

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Not ever?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Master Sisyphus is dead, Lernea."

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

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

"Don't do that."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Mother made mistakes as well in her reign."

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

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

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 attached to a hand holding her coinpurse.

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

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

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

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

Lerneia 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."

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

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

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

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

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

Parcival 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 am the firstborn, rightful heir to the throne and all that, can you?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What say you now, thief?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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