell me, dear Parcifal?”

“How can you tell us apart?”

“Oh, that’s easy. Queen Lernea is still wearing her marital ring.”

“News travels fast. So you’ve heard about we’re not the reigning Nomos family anymore?”

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

“Sit down, Mr. Abbermouth. We demand compensation. Financially, as well as morally.”

“Right. As I said, the money’s turned into jambalaya for everyone.”

“A coinpurse full of gold? That should be enough to buy this place!”

“That was gold? I thought I’d seen that kind of colour before, but I wasn’t sure.”

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

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

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

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

“Please, miladies. Don’t do anything rash. I’ll explain, I promise.”

Lernea and Parcifal exchanged troubled looks. They shot glances at the man who had practically ordered everyone to leave with a less than keen eye, and then saw the worry on Winceham's face. There was fear, worry and anxiety written there, the sisters shared their lack of doubt with a simple nod. Ned appeared from behind the bar, holding the sisters' coin-purse, still full. His father, the barkeep, looked at the bossy man with restrained anger.

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

"That's Sturgeon. I've got the money," said the barkeep, while Ned's eyes seeped with fury.

"Ain't that a surprise, eh, Mr. Brumbles?" said the man and slapped the ape-man across the chest. The ape-man replied, always grinning, the gold in his mouth sparkling:

"Mos' def, Cap'n."

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

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

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

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

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

Winceham rolled his eyes wildly as a signal to the sisters. It went largely unnoticed since they had both turned to face what appeared to be nothing more than glorified debt collector. The ape-man had taken the coinpurse and started counting the money, even as Ned found it increasingly difficult to

keep his temper. His father shook his head and bit his lip.

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

“Really now, how so? Is Winceham over here giving you trouble? He’s a fine lad and all but has his priorities mixed up, wouldn’t you say Wince ol’ mate?”

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

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

“That’s our money, sir,” said Lernea, the word ‘sir’ filled with as much disdain as possible.

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

“Are these, ah, comedians friends of yours Ned lad? ‘Cause I’ve seen that act and it’s a bloat of shit, really.”

Mr. Brumbles stopped counting and drew his blunderbass to face the sisters, cocking the gun.

Ned replied through gritted teeth:

“My act is not shit.”

“What smells that bad then, eh?”

“That would be him,” said Lernea, drew her arrow, aimed at Mr. Brumbles and let an arrow fly right between his eyes before he had a chance to even swerve the gun their way. A gunshot rang clear though; Culliper was holding a pistol,

smouldering smoke trailing off its barrel. Ned's father was down on the floor. Parcifal sprang at Culliper with all the might of her sword, but he parried expertly as he turned to leave. Lerneia was reloading her bow even as Ned cried in outrage, "you murderous bastards! I'll see you dead!"

Winceham simply stood in his chair, his palms on his face, mumbling to himself:

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