

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!"

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 dazzling 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 with his sly ways.

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 crowd

in an effort to cause a little bit of hysterical panic to make his escape all that easier. That didn't work though; the people around him went about their business, a few casually wondering to themselves whether or not they had heard some kind of voice; those who did hear wondered where it came from. He had to make himself scarce the hard way, and bolted into the nearest building.

"Quick! Into that establishment!" yelled Parcifal to Lernea, her finger pointing to a large sign, illuminated by a nearby lamp post which had just been lit, as night proper fell.

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

"What did you expect this far south? 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 merriment and folk music blasted away from the relatively large inn.

"By Skarla, of all the places.." said Lernea mostly to herself but followed Parcifal inside reminding herself 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 powerful mix of heavy scents dominated the air; rye, ale and roasted meat. The tables were mostly occupied by rowdy gangs of shady-looking sailors; everyone seemed to be having fun judging by the spillage on the floor, 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 hilt 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."

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 irrelevant yells, most prominently, 'Show us yer tittays!'. Nevertheless, he smiled courteously and said to the crowd:

"Well, this place is lively, ain't it? Feels like a band of roaming Dwarves would love to roll by. Hell, it's not like they're set in stone or anything," he said, grinning widely and posing to the crowd which hardly noticed anyone was talking on stage. The performer was facing a tough crowd. He turned to the band of musicians and said in voice right above a whisper:

"Guys.. That was a joke."

The percussionist realised that was meant for him, nodded, and promptly made a half-hearted drum roll, followed by hitting a small cowbell. The sound was not unlike a couple of coconuts banging together.

"Thank you!" said the performer on stage, clapping his hands in solitude.

Parcifal, equally oblivious to what sounded like a bad comedian noticed something else. She told Lernea:

"Windows just on the front. That door behind the barkeep, that's locked and barred. He's got to be 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.

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

Lernea let out a little laugh, more aptly a snigger, and put a hand to her mouth. Parcifal eyed her in puzzlement, her brow furrowed. Lernea replied with a giggly voice:

"That sounded like a, uhm.. A poop joke. 'Flush' him out like the little, uhm, shit he is! Oh, my!"

Parcifal closed her eyes, said nothing and sighed. Then she slowly started wading through the tables, filled with passed-out customers. The comedian was having a go at 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? What a race," he said and pretended to run for a moment. "I remember one night, a group of them fellows walks in this very same place. He nods at the bar and shouts, 'Barkeep! Seven short ones', to which the barkeep replies, 'I can see that, 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 lay motionless except for their eyes, magnetized by Parcifal's presence. Even if staring at her meant her staring back at them with a look that could shrivel their scrotum and turn their eyes into tiny glass beads. The comedian went on:

"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. Then came a drum roll and the signature cowbell. The crowd though wasn't paying attention; they kept drinking and singing rowdy songs, mostly containing obscene lyrics about unicorns and the priest's daughter. There was a voice of dissent though that rose sharply above the cacophony:

"That's bloody lie!"

It was the thief, all flustered, standing up on his toes to make

himself heard. 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 was dominant.

"Every other night, no-one reads the sign," said the comedian mostly to himself. He did try to get everyone's attention though:

"Excuse me now, I'm sure there's been some kind of misunderstanding. The lady here is certainly new around these parts. I mean, she's still got most of her belongings on her and a full set of teeth. If you could just ignore her breaking 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 was suddenly holding something that could kill, maim, or hurt like hell, most prominently forks, knives and the odd cutlass and pistol. 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 someone yelled 'Balls!' right before slumping down on the floor. The comedian got off the stage disheartened and headed for the bar. The band picked up a serene ballad that no-one really cared for. The barkeep smiled congenially to the comedian and told him: "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 screwed up that they felt relieved, confused and mildly insulted at the same time. Parcifal would not leave the thief from her sight; he approached her with both hands 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 in abundance.

"I guess we're even now, eh?" said the thief, still careful enough to put 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 stubborn, hot-headed, beautiful though foreign lady. I certainly wouldn't have heard anything of the sort if I were you," replied the thief with a kind smile. Lerneia stood by her sister's side and pondered for a moment 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 Higginsbottom Abbermouth the Third. At your service," said the small man with a slight bow and a smile, before showing the sisters to a recently emptied table. Parcifal looked at the man as he had insulted everything holy by Skrala and couldn't help but yell in anger:

"What, we're having drinks with the runt now?"

Lerneia sighed, took a deep breath and gently took her sister by one arm, walking her towards the table. She told 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 of person."

Parcifal couldn't believe her ears, but followed along as if in some kind of a trance. Winceham led the way and drew their chairs charmingly. 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 this is neither party's priority. Mr. Abbermouth here will make sure we're properly compensated for all the trouble he's caused us," said Lerneia stressing her last few 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 maggoty 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 with you 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? 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 upon 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 some foam off her mouth and settling her 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 a 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 unladylike manner. Parcifal added after another swig of ale:

"You knew 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."

Winceham nodded along, sipping at his beer and 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 exactly constitutes a thief, tell me, dear Parcifal?"

"How do you know which one's which?"

"Oh, that's easy. Queen Lernea is still wearing her marital ring," said Winceham and pointed to Lernea's finger.