

Futile Fantasy Creations Presents...

FUTILE FANTASY SIX

THE RETURN OF EVERKEI

“You’ll never take me alive!” A statement that declares how a person would rather take their own life or fight to the death than face the indignity of surrendering. Being quite the quivering coward, such a bold declaration was never one that Bonson would ever make. Being a man who’d happily choose surrender over conflict at every given opportunity, it would simply be untrue and there was no way a meticulous wordsmith like him would ever say anything so appalling imprecise. Until today. Despite his normally unbending attitude towards precise phrasing at all times, his current predicament had found him leaning heavily towards such bravado and horribly inaccurate statements. Racing down an unfamiliar, marble corridor in a castle strange to him, his only focus was on escaping. He’d chastise himself for his abuse of the spoken word later. For now he had to find a way out of this vast, stone prison.

Having crawled through a vent to free himself from his cell, he was now lost in a labyrinth of corridors being pursued by a determined legion of oriental guards in uniforms he didn’t recognise. Why they’d gone to such lengths to capture an old, retired ex-butler to the Guevina royal household, he had no idea. He didn’t care either. He just wanted to escape now and ask questions later. Having climbed into his own cosy bed and awoken up in a strange prison cell, he’d barely even questioned the bizarre happening before making a beeline for the vent and a dash for freedom. Pointless questions like “what?”, “why?” and “where am I?” didn’t even enter his head at this time. The only question on his mind was how he was going to get his aging self out of there. And thus, he made the threat he had no intention of adhering to as he raced down a thin passage with no idea where it lead; four well-built warriors hot on his tail.

BONSON: You’ll never take me alive!!!

(Gasping for breath, he then made a far more accurate statement.)

BONSON: I’m too old for this!

(This time, he’d spoken the absolute truth. This was a man whose prime was so long ago he didn’t even recall ever having one. At his age, a race against a group of fit, healthy young soldiers would most certainly end in his re-capture, and he knew he didn’t have much time. With this in mind, he looked around desperately for a way out of the building as he bounded forth. Alas, there was nothing but solid marble walls either side of him.)

BONSON: Stupid bloody walls, now what?

(As the shouts and footsteps of his eager pursuers drew nearer, Bonson knew his time was running out. He was barely twenty feet ahead of the chasing pack by the time he reached the end of the corridor, and they were gaining ground rapidly. Not about to give up any time soon, however, he whimpered frantically then veered off down a passage to his right, ever mindful of his need for a way to elude his pursuers. Having survived a heart attack only a few years before, running much further simply wasn’t an option. It was at this point the gasping, wheezing old man spotted something to his left.)

BONSON: What the...

(Along the wall on that side of this passageway was a stone rail balcony overlooking what looked like a plush room below. Such was his desperation to escape the guards on his heels, paired with his desire to bring an end to his lengthy run, he clambered over it without a moment's hesitation. Hoping the guards would race past and not notice him there, he clung onto the rails and ducked down.)

BONSON: I must be insane!

(Much to his relief, the first part of his plan worked. The guards, with toned muscles like that of a gorilla and brains to match, raced past him looking baffled as to how he could have disappeared from view.)

BONSON: Excellent!

(Sadly for Bonson, the second part of his plan, to climb back over the balcony again, wasn't quite as fruitful. Weak from the run, his tired and creaking knees didn't want to help him back up. To add insult to injury, his tired, aching hands then gave up the fight as well.)

BONSON: Uh-oh!

(And thus, he lost his grip and dropped like a stone from the balcony to the plush room below.)

BONSON: Shit!!!

(Now, Bonson had always chastised his acquaintance, the hapless royal knight of Guevina, Lefiat, for making a mess of every minor task and yet somehow coming out of it looking like a hero. He often made jibes about the young lad's obscene amounts of luck and how he'd like a slice of that good fortune now and again. As his fall was broken by a large comfortable bed in the oriental harem he'd tumbled into, however, he finally felt his ship had come in. With his hair sticking up and out in every direction, he looked about at the stunned, naked ladies around him. Having scanned their bewildered faces, he then looked up to the balcony from where he'd fallen and beamed.)

BONSON: So there is a god!

(With that, he flattened his hair with his fingers, made himself comfortable on the bed then raised a knowing eyebrow to the nearest concubine.)

BONSON: I'm single, you know!

(In that moment, his determination to escape at all costs withered and died. Something told him he could be happy here. Sadly for him, the elder concubine quickly dispelled that delusion.)

CONCUBINE: Old man, you are not welcome here!

(Deeply offended, he sat up indignantly.)

BONSON: Hey, less of the old! Besides, I wasn't talking to you!

(Not about to stand and argue with the round-eyed intruder, the elder immediately thrust her hand toward the door.)

CONCUBINE: Out!!!

(With a sigh, Bonson slid himself from the bed.)

BONSON: Fine! I've got an escape to perfect anyway!

(He took one step then paused for a moment, deep in thought.)

BONSON: Hmm!

(He looked to the elder concubine with a glint in his eye.)

BONSON: I don't suppose I could borrow something before I go, could I?

(Sure enough, moments later he slipped from the harem doors and out into the corridor

dressed in a pink harem dress, headscarf and fluffy slippers. The perfect disguise. Desperate to reaffirm himself and get back the determination he needed to escape, he then clenched a fist and growled under his breath.)

BONSON: Okay, Bonson, you look like a tit but underneath it all you're man enough to do this. Come on, old chap! Time to get out of this hell hole!

(Just then, he caught sight of his reflection on the marble wall.)

BONSON: Hmm, not bad!

(Immediately his shoulders dropped.)

BONSON: For fuck sake, since when did I care how I look in a dress??? I've been spending far too long with Lefiat!

(The fact that Lefiat wasn't there to hear the insult to his masculinity was neither here nor there, the simple fact he'd said it seemed to give Bonson a second wind. After all nothing was more quintessentially Bonson than berating Lefiat and he felt himself again.)

BONSON: That's more like it! Now come on, Bonson, it can't be that hard to pretend you're feminine. If that hideous beast you married can do it then so can you!

(Quite amused by that cheap shot at his ex-wife, he allowed himself a brief chuckle then rushed down the marble corridor looking all about himself for signs of a way out.

Without the warriors hot on his heels, he finally had a chance to gauge the sheer size and splendour of his surroundings as he shuffled onwards. He was very much impressed. The ceilings were high and the corridors were unusually long. He was quite certain this must be the palace of a very wealthy sovereign. Not only was the building impressive in stature but the interior decoration was something to behold. The walls were adorned with some of the finest oriental artistry he'd ever seen.

Not about to be distracted by the magnificence of his environment however, he managed to keep his main focus on finding his way out. Unfortunately for him, being focussed was one thing, maintaining a female gait without tripping on the bottom of his dress was another. Stumbling every few feet as he dashed onwards, awkwardly giggling in a girly manner every now and again as not to arouse suspicion, he was becoming quite flustered. Hiding his angered frown behind a limp hand that rested on his cheek, he mumbled to himself as he staggered forth.)

BONSON: Why can't women wear sensible clothes? I'm sure god only invented women to piss me off. I mean why do we even bother with the ridiculous creatures anyway? A dog is supposed to be man's best friend... and they're better looking than most of the things I end up dating.

(Fearing his mumbled rant may have been getting a little too loud, he then groaned to himself and *thought* his angry words to himself instead. Typically, once Bonson got a bee in his bonnet, all his focus on anything else would quickly disappear. As a result, he didn't notice the guard keeping vigil over the large wooden door at the end of the corridor that he was rapidly stumbling towards. So engrossed was he in his temporary hatred for everything female, he received quite a start when the guard stepped into his path.)

GUARD: Halt!

(Almost leaping out of his skin, he released a deep, manly scream before remembering his character and releasing a second, unconvincing high-pitched one. Naturally, the guard was more than a little suspicious. Placing himself firmly between Bonson and the

doorway, the guard raised a distrusting eyebrow.)

GUARD: Umm... are you okay there... ma'am?

(Still in a state of shock, Bonson just stared at him. He had no idea what to do or what to say at this point.)

GUARD: Ma'am?

(As sweat started to pour from his forehead, Bonson could still only gape and say nothing.)

GUARD: Well?

(Feeling increasingly agitated and knowing that the longer he was silent, the more likely he was to be caught, he wiped the sweat from his brow, allowing his sleeve to drop and reveal his forearm.)

GUARD: Hmm... what hairy arms you have!

(Completely stuck for an answer he quickly tried to think how a woman might react in this situation. Truth was, the miserable old man hadn't had much female attention. Something about his mean, angry, belittling and condescending personality seemed to put them off. By now desperate, he took a deep breath and did the only feminine thing that sprung to mind. With a quick flash of his eyelashes, he giggled in a girly voice and gently slapped the guard on the chest with a limp hand.)

BONSON: Oh, you!

(As if he'd just seen his entire family slain before his very eyes, the guard recoiled and grimaced.)

GUARD: God no!

(With that, he thrust open the door behind him and urged the hideous woman, Bonson to pass through it.)

GUARD: Please, my eyes are offended!

(At first, Bonson placed angry hands on his hips in readiness to chastise the cheeky young man and give him a lecture about respecting his elders, before remembering the situation and scuttling through the doorway as soon as possible. As the thick oak door slammed behind him he could clearly hear the guard retching.)

BONSON: Git!

(Setting aside the half a mind he had to go back and lecture the guard, he looked around himself to see where he'd ended up. He was in a vast picturesque courtyard, surrounded by apple trees and cherry blossom.)

BONSON: Hmm... beautiful!

(Much to his alarm, those exact sentiments then came straight back to him with a deep, booming voice. Looking mortified, he turned to see a bulky soldier stagger drunkenly towards him, drooling down his chin as he did so. In a blind panic, Bonson looked around and noticed concubines and soldiers in what can only be described as intimate clinches, dotted all around the area. Trying to think quickly, Bonson spoke up in a high voice as he thrust his back against the door he'd just walked through.)

BONSON: What is this place?

(The large, amorous drunk beamed.)

DRUNK: For you, love. It's about to be heaven!

(Bonson's eyes bulged and he screeched in a high, quivering voice.)

BONSON: What?

(He couldn't believe his misfortune. This would never happen to Lefiat! He'd

inadvertently stumbled on the place where the concubines entertain the guards. Knowing he had to act and act soon, Bonson thought hard.)

BONSON: Umm...

(His train of thought was soon broken however.)

DRUNK: I'm gonna shag you so hard your teeth will fall out!

(With that, Bonson immediately threw off the dress and surrendered.)

BONSON: Fuck that! Take me to jail!

(Much to his horror, the drunk merely looked baffled for a moment before shrugging.)

DRUNK: My offer still stands!

(Bonson's scream could be heard from several miles away! Thankfully for him, the more sober guards reacted to the scream and arrested him on sight. As they led him away he could be heard thanking the gods for, as he so quaintly put it "quite literally" saving his backside.)

(Within a matter of minutes, Bonson was returned to his jail block. As he was led into his cell, feeling a little aggrieved that he'd failed to escape, he decided to console himself with the knowledge that it could have been worse. A lot worse. Tired from his exertions, he immediately sat himself on the bunk and took a deep breath before sitting back against the wall and scanning the slanted eyes of the guards who'd escorted him back.)

BONSON: So... are you oriental or is just very bright in here?

(The guards looked at one another.)

BONSON: You know... it was a joke... 'cause you have squinting eyes!

(He rolled his eyes.)

BONSON: No bloody sense of humour these foreigners!

(Just then a female voice emerged from the doorway.)

CHYNA: Forgive them...

(As he looked up to see who'd spoken, the guards parted and the most beautiful woman he'd ever set eyes on emerged from between them. Wearing a fine, yet revealing satin robe, she elegantly glided towards him, her soft lips curling into a seductive smile. She was simply a vision of oriental perfection.)

CHYNA: Forgive them... they do not speak your language!

(Bonson couldn't say anything for the fact his tongue was hanging out.)

CHYNA: Allow me to introduce myself, I am Chyna... Chyna Lee! Welcome to Tang Yul!

(Looking the love struck Bonson in the eye, she then bowed respectfully. When she looked up however, Bonson's eyes had refocused elsewhere. As if in a dream, he slowly shook his head and mumbled.)

BONSON: You just don't see cleavage like that in Guevina anymore!

(Slowly, Chyna stepped to him and lifted his chin so he could look into her eyes.)

CHYNA: Welcome, Bonson!

(Bonson was simply struck dumb with lust.)

BONSON: Well... quite...

CHYNA: You must be curious as to why you are here!

(The old man was so lost in her eyes he didn't even hear her.)

BONSON: I think I love you!

(Allowing herself a chuckle, she slowly lowered herself to sit beside him. Maintaining her warm smile she then placed her hand on his thigh forcing him into a quick crossing of his legs. His jaw then dropped and he performed a double take at his lap.)

BONSON: Hello? I never thought I'd see *you* again!!!

(Well aware of the effect she was having on him, Chyna leant into him and gently stroked his face, allowing her hair to fall onto his neck.)

CHYNA: Worry not, Mr Bonson, although you are my prisoner, I will treat you like an honoured guest. I promise you will not be harmed. And in a few days you will be free to return to your home.

(The lusty Bonson could only leer at her and offer up a goofy smile.)

BONSON: You're lovely!

(Chyna nodded to herself then placed honest hands on her lap.)

CHYNA: So... the gathering has begun.

(Unable to concentrate, Bonson just looked to her with glazed eyes.)

BONSON: Gathering, you say?

CHYNA: You will find out in time.

(She then slipped her hand back onto his thigh.)

CHYNA: Until then, I will make you feel welcome by pleasuring you in ways you never would have dared dream about.

(With that, the guards slipped away and shut her in the cell with him. As they headed away to resume their duties, Bonson could be heard proclaiming a new found faith in the gods and the glory of life itself. His attempt to escape had been a complete failure and he couldn't have been happier about it.)

Township of Tifaeris

(As always, the dawning of a new day in the idyllic sunlit retreat of Tifaeris had brought with it sunshine and bird song. An ideal accompaniment to the perpetual sound of the waves gently caressing the cliffs and the beach. The happy citizens of this fine settlement often rose with the sun to bask in its glow and make the most of what the wonderful settlement had become since the town leader, Sir Flaxley and his beautiful, yet violent wife, Kritz had transformed the place from a shanty town into a paradise. The pace of life here was very different to the world's major cities like Guevina. The people were never too busy to lend each other a hand nor to stop and talk to one another. People worked hard, but did so in their own time and they were much happier for it. As a result of this easy going lifestyle, people were flocking to Tifaeris from all over the world to build houses and create a better life for themselves there. Nowhere else in the world, after all, was as easy going, secure and peaceful.

In the early hours, normally Sir Flaxley and Kritz would be among the many citizens of Tifaeris preparing for their day in no particular hurry. The routine of feeding themselves and their two toddlers would take as long as they liked before they headed out to work and returned whenever they felt like it. Today however, was different. While their young twins were sleeping soundly indoors, Flaxley and Kritz were busy doing battle in the street outside.

Having been ambushed in their living room by a clan of 20 or more hooded assailants, the perplexed duo had managed to take the fight into the thoroughfare outside for the sake of their children's safety. With the first priority, their offspring, taken care of, all Flaxley cared about now was subduing the enemy and interrogating them about it later. Kritz, however, was by nature a lot less patient.)

KRITZ: What the fuck's going on? Who the fuck are they?

FLAXLEY: How the hell should I know?

(As far as they knew, they had no enemies and the attack had come as a complete surprise. Kritz, however, was no lover of surprises, especially when they came in the form of being attacked in her own home and she was determined to get to the bottom of it as soon as possible. Holding her defensive stance as she helped her husband knock back enemy attacks, she spoke with a determined aggression in her voice.)

KRITZ: You must have *some* idea who they are!

(Batting back two assailants at once with his fist and the hilt of his ever present sword, Flaxley frowned.)

FLAXLEY: Why must I?

KRITZ: Well, you must have done...

(Without breaking her sentence she high kicked an attacker then continued.)

KRITZ: *Something* to piss *someone* off!

(Not about to stand there and get nagged during battle, Flaxley rolled his eyes.)

FLAXLEY: Yes, dear!

(With that, he leapt forward to take the battle to their hooded foes.)

FLAXLEY: Taste cold steel, you hooded... things!!!

(Flaxley wasn't reputed to be the best swordsman in the world for nothing and very quickly started to make headway, killing two of his attackers in a swift double strike of his blade.)

FLAXLEY: A-ha! Fools!

(Unfortunately, Kritz wasn't about to let him off that easily. Performing a somersault as she did so, she leapt to his side once again.)

KRITZ: You did pay the timber merchant, didn't you?

FLAXLEY: What?

KRITZ: You heard me!

(Looking extremely peeved, Flaxley nonchalantly punched an incoming enemy to the ground then stood tall and glared at her.)

FLAXLEY: Of course I bloody paid him!!! Now if you don't mind, I'm try to do battle here.

(Taking his word for it, Kritz shrugged then leapt forwards to release a swift combo of kicks and punches at the next advancing enemy then leapt back into position and stood up straight.)

KRITZ: It's just... if you paid the bills, why are we being attacked? What did you do? I promise I won't be angry!

(Flaxley snarled.)

FLAXLEY: No but if you don't shut up, *I* will be. Now come on!

KRITZ: Fine, but I'll find out and when I do...

(Before she could finish, Flaxley leapt forward into a group of assailants and mounted a

vicious assault upon them with his trusty blade.)

KRITZ: How rude!

(With that, she too came out fighting. For all the attackers efforts, they were clearly no match for the well versed duo of Flaxley and Kritz. Despite the current argument, their natural harmony in battle made them quite the force to be reckoned with. In their hearts they knew it was only a matter of time before the victory was theirs. Fending off multiple attackers at a time with swift defences and stunning counters, there didn't seem to be any danger of defeat. So confident where they, at one point Kritz even started to showboat. Using Flaxley's back as a wall, she boosted herself into a high kick and snapped an enemy neck with a perfect roundhouse.)

FLAXLEY: Excellent move, my love!

KRITZ: Thanks!

(Dropping to the ground in a fighting stance, she then resumed battle immediately. With half the enemy either dead or incapacitated in a matter of moments, things looked to be going brilliantly at this point. Without a scratch on them, they continuously performed their well-rehearsed moves with deadly precision, time and time again, thinking the battle would be won in no time. Alas, their optimism would prove unfounded. Much to their horror, only moments later, one of the assailants called for his men to back off in a strong oriental accent. As the attackers swiftly retreated, their leader then called out to Flaxley and Kritz from the porch of their home.)

LEADER: Desist or the child dies!

(Upon sighting the enemy leader, standing tall with a sharp blade at one of their toddlers throats, Flaxley and Kritz immediately froze in horror. Without a moment's hesitation, Flaxley then threw his sword down and held his hands in the air.)

FLAXLEY: Okay, we surrender, just don't harm the child.

(A tearful Kritz was too terrified to speak.)

FLAXLEY: Please!!!

LEADER: You have my word. If you comply, your child will not be harmed.

(The leader then nodded to his men.)

LEADER: Bind them. Hurry!

(He then looked to Flaxley wearing a bewildered expression.)

LEADER: What have you been feeding it? It weighs a tonne!

(Flaxley could only meet his words with an icy stare.)

LEADER: Very well.

(Moments later, Flaxley and Kritz found themselves standing side by side in the thoroughfare with their hands tied behind their backs and their ankles bound together. By involving one of their children, their attackers had found the one thing more important to Flaxley and Kritz than their own lives and their victory had been assured.

Much to Flaxley and Kritz's utter relief, as soon as their binds were secure, the enemy leader remained true to his word and returned the child safely to its bed. Now all that remained was for him to explain himself. Looking exhausted from the fight, he stepped from the homestead and approached the captured twosome confidently.)

LEADER: You fight well!

(Kritz snarled.)

KRITZ: You fight dirty!

FLAXLEY: Yeah, have you no honour? You timber merchants are all the same, I miss one lousy payment and...

KRITZ: I knew it!!!

(The leader shook his head ruefully.)

LEADER: I apologise. My name is...not important. I am not here about timber however, that I can tell you. You will come with us to Tang Yul!

(Flaxley sneered furiously.)

FLAXLEY: Tang Yul??? You're one of the Dim Dum Dynasty aren't you?

KRITZ: Dim Lee!

(Angered by the interruption, Flaxley snapped at her.)

FLAXLEY: Lee, Dum, who cares? Like he didn't know who I meant!

KRITZ: Well pardon me for breathing!

LEADER: I am sorry once again. We wish you no harm. You will come...

KRITZ: But...our children!

(The leader nodded.)

LEADER: I am sure one of the many citizens who watched cowering from the window will take care of them until you return!

KRITZ: But...

LEADER: Enough!

(He looked to his second in command.)

LEADER: Cast sleep magic on these two. The gathering must go on; we are running out of time.

(Flaxley looked more than a little peeved.)

FLAXLEY: Sleep magic? You've had sleep magic all along?

KRITZ: Hey, yeah! Why didn't you just use that in the first place instead of making us all go through a huge battle?

(The leader looked lost and stared straight through them.)

LEADER: Um... hey, I don't tell *you* how to do *your* job!

(He looked to his second.)

LEADER: What's keeping you? Sleep magic, now! And not a word from you either, okay?

(With puppy dog eyes, Kritz looked imploringly to the leader.)

KRITZ: Please... my little ones... I need to know they're okay. Please take them to the babysitter, I beg you!

(Leader sighed and bowed to concede to her request.)

KRITZ: I need to see they're okay then you can do what you like with us!

FLAXLEY: Within reason, of course!

LEADER: Okay. And what is this babysitter's name?

(She bit her lip and tried to think quickly only to make a stunning discovery.)

KRITZ: Um... come to think of it, I don't actually know her name! What is it, Flaxley?

(Asking Flaxley to remember a name was like asking a penguin to climb a tree.

Unsurprisingly, his face immediately looked blank.)

FLAXLEY: Her name's... Phisele's mum!

KRITZ: Oh, you're helpful!

(Leader rolled his eyes.)

LEADER: Just point to the house!

KRITZ: Um... my hands are tied!

LEADER: You can nod, can't you?

(With a saddened face she turned her head and nodded towards the house.)

KRITZ: It's that one!

LEADER: Very well!

(Moments later as Kritz and Flaxley watched Phisele and her mother race across the thoroughfare towards their house, the second in command cast the sleep magic. The last thing Kritz saw as her head hit the turf was Phisele disappearing into her house. With a smile of relief, she then fell into a deep, magic-induced sleep. As he stood over hers and Flaxley's horizontal bodies, the leader nodded.)

LEADER: There is one more here. Gather him!

(He looked sheepish.)

LEADER: Umm... sneak in and use the sleep magic this time!

(With that, he folded his arms and stood tall.)

LEADER: And then... our work here will be done!

Tang Yul

(Tang Yul was, if nothing, a beautiful country. There were a million vast meadows, hundreds of glorious mountains and several sprawling forests that spread majestically across the landscape. Even the cities were picturesque. With architecture that most civilisations could only fantasise about, to the untrained eye this nation looked perfect. Sadly, all was not as it seemed. Many years of battling with the neighbouring kingdom of Bochoco for a disputed region in the south had left Tang Yul in some disarray. Many citizens were poor and street crime was a far too common problem.

Their leader, Chyna Lee had inherited her post after her two older brothers had died making vain attempts to avenge their father's death. Just like their father, her brothers, Chum Lee and Chung Lee had used military might to further their nations cause during their short reigns. Both were known for being ruthless and brutal, but neither could even begin to hold a candle to their father, the notorious death bringer, Dim Lee. During his reign he'd bullied many a weaker nation into doing his bidding for him and had even sided with the evil queen of all witches, Kajice, to help fund his war on Bochoco. This tactic of bullying weaker nations however, had had consequences. Tang Yul was now regarded as a pariah state to which all other nations were wary of dealing with. Chyna was well aware of this perception, however, and was working hard to change things. No longer prepared to sacrifice the well-being of her citizens for the sake of a pointless military campaign, she'd scaled down the army and even brokered a settlement to the dispute with her southern neighbours. Her work was far from over but Tang Yul's transformation from a war crazed military dictatorship to a prosperous, trading nation was beginning to bear fruit.

In Tang Yul's capital, Athumba, the Lee dynasty castle dominated the skyline. It was

viewed by some as a sign of the nation's prosperity but when viewed from the slums, its magnificence looked more like an over exuberant insult to the poor who lived in its shadow. As Chyna looked down at the slums from the vast balconies within the castle this often made her feel guilty. She was a leader for all the people, not just the few.)

Lee Dynasty Castle

(As the summer sun rose above the horizon to cast an orange glow on the tree tops, Chyna found herself once again standing on a balcony staring out deep in thought. She'd been up before the sun, unable to sleep for the myriad of thoughts that keep running through her mind.

The previous evening, she'd met and spent time with those her army had been sent to gather. The very six souls responsible for her father's death. Although, she knew in her heart that *they* were the good guys and that her father was the one in the wrong, meeting them had been hard on her. Part of her wanted to make them suffer for what they'd done to her father. In her heart, however, she couldn't help but feel guilty. After all her father had done in Tang Yul's name, she was greatly aware that *she* should be the one apologising to *them*. They'd merely acted in self-defence. Knowing this, she'd treated them all with the utmost respect and they'd all been given her most personal, heartfelt welcome. They'd been treated like honoured guests, albeit it from the confines of their prison cells. Having done the right thing by them, however, thoughts about her father dying at their hands continued to niggle away at the back of her mind. Suffice to say, it had been a confusing time for her and it wasn't about to get any easier.

Having taken them prisoner, any moment she now had to inform them as to why. This only served to pile more guilt onto her already overburdened shoulders. Taking prisoners was not her style, this was what Tang Yul used to be about and was everything she was fighting to change. In turn, this just made her feel guilty about her father. All night she'd been plagued by the thought that maybe her desire for change dishonoured his memory in some way. She loved him dearly and she knew the feeling was mutual and there were times when she missed him terribly. Outside of her personal fondness for him, however, it was impossible for her to think of a single good thing to say about him. He was a killer, he was merciless and he was heartless, things she could never condone. To say she felt conflicted would be quite the understatement.

While she continued to stare emptily from the balcony, struggling to make sense of her conflicting emotions towards her father, her troops were beginning to gather together the prisoners in the large, luxurious chamber behind her. Oblivious to them she remained quietly out of the way while the first two were led in from different sides of the room. One of them walked tall. A man of honour, he offered no complaint or protest. The other, however, was Bonson. He wasn't about to be manhandled into a room by anybody without saying his piece.)

BONSON: Look here, you... I'm quite capable of walking myself. In fact, these old legs have been doing it since before you were even born, sunshine! It's not like I'm going to

escape after the last attempt now is it? Just let me...

(His words then dried up as he caught sight of the prisoner he was brought alongside.)

GUARD: Wait here. Her excellence will see you shortly!

(As the guards left to fetch the other captives, Bonson didn't even bother to acknowledge them. Being manhandled suddenly didn't seem so bad. Instead he chose to raise an unfriendly eyebrow and place his hands on his hips in a show of disdain for his fellow captive.)

BONSON: Well, well, look what the cat dragged in!

(The other captive nodded to him politely.)

FLAXLEY: Actually, Bonson, it wasn't a cat it was an entire legion of soldiers!

BONSON: Yes, I forgot, the only pussy here is you!

(As he scowled at Flaxley, expecting an angry reaction he was most put out to see him smile.)

FLAXLEY: It's good to see you, old chap!

BONSON: Don't you grin at me while I'm insulting you!

(Much to Bonson's fury, Flaxley placed his finger to his lips and urged him to be silent.)

FLAXLEY: Don't embarrass yourself, Bonson. I've known schoolgirls more intimidating than you!

BONSON: How dare...

FLAXLEY: Now shut your face, there's a good chap. I'd hate to have to beat you to death so far from home.

(As Bonson fell silent in fear of whether or not Flaxley was serious, it was pretty obvious to the watching sentry guards that there was a lot of tension between the two of them. Tension over an incident in their recent past. They were not wrong. Flaxley and Kritz had made the unpopular decision to stop seeing their former allies Bonson, Sir Lefiat, Queen Mandika I of Guevina and Derek together at the same time, a decision made on the grounds that every time all six of them were together something terrible happened. They knew these events had all been controlled by a mystic wise man, Daman Siria and decided the only way to stop them happening was to sever the ties. After the six last met in Tifaeris there had been an argument about it which resulted in Mandika, her husband Sir Lefiat and Bonson returning to Guevina feeling bitter. The three who remained in Tifaeris, Flaxley, Kritz and Derek were unable to convince them that the idea wasn't motivated by anything cruel. The decision was made in the hope they could all move on with their lives in peace and end their time as pawns in Daman Siria's game. Mandika was particularly upset at what she considered a snub having taken it personally, a result of her spoilt upbringing. In her mind she'd been ejected from Tifaeris with an extreme lack of courtesy and she wasn't about to forgive that any time soon. Bonson understood the wisdom in the separation but he'd decided to be bitter about it anyway.

And so, the two men stood a good few feet apart, both staring ahead and refusing to acknowledge the other's existence. Anxious to pretend he'd not even been bothered by Flaxley's threat, Bonson looked around the chamber at the artworks and vases with an approving look on his face. Flaxley, true to his knight ways, stood tall and stared straight ahead, his eyes straying now again to look Chyna up and down as she looked over the balcony, oblivious to his presence. Just then, the two side doors creaked open once more and this time Kritz and Mandika were led into the room. Kritz had suppressed her urges

to beat the guards senseless as she was anxious to see her beloved husband. She'd been no trouble for them whatsoever, marching silently in time with them as they led her into the chamber. Mandika on the other hand had refused to walk and had had to be carried. She'd complained all the way about how being a sovereign queen meant she deserved better treatment and of course, she frequently reminded the guards that they were peasants and therefore must have poor personal hygiene. As they were brought to their comrades, Kritz immediately hugged Flaxley and they shared a warm smile. As soon as Mandika was set down, she slapped Bonson and growled at him.)

BONSON: What the...

MANDIKA: This is your fault!

(Bonson was horrified.)

BONSON: What? Why?

(She looked furious as she desperately tried to think of something to justify her accusation.)

MANDIKA: Because...um...

(Bonson raised an inquisitive eyebrow.)

BONSON: Because that useless tit you married, Lefiat, isn't here to take the blame?

(She scowled and looked away.)

MANDIKA: Shut up!

BONSON: No, no... fair comment, ma'am. It's never easy knowing who to blame when he isn't around, I know that better than anyone.

(He sighed then gestured to Flaxley and Kritz with his thumb.)

BONSON: *They're* here though!

(As soon as Mandika caught sight of them her nostrils flared. Standing akimbo she looked them both up and down as if they were filth.)

MANDIKA: Well, well... isn't this an unpleasant surprise?

(Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: Indeed, but I'll get over it!

MANDIKA: Hey, I meant for me!

BONSON: Well done ma'am. That told them!

MANDIKA: But...

(Before she could continue, Flaxley stepped forward and held his hands out to his sides.)

FLAXLEY: Before you go off on one of your rants that nobody pays any attention to, may I remind you we're captives in this place? Let's just put all the arguing aside until we're out of here then you can whinge to your heart's content!

(Not used to being talked down to, Mandika sneered.)

MANDIKA: You'd like that wouldn't you? You think if I don't have a go at you now I'll forget! Well, pull back your ears, Flaxley, there's a lot I have to say to you...

(She sneered at Kritz.)

MANDIKA: And that tart of yours!

(Much to her amazement Kritz didn't react.)

MANDIKA: Hey! I said tart!

(Kritz merely shrugged.)

KRITZ: You'll keep!

(As had become the norm in such situations, Flaxley rolled his eyes and attempted to take control.)

FLAXLEY: Listen Mandika, right now I'm trying to assess our options. Would you like me to help you escape or would you prefer to wait for Lefiat to come and rescue you?

(With that, Bonson sighed.)

BONSON: Lefiat? Lefiat's probably here in Tang Yul too!

MANDIKA: You think so?

BONSON: I know so! I bet you Daman Siria is behind this, I'd bet Lefiat's life on it!

FLAXLEY: You'd bet Lefiat's life on the toss of a coin, Bonson!

BONSON: Even so, he's here, you mark my words!

(Just then, sure enough, the door creaked open again and a trembling, tin pot helmet wearing Lefiat appeared in the doorway flanked by guards.)

BONSON: See? I'm always right!

(True to form, the first thing the gangly, bumbling buffoon Lefiat did was inadvertently offend his beloved Mandika. This was hardly difficult to do but nobody was quite as good at it as he was. It was hardly the crime of the century but it was enough to make Mandika snarl. All he did was simply look up and smile when he was led to join his co-captives.)

LEFIAT: Mandika!!! You're safe! Oh... Flaxley, Kritz... good to see you!

(As he went to hug Mandika, she stepped back and fumed at him.)

MANDIKA: Good to see them? How on earth did you reach that conclusion???

(Immediately, Lefiat reared back in fear of her vile tongue.)

LEFIAT: Um...

MANDIKA: Well??? How can it be good to see them two traitors???

(Lefiat sighed and looked sheepish.)

LEFIAT: Well, I thought for a minute *I'd* have to rescue us and we all know how that'd turn out!

(Everybody nodded as they pondered the thought of Lefiat rescuing them.)

BONSON: Hmm... I'm not quite ready to die just yet!

LEFIAT: Exactly!

(Flaxley nodded and stood tall.)

FLAXLEY: Well fear not, we'll see what they want then I'll get us out of here. Just leave it to me!

(Kritz rolled her eyes.)

KRITZ: Arrogant sod!

(Mandika's shoulders hunched and she looked to the ground.)

MANDIKA: Fine, you can rescue us, Flaxley but don't expect me to be grateful!

BONSON: No change there then!

(Immediately, she glared at Bonson.)

MANDIKA: Whose side are you on?

(Bonson looked bewilderedly back at her.)

BONSON: Whose side? Good question. Do I pick the all-powerful knight who can rescue us or the whinging Minnie with a chip on her shoulder?

(He nodded.)

BONSON: I need time to think this one over!

MANDIKA: I hate you, Bonson!

(Bonson scoffed.)

BONSON: No ma'am, you merely *wish* you did.

(Realising that Bonson was up to his old tricks and deliberately trying to wind Mandika up, Flaxley stepped forward to intervene.)

FLAXLEY: Never mind that, you two. Keep it down while I think of a plan!

(He then paused and rubbed his chin as he mused out loud.)

FLAXLEY: But, you know, I doubt we'll have to escape. I met their leader last night and she seems very civil. I don't think we've anything to fear, to be honest.

KRITZ: Yeah, I got that impression too.

LEFIAT: Um, so why have they brought us here?

(Flaxley shrugged.)

FLAXLEY: I don't know!

MANDIKA: You don't know? We killed Dim Lee! Their mightiest of leaders and we sent what was left of him home in a box.

KRITZ: So?

MANDIKA: What do you mean, "So"?

(She frowned.)

MANDIKA: I see you're as smart as ever, Kritz!

FLAXLEY: Hey!

KRITZ: Yeah, hey!

MANDIKA: "Hey" all you want. We killed Dim Lee and now they want revenge!

(Flaxley shook his head.)

FLAXLEY: No. We killed him, true. And those two sons of his challenged me and failed but I don't think that's it!

BONSON: Hmm, I'm not so sure!

KRITZ: Well, I guess we'll find out in a minute!

(Bonson nodded.)

BONSON: You know, what Mandika said was the only rational explanation. Well done by the way...

(Mandika gave Kritz a conceited sneer. It never ceased to amaze anybody how despite being reasonably intelligent and extremely well educated, Mandika was all too often making the stupid mistake of taking out her frustrations on the only person willing to hit her.)

KRITZ: It's being noted, Mandika. I can wait!

BONSON: Although, having said revenge is the only rational explanation... I don't think that's why we're here. I don't sense anything negative about how we've been received here... well personally speaking that is.

(Just then, a dark cloud seemed to descend over him and his brow furrowed.)

BONSON: Come to think of it, there is one other explanation. If that bastard Daman is behind this... and I'm beginning to suspect he might be, it could be far worse! She could be gathering us for a quest! You know, to do Daman's bloody bidding for him.

(As they quietly considered Bonson's troubling words, the final captive, Derek the three foot tall green alien from the planet Tryme 17 was led into the chamber. He too was more than a little surprised to see everyone. Wearing a warm smile on his little green face, he approached them and looked up.)

DEREK: Everyone's here! How wonderful!

(He then glared at Mandika.)

DEREK: That's a downright nasty thing to think!!!

(Mandika turned and looked away, cursing Derek's mind-reading skills.)

DEREK: What's with her?

(Bonson shrugged.)

BONSON: Nothing out of the ordinary. You *have* met Mandika before haven't you?

(Derek just looked blank, an innocent look that somehow managed to spark an exchange of raised voices and insults.)

BONSON: Don't look at *me* like that, Derek.

DEREK: Like what?

BONSON: Like I'm a world class git! I was just saying, you can hardly act surprised that Mandika's being a cantankerous little shit.

MANDIKA: Bonson, you're really starting to annoy me now!

BONSON: Well, about bloody time!

(Flaxley rolled his eyes.)

FLAXLEY: Hey, don't start this again!

MANDIKA: You can shut up an' all, Flaxley!

FLAXLEY: Oh can I now?

KRITZ: Um... guys!

MANDIKA: Oh, the tart speaks!

KRITZ: You are so dead, Mandika!

MANDIKA: It's Queen Mandika to *you*, peasant!

(Lefiat spammed his forehead.)

LEFIAT: They're off!

(Derek nodded, unsurprised by the human's behaviour.)

DEREK: Bloody savages!

(Just then, Chyna stepped from the balcony and onto the carpet of the chamber. As she did so, everyone immediately fell silent and stared at her longingly. All concept of what they'd been arguing about instantly vanished from their minds as their eyes all fixed upon her beautiful face. Apart from being the first Tang Yul leader not to be driven by war, there was one other thing that set her apart from her peers. She was a seductress; and a good one. There wasn't any problem she couldn't solve with a flash of her long eyelashes. Part of her skill was to appear to the beholder as the most beautiful thing their eyes had ever feasted upon. Resistance was futile. This would be an important weapon for her in the discussion she intended to have with her captors. She'd made sure they weren't intimidated or mistreated in any way once they'd arrived and made sure they had no fear of her or anything about Tang Yul. Intimidation was not her tactic, seduction was.

With her six captives very much under her seductive thrall, a place from which no man or woman had ever escaped, she walked towards the centre of the room to stand before them. As one, they all drooled and watched her adoringly; tilting their heads to admire her wares. As her walk ceased she was then flanked by two bare-chested men who fanned her with large ostrich feathers. Looking majestic she then projected her sultry voice to their waiting ears.)

CHYNA: Friends! I apologise for bringing you here in such a brutal and callous manner.

(Flaxley glanced to his feet like a shy schoolboy and Bonson sighed adoringly.)

BONSON: Don't worry about it, sweetheart!

CHYNA: But I do, this is not the way of Tang Yul!

(Flaxley snapped out of his trance and glared at her in disbelief.)

FLAXLEY: Excuse me???

CHYNA: I mean anymore!

(As Flaxley nodded in acceptance, she continued.)

CHYNA: This is why I took the time to get to know you all individually last night. I need you to know I'm nothing like my father. I am a woman of peace and as I said last night, I hope you can forgive Tang Yul for what he did.

(Like helpless kittens, her prisoners all shrugged nervously and smiled warmly to acknowledge their forgiveness.)

CHYNA: Thank you, my friends.

(Delighted to have their full attention, she then resumed her speech.)

CHYNA: I won't lie to you; I have too much respect for you all. I'll come straight to the point. I have brought you here to ask of you all a favour!

BONSON: We'll do it!

(Chyna smiled.)

CHYNA: Thank you, but wouldn't you like me to tell you what the favour is before you decide?

BONSON: Nope!

CHYNA: Right... well, I'm going to anyway.

(There was silence.)

CHYNA: There is an important artefact...

(Out of the blue, Flaxley then stepped forward.)

FLAXLEY: Thrall!

(Everybody stared his way in bewilderment.)

CHYNA: I beg your pardon!

(Flaxley stood tall and sneered.)

FLAXLEY: I've seen beautiful women before but for some reason I can't take my eyes off of you!

(As a knight Flaxley was constantly assessing every situation and something about her was ringing alarm bells in his head.)

FLAXLEY: There's something odd about you, you're using some kind of thrall.

(Chyna merely sighed.)

CHYNA: Come here, Flaxley.

FLAXLEY: Come to you? Never! You can't control *me*, you bewitching sow!

(With that, he walked straight up to her and stood tall.)

FLAXLEY: Okay... it appears I might have been wrong about that.

CHYNA: Now kneel, there's a good boy!

FLAXLEY: There's no way... oh, who am I kidding?

(With that, he knelt before her and she stooped to kiss him gently on the lips.

Immediately, Flaxley was lost in her eyes and they embarked on a lingering kiss, their tongues entwining shamelessly. Kritz could only watch on and fume, too shocked to even move.)

KRITZ: That bastard!

(Desperately trying to keep a clear mind and yet entrapped by Chyna's thrall, Flaxley pulled away from the kiss and stared at her with a horrified look on his face.)

CHYNA: Now, no more interruptions or that'll be the last time!

KRITZ: *Last time?* There was a previous time then???

CHYNA: Now go and join the others, my sweet.

(Looking tortured Flaxley immediately staggered back over to a fuming Kritz.)

KRITZ: You bastard! As soon as we're out of here I'm gonna kill you good and proper!!!

FLAXLEY: I couldn't help it!!!

KRITZ: You just wait! First Suma now her! And that's after lying about shagging my sister. You're in for a world of pain, mister.

(As Flaxley continued to stare in horror at his growling, snarling wife, Chyna bit her lip uneasily. Flaxley's momentary resistance to her thrall had thrown her a little. She wasn't used to her charms letting her down and a few seeds of doubt in her abilities started to grow within her mind. Having met them all on a very civil basis and assured them she meant them no harm, she knew intimidating them wouldn't work and should her thrall fail, she had little else to bargain with. She had a plan B but it was one she very much hoped she wouldn't have to use. And so, feeling a little less self-assured, she tried to resist any self-doubt and resumed speaking in a confident manner.)

CHYNA: Now where was I? Ah, the artefact...

(Unfortunately for Chyna, her thrall was nothing compared to the weight of Kritz's angry glare and Flaxley fell to his knees looking like a broken man, interrupting her again.)

FLAXLEY: No more! Kritz, I'm sorry! I was unfaithful!!!

(Chyna sighed to herself nervously. Flaxley's mind was a lot stronger than she'd expected and his true self was fighting her thrall. She could do nothing but look on with uncertainty at what was happening before her.)

FLAXLEY: Darling, I can't lie to you. I slept with her last night when she came to see me! Gave her a thorough seeing to, in fact. I couldn't help myself!!!

(He looked to her imploringly.)

FLAXLEY: I'm sorry!!!

(Much to everyone's amazement Kritz's bottom lip quivered and she also fell to her knees.)

KRITZ: So did I!!! A solid hour of girl on girl naughtiness and I loved it!!! I'm sorry!!!

(A gasp then rose up from everyone in the room except Bonson. He looked peeved by the whole thing.)

BONSON: Damn, me too! But the fact you two also did her takes the shine off it completely.

(He then mused merrily to himself for a moment.)

BONSON: Who am I kidding? No it doesn't!

(Determined to be heard Chyna clapped her hands and looked around at them all in a desperate attempt to reinforce her thrall. As they all fell silent and stared into her eyes, she continued, hoping against hope her thrall would hold this time.)

CHYNA: This artefact has been hidden in a mountain since...

(Infuriatingly for Chyna, Mandika then spun around and looked to Lefiat with tearful eyes.)

MANDIKA: I did her too!!! Naughty bits to naughty bits!!!

(As ever, Lefiat didn't understand.)

LEFIAT: Eh, what? Naughty bits?

MANDIKA: I slept with her! I'm so, so sorry!

(As she stared to cry, Derek, the three foot tall green alien, sighed.)

DEREK: Well... if we *all* did it then I don't have to feel so guilty about being unfaithful to Zanne, not even if it *was* with a human!

(Lefiat looked crestfallen.)

LEFIAT: All? All?

(He glared at Chyna and received a sympathetic shrug in return.)

LEFIAT: When she came to see *me* she asked my bloody name and left again!

(He received several pitying looks.)

LEFIAT: Oh I get it! Like that is it? Typical!

(Chyna gave him an apologetic smile.)

CHYNA: I'm sorry Lefiat, but you're simply not my type!

LEFIAT: Type? Type? Flaxley I can understand but two women, an old man and an alien? And you say *I'm* not your type???

CHYNA: What else can I say? I'm just not attracted to you!

(Lefiat's mouth fell open for a moment before quickly closing in time with his hunching shoulders and deflating demeanour.)

LEFIAT: Fair comment. It's not like I've never heard a woman say that to me before!

(Chyna smiled warmly only to see Lefiat raise his head again.)

LEFIAT: But... an alien?

(Chyna shrugged.)

LEFIAT: Pete's sake!

(Next thing Lefiat knew was Mandika staring into his eyes from a few inches away looking absolutely furious.)

MANDIKA: You sound like you *want* to sleep with her!

LEFIAT: Um...

MANDIKA: I was under thrall, but you...

LEFIAT: But Mandika, that's not the point I was making...

BONSON: Sounded like it to me! We're all ashamed and yet you're disappointed!

(Flaxley rolled his eyes.)

FLAXLEY: Stop shit stirring, Bonson. He's just a bit gutted that a woman would rather doink an old man and an alien before giving him a second glance! That would knock anyone's self-esteem.

(Mandika gave Lefiat a doubting glance.)

MANDIKA: That had better be all it is!

(Lefiat nodded desperately.)

LEFIAT: It is, it is!

BONSON: Fair enough. Can't be easy to be rejected over a wrinkled old man and a tiny alien!

(Derek gave a cocky smile.)

DEREK: I'm not so tiny where it counts, you know!

(With that, Derek found himself shrinking under the weight of several icy stares.)

BONSON: I should think you *would* hide your face, Derek. Now where was I? That's right, consoling Lefiat. Must be sickening to know you're that far down her list.

Someone as free and easy with the sex as she is and yet you still can't get any!

(Feeling slightly guilty about her infidelity, Mandika stepped to Lefiat's defence.)

MANDIKA: Bonson, leave him alone!

(Bonson looked to Mandika and sighed.)

BONSON: Yes, quite right, ma'am. And if it's any consolation I can see why *you're* upset too. He was rejected by the world's easiest woman and yet *you* lower yourself to sleep with him all the time.

(He sucked his teeth and shook his head.)

BONSON: You must be devastated. I feel for you both!

(Quite taken in by Bonson's attempts to upset her, Mandika pouted solemnly and spoke up in a small voice.)

MANDIKA: But... he's not that bad... she only left him out to hurt his feelings probably!

BONSON: Yes, you tell yourself that!

(By now, Chyna had hung her head, fearing she'd never get a word in. She'd enthralled larger groups than this before without a hitch but for some unknown reason they were able to break her spell with ease. Why she was failing to keep their attention, she didn't know. It simply made no sense. Desperate to keep trying however, she raised her voice.)

CHYNA: Hey, will you please pay attention?

(Mandika folded her arms indignantly, set on edge by Bonson's mean words.)

MANDIKA: No! Not until you sleep with my husband!

CHYNA: Excuse me?

MANDIKA: I won't have people thinking I married a guy who's beneath a trollop like you! I demand you to shag him this instant!

(As everyone gave her their most baffled looks, Mandika growled.)

MANDIKA: What???

(She then realised what she'd been saying and started to shrink.)

MANDIKA: Leave me alone. I wasn't thinking!

(Chyna looked Lefiat up and down and shuddered.)

CHYNA: No, you really weren't, were you?

LEFIAT: Hey!

(As a chuckling Bonson explained her comment to Kritz, Chyna raised her voice once more.)

CHYNA: Now, please. No more interruptions!

(She gestured to the two feather fanning guards either side of her.)

CHYNA: My men are armed and I'd hate them to have to restrain you!

FLAXLEY: I'd like to see them try!

CHYNA: Please! This is important!

(Much to her surprise, they then fell silent and stared her way attentively.)

CHYNA: Oh... thank you! Right...

(She cleared her throat then began.)

CHYNA: The artefact resides inside a mountain where it's been since the elders of this planet placed it...

DEREK: Artefact?

FLAXLEY: What artefact?

MANDIKA: Ouch!!!

(As Mandika rubbed her painful head and glared at Kritz, Chyna took a deep breath and counted to ten.)

KRITZ: That's for calling me a tart earlier!

CHYNA: Eight, nine, ten! If you'd been listening... I said there's an artefact...

(Just then, an inquisitive Bonson gestured to the two guards at her sides and spoke over her.)

BONSON: I suppose you bonk these two on a regular basis then.

(Chyna growled under her breath.)

CHYNA: What?

BONSON: I'm just guessing, two physically fit young men, a total slapper like you... it just stands to reason!

CHYNA: No, look... they're married. Of course not!

MANDIKA: So? We're all married except that wrinkled old fart there!

(She gestured to Bonson.)

BONSON: Hey! That was uncalled for!

CHYNA: Yes, but those two are married to each other!

(The silence was deafening.)

BONSON: But... they're both blokes!

CHYNA: And?

(Bonson was genuinely baffled by this.)

BONSON: And... I don't know! Why choose to be a bottom fondler when there's a fit bird like you around who'd shag anything in trousers? What gives?

(As Bonson's brain started to work overtime, Chyna took full advantage of the silence.)

CHYNA: The artefact I've been trying to tell you about is known as the soul sphere, it was placed in safe keeping but now the elders need it back. This is why I brought you here...

MANDIKA: So... which one wore the dress at their wedding? Or did neither? Or was it both of them? I'm confused!

(Defeated, Chyna hung her head and took a deep breath.)

CHYNA: Fine! If you won't listen to me then perhaps you'll listen to Daman Siria!

(Upon saying his name she received everybody's full attention, not to mention a whole host of hateful stares. The attitude among the captives changed immediately. Suddenly they weren't interested in asking questions and talking over her, they knew that if Daman was involved then tough times were ahead. Naturally, Bonson was not about to say nothing.)

BONSON: Daman Siria!!!

DAMAN: That's right, Bonson!

(At this point the aged wise man himself appeared from the balcony. The language used to greet him could be described as colourful to say the least.)

BONSON: I knew you were behind this! I hoped I was wrong but what are the odds of that ever happening?

DAMAN: It's good to see you too, Bonson!

BONSON: Well that's not precise! I never said it was good to see you, mostly because it isn't!

DAMAN: Well, however you feel about me personally, don't even bother trying to move, you can't!

(Much to their horror Daman had used a paralysis spell on them to stop them moving. They could but grimace and glare at him.)

DAMAN: I apologise but I know there's at least one of you here who'd kill me if he could!

(He looked to a snarling Flaxley.)

FLAXLEY: You got that right!

DAMAN: I apologise.

BONSON: You do that a lot!

DAMAN: Indeed. But, you know... Chyna did her best not to involve me but despite her thrall you just wouldn't listen to her. I guess the fact you're all already under the elders thrall hinders hers in some way!

BONSON: I knew it!!!

(Daman smiled kindly to Chyna as the captives struggled and snarled in a vain attempt to wriggle free of the spell.)

DAMAN: I apologise, your thrall never stood a chance on them as a group. Individually maybe but the elder's thrall is a supreme power, they just acted the way the elders thrall makes them act. I'm sorry.

(Chyna sighed and shook her head.)

CHYNA: Just say what you have to say and do what you have to do. You've brought me much shame and you've dishonoured everything I'm trying to do for Tang Yul by making me bring prisoners here!

(She looked to the angry faces of the captives.)

CHYNA: Forgive me!

(Daman bowed to her.)

DAMAN: I am sorry, Chyna. But what I asked of you is for the good of the planet, were it not then I would never have burdened you.

CHYNA: Then say what you have to say so I can start to right this wrong!

(Daman bowed to her and turned to face the captives. As he started to speak Chyna held her head in her hands. The fact her thrall had failed was no longer her concern, she'd been uncomfortable with the whole thing from the beginning but had felt compelled to act out of respect for the elders and their perceived greater wisdom.

Riddled with yet more guilt, she stood perfectly still hoping Daman would be quick and the whole unseemly episode could be brought to a close. Unfortunately the procrastinating elder liked the sound of his own voice far too much for that to ever happen.)

DAMAN: Now, angry stares aside, I'm glad I have your attention!

BONSON: You'll have my boot up your arse in a minute!!!

(Chyna sighed. She'd only known Bonson for a few short hours but even she knew better than to expect he could keep himself from airing his two cents at every given opportunity. This would hardly help bring about the speedy conclusion she was looking for.)

DAMAN: Yes, Bonson, I know! Thus again highlighting why I have you in a hold!

BONSON: Git!

(The tension in the air at this moment was extremely thick. Daman was the man who'd manipulated these good people into risking their lives on several occasions and then lied about giving them their freedom. Any ounce of trust between them had been well and truly shattered. The fact he'd brought them together again with a view to asking them yet another favour hardly endeared them to him. During the last two major manipulations

he'd vehemently denied any thrall or manipulation and yet here he was admitting what they'd all suspected. They were still under his spell and had been so all along.

Unsurprisingly, they had a lot of questions.)

FLAXLEY: Before you start, Daman, I want to know... why us? Why did you tell us about all the manipulation and let us think we were free? Why not just keep it a secret if you wanted to manipulate us again? Were you *trying* to piss us off?

(Daman nodded to himself.)

DAMAN: Fair questions, one and all.

FLAXLEY: Well?

DAMAN: Okay...

(He looked across at the person he was speaking to as he said their name.)

DAMAN: Flaxley, Kritz, Bonson, Lefiat, Derek, Mandika...

MANDIKA: It's "your majesty" to you!

(He offered her a smile.)

DAMAN: Your majesty!

BONSON: And it's *Mister* Bonson if you don't mind!

DAMAN: Please, hear me out! The six of you have done more for this world than it could ever possibly repay you for. You've done more for this world than you could ever understand even yourselves. The world owes you its life. And yet, you know nothing!

(Bonson frowned.)

BONSON: Ahem, I *am* here you know!

DAMAN: No, no... even you, Bonson! If you knew what was to come... if you knew what the world once faced... put it this way, everything you've done up until now was a means to an end but there is one final task to undertake.

(Bonson sneered.)

BONSON: Oh, piss off!

DAMAN: Sorry?

BONSON: You heard me! I've retired. You had all the bravery and greatness out of me you're gonna get, chummy!

DAMAN: Bonson...

FLAXLEY: Bonson's right!

BONSON: Well obviously!

FLAXLEY: You've asked too much, Daman! We'll do nothing for you!

KRITZ: Yeah, that goes for me too!

(Flaxley gave her a sideways glance.)

FLAXLEY: Who did you think I meant by "we"?

(She shrugged.)

KRITZ: You and Bonson!

FLAXLEY: Right!

(He glared at Daman again.)

FLAXLEY: It's over, Daman! Now let us go so I can kick your arse!

(Daman shook his head.)

DAMAN: Fools! This is not the way it's going to be. You have but one choice and that's to help me one last time!

LEFIAT: Okay, so what's the other option?

DAMAN: There isn't one!

(Bonson rolled his eyes.)

BONSON: Pillock!

DAMAN: Be kind to the lad, Bonson, he wasn't to know!

BONSON: Not him, you!

(Lefiat beamed.)

BONSON: Stop that, Lefiat you curly-haired circus freak!

LEFIAT: Hey!

DAMAN: You were referring to me, Bonson?

BONSON: Yes! You said we had a choice! A choice implies we get a pick of two or more options. Otherwise there is no choice!

DAMAN: Exactly! You don't have a choice!

BONSON: You said, and I quote... "You have but one choice".

DAMAN: And?

BONSON: Now you say we have none! So, what is it, one or none?

(Daman gave him an empty glance and paused before replying in a cold voice.)

DAMAN: *No* choice!

(Bonson nodded.)

BONSON: That's settled then. No choice. For fuck sake, Daman, be precise in future. Twat!

(Daman sighed and mumbled under his breath.)

DAMAN: I knew it'd be like this!

LEFIAT: Oh, and for what it's worth Bonson, I'm not curly haired... anymore!

(He lifted his helmet to reveal a short cropped haircut.)

LEFIAT: It still hasn't grown back after that guy chopped it off, see?

(Knowing how losing his hair in battle had damaged Lefiat's already shattered confidence, Mandika gave him a consoling smile.)

MANDIKA: At least you aren't bald on top anymore! Nobody likes a bald freak!

(She glared directly at Bonson. Without reacting, Bonson turned to face Daman.)

BONSON: Chyna does!

(He looked back at Lefiat again with a smug look his face then turned away.)

BONSON: But then she has good taste! Now where was I? Oh yes, Daman?

(Daman looked to him inquisitively.)

DAMAN: Bonson?

BONSON: You're a cock! Now, if you don't mind I'd rather be at the inn enjoying a cold one.

(Daman shook his head.)

DAMAN: Gentlemen, Ladies... Lefiat, until you hear me out we're going nowhere!

BONSON: Fine! Then I guess we won't be going anywhere!

DAMAN: Well I guess not!

FLAXLEY: Suits us fine!

DAMAN: Good!

MANDIKA: Good!

DAMAN: Good!

BONSON: Didn't have anything planned for today anyway!

DAMAN: Nor did I!

FLAXLEY: Good, then everyone's happy just to wait!

DAMAN: I guess so!

MANDIKA: Good!

DAMAN: So that's settled then!

FLAXLEY: Looks that way!

DAMAN: So we'll just stand here then!

KRITZ: Fine!

DAMAN: Fine!

LEFIAT: Hey, what do you mean "Ladies, Gentleman and Lefiat"?

(Having folded his arms to join everyone in staring at the ceiling indignantly, Daman then threw him a quick glance and flicked a dismissive wrist.)

DAMAN: I meant, Derek!

DEREK: What?

DAMAN: You're an alien!

DEREK: I'm a gentleman alien!

DAMAN: Whatever!

DEREK: Racist!

(Daman looked offended.)

DAMAN: I am not!!!

DEREK: You look at me and you just see a green alien. I'm a man... with feelings!

(Daman just shook his head and looked to the ceiling again.)

DAMAN: Whatever!

(As a silence reigned, Chyna couldn't believe what she was seeing. Seven adults, one of them a worldly elder, sulking like six year olds. In complete disdain of them she placed her hands on her hips.)

CHYNA: Guys! This is pathetic!

(Bonson frowned.)

BONSON: He started it!

DAMAN: I never! You called me a cock!

(Bonson shrugged.)

BONSON: I stand by my statement!

CHYNA: Please!!!

(Hearing the passion in Chyna's voice, everyone turned to face her.)

CHYNA: I know you have personal issues with each other and I know it's not easy but you must focus. Please, listen to what Daman has to say, just let him say his piece and when he's finished, then you can decide. Please?

(Flaxley sighed.)

FLAXLEY: Fine! We'll do it for *you*!

(Daman sighed then gave Flaxley a grateful nod.)

DAMAN: Thank you, Flaxley!

(He then raised a baffled eyebrow.)

DAMAN: Are you okay there, Flaxley?

(Flaxley stood tall.)

FLAXLEY: I'm fine!

(He glared at Kritz.)

FLAXLEY: Why did you stamp on my foot?

KRITZ: Because my foot is the only part of me I can move... do it for her indeed!

FLAXLEY: You're a petty woman sometimes, you know that?

KRITZ: Don't try and sweet talk your way out of it!

FLAXLEY: Eh? I said petty...

KRITZ: If you ever want to have sex again, you said "pretty"!

(He mused briefly to himself then nodded.)

FLAXLEY: I guess I did then!

(He looked to Daman.)

FLAXLEY: Say what you have to say, Daman! Make it short and to the point!

DAMAN: Fine!

FLAXLEY: And don't interrupt, Bonson!

BONSON: As if I would!

(Despite being at the front, Bonson was well aware of the disbelieving looks on the faces of those behind him and furrowed his brow accordingly.)

BONSON: I know what you're all doing, now stop it!

(With that, Daman cleared his throat and stood tall.)

DAMAN: Right, listen carefully...

(He scanned the eyes of the six allies before him and upon feeling satisfied he had their full attention, he began.)

DAMAN: There's an artefact in a mountain just south of here. An artefact so precious it was hidden in a place where no man could ever reach it. This is where you chaps come in.

(Already Bonson's face was straining. He had a thousand cutting insults for Lefiat in response to the words "no man could ever reach it" and it was taking every last sap of energy he had not to say anything.)

DAMAN: Only a Leramite can reach the artefact.

(Everyone looked to a baffled Derek.)

DAMAN: It's hidden in a cave upon the mountainside. A child could climb inside the cave but could never scale the wall in there or conquer the challenges within.

(As an intrigued Derek listened carefully, Daman continued.)

DAMAN: So you see, Derek, this is why you're here on this planet. Everything that went before was significant enough but this is your true calling. Call it your destiny perhaps!

(Derek looked uncertain.)

DEREK: So my crash on this planet wasn't an accident?

(Daman nodded.)

DAMAN: Nothing in your lives has been an accident, you know that!

(Bonson looked stunned.)

BONSON: You mean you made Lefiat like that on purpose? That's *beyond* evil.

DAMAN: Bonson, please!

(Bonson shrugged.)

BONSON: Sorry, couldn't help myself!

DAMAN: The artefact is known as the soul sphere. I can't go into too much detail but everything you've achieved up until now is directly related to it!

FLAXLEY: "Can't" go into detail or "won't"?

DAMAN: Both. Anyway, the artefact is the property of the elders and we need it back. It could well be the thing that saves the planet one day.

FLAXLEY: You're being very vague here, Daman!

(Daman looked puzzled.)

DAMAN: I am?

FLAXLEY: Yes! You said earlier we didn't know what was to come. Now you speak of this artefact saving the world. What aren't you telling us? Is there something coming?

(Daman looked thoughtful and took a moment before replying.)

DAMAN: Flaxley, should something come... it's hard to explain. Let's just say, the work you did before when used in conjunction with the soul sphere could be the difference between life and death some day!

FLAXLEY: Some day?

DAMAN: I know it's vague but everything we've asked of you relies on the soul sphere.

Once this is gathered then your work is done!

BONSON: Hold on, so the witches, demons and warlords we've killed are somehow related to the soul sphere!

(Daman looked sheepish.)

DAMAN: I think I've said too much!

BONSON: Hmm, all we did under your thrall was kill evil types as they went about their evil day. Pair that with an object called a "soul sphere" and it clearly has something to do with the souls of the things we killed! Why are you gathering evil souls?

(Daman scratched his head and sighed.)

DAMAN: I hope you never live to find that out!

(Bonson was peeved.)

BONSON: You wish me dead???

DAMAN: No, I hope the evil never happens!

BONSON: Oh... that's alright then!

DAMAN: Anyway... in return for doing this for us we will free you from the thrall forever and let you return to your lives, never to be manipulated again.

(Having expected an excited response, Daman was quite taken aback to see several pairs of distrusting eyes glaring his way.)

DAMAN: Um... you don't like that idea?

FLAXLEY: You told us we were free before remember?

MANDIKA: Yeah, right after we killed Kajice you told us about the thrall and claimed you'd lifted it.

(Daman sighed.)

DAMAN: That was a mistake. I thought you were going to be freed from the thrall but I was wrong. Had I known then I'd never have burdened you with the truth.

(Bonson looked far from impressed.)

BONSON: So, let me get this straight... despite manipulating and controlling us all our lives, despite turning us into your puppets, you're one regret is that you didn't deceive us better?

DAMAN: No Bonson, it's not like that. I genuinely wish there'd been no necessity for what we did but there was. My regret is telling you about the thrall and then having to lie about it. You'd have been better off not knowing!

FLAXLEY: Isn't that for us to decide?

(Daman nodded.)

DAMAN: Perhaps. Anyway, I've said what needed to be said. Will you help Derek

collect the artefact? It won't be easy. That mountain can be a dangerous place, but if you do this one last task for me, I promise the thrall will be ended. No more manipulation.

KRITZ: How can we trust you, Daman?

DAMAN: Well, I guess you can't. But the thing is... you will get the artefact whether you want to or not. If you refuse then the elders will simply use the thrall to change your minds. If there was nothing sincere about me don't you think we'd have sent you to get it anyway, without consulting you? I'm offering you this chance to act under your own steam out of respect for you. And when I promise you'll be free of the thrall, I mean it. So, what do you say, my friends?

(He looked around at everyone's eyes wearing a sincere expression in an attempt to convince them of his honesty. Naturally, Daman's request sparked quite the heavy discussion. Knowing it'd be best not to push them, he folded his arms and awaited their decision.)

BONSON: Hmm... no thrall? If I've been in this thrall all my life... I wonder what I'm really like.

LEFIAT: You might even be a nice bloke!

BONSON: Let's not get carried away, Lefiat.

(Flaxley nodded to himself as he pondered Daman's words.)

FLAXLEY: For the first time, the elders have needed our help and came straight out and asked us rather than playing games. I respect that. If they really are genuine about this then I say we do it. If this artefact really is the final piece of the jigsaw and draws a line under everything we've done, we almost owe it to ourselves.

KRITZ: But... what if they remove the thrall and we no longer love each other, Flaxley? (Flaxley glanced at her ample cleavage and drooled.)

FLAXLEY: I can't see that happening somehow!

(Unashamedly proud of her sizeable breasts, Kritz smiled.)

KRITZ: Good point, the elder's thrall is nothing compared to the lure of *these* lovelies. Even if our love was entirely brought about by thrall, seducing you again will be a piss of piece with these.

(Mandika rolled her eyes.)

MANDIKA: Slut!

(Kritz was not impressed.)

KRITZ: What did you call me?

(Immediately, Mandika panicked.)

MANDIKA: I meant "tart"!

(She spanned her forehead.)

MANDIKA: Oh for fuck sake!

(She looked up at the fuming Kritz and cringed.)

MANDIKA: Please don't hit the face!

KRITZ: I'm not going to promise anything!

(Mandika gulped.)

KRITZ: Anyway, I'm in. We've been through so much and if this brings it to an end then yeah, let's do it.

(Derek nodded.)

DEREK: I'm in. Like he said, whether I want to or not I'm going to do it anyway.

Arguing seems kind of pointless.

(Lefiat nodded.)

LEFIAT: I guess so!

(Sadly however, arguing being pointless wasn't about to stop Mandika or Bonson from doing so.)

BONSON: I think you're all mad!

MANDIKA: I think so too!

BONSON: Good girl, I knew you'd see sense eventually. Bonson's way is rarely wrong.

MANDIKA: Shut up, Bonson.

BONSON: Righto!

MANDIKA: Have you forgotten what he put us through? Why would you help him?

FLAXLEY: Well... for all the reasons we already mentioned!

MANDIKA: What? To wrap things up nicely?

FLAXLEY: No, because we have no choice. The fact it wraps things up nicely is just a bonus. And don't you want to be rid of the thrall?

BONSON: That's all very well, Flaxley but have you forgotten what these missions are like for Mandika and I?

(As Bonson and Mandika paused and thought back over all the near death experiences they'd had, Flaxley paused to remember all the times the two of them had taken it easy while the others did all the work.)

BONSON: It was horrible!

FLAXLEY: Not for you it wasn't, you lazy git!

MANDIKA: It was!

(She sighed.)

MANDIKA: But like you say, we have no choice! I wasn't going to agree without letting it be known I'm against it though!

(Bonson gave her a wide smile.)

BONSON: It makes me so proud to hear you say that. Always let the bugger know you don't like it, I say!

FLAXLEY: So we're in then?

(Everybody nodded or mumbled in agreement.)

FLAXLEY: Okay...we're in!

(Daman nodded.)

DAMAN: Thank you. Chyna will fill you in with the details. I however, must be gone from this place. There is much to be done!

(And with that he disappeared. Nobody was surprised by the hasty exit. Ever since he'd first offended them he'd always been very quick to escape their scornful looks as soon as he'd made his point. It was safe to say he would not be missed.)

BONSON: Good riddance, I say!

DEREK: You won't hear any argument from me, Bonson!

(As the allies then proceeded to pace on the spot and flex their arms, relieved to be able to move their bodies of their own free will again, Chyna watched them and raised a curious eyebrow. Having been ripped from their everyday lives and then jailed, these six innocent souls had every right to be livid at Daman, and every reason to refuse his request and yet they'd actually shown little in the way of resistance to his plan. They'd offered Daman up a fair degree of scowling and verbal abuse but that was about it.

Under the circumstances, she was expecting them steadfastly refuse and make much

more of a scene.

Pondering their fairly quick surrender to Daman's whim, she would have loved nothing more than to give her thrall the credit, but she knew there was much more to it than that. The six, mismatched heroes before her, had been through all kinds of torment at Daman's hands in the past and she knew she couldn't even begin to imagine how they reached their decision. All she knew was that despite their hostility towards Daman, they'd shown a willing to do his bidding that went beyond merely a sense of doing the right thing. Maybe they were motivated by the elders thrall, maybe their motivation lay in being freed of said thrall or maybe they'd simply realised that resisting Daman was futile. For whatever their reasons, however, one thing was clear. With far less persuasion than she'd expected, the six captives were in agreement to set off on another dangerous mission, albeit some less enthusiastic than others.)

(As was always the case, as soon as Flaxley was given a mission it became his major focus. All he wanted to know was where they had to go, who he had to kill and what he had to look out for. And so, knowing all too well that his five comrades would be relying on him to ask the right questions before they set out, he stepped up to Chyna with an urgent glint in his eye.)

FLAXLEY: Chyna, what do we need to know?

(She offered him a seductive smile and gestured to the balcony.)

CHYNA: Follow me, my friends!

(As Chyna headed for the balcony they all followed on watching her hips sway with love struck expressions on their faces.)

MANDIKA: She's so perfect!

(As she stepped out into the centre of the balcony, Chyna stopped walking then gestured with a gentle twist of her wrist to the view before them.)

CHYNA: I give you Mount Takiyama!

(Before them stood the breath-taking sight of a mountain top, rising up from the forested earth only a few miles away. Set before the still rising sun, it made for quite an awesome sight.)

KRITZ: Lovely!

FLAXLEY: Hmm, so it's not far then?

CHYNA: No! It is only a short trip. It will, however, be a perilous one.

(Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: We're not strangers to peril. *That* we can handle.

MANDIKA: We?

FLAXLEY: I was talking about Kritz, Derek and myself.

(He rolled his eyes then grimaced at Chyna.)

FLAXLEY: Of course, I'm assuming you'll be returning our weapons before we leave. Otherwise Derek will be going on his own.

DEREK: Not without my magic armlet I won't!

CHYNA: Don't worry, your weapons will all be returned to you before you leave this city.

FLAXLEY: Good, good.

(He then scowled at her.)

FLAXLEY: But let it be known, if there's so much as a scratch on my sword, when we leave the city it'll be on fire!

CHYNA: Do not worry; we've taken special care of them. We even polished them.

FLAXLEY: Not with that cheap stuff, I hope.

CHYNA: Of course not.

FLAXLEY: Good. Glad to hear it.

(He stood tall then looked to Chyna enquiringly.)

FLAXLEY: So, these perils you speak of...

CHYNA: Apart from the obvious dangers you face when climbing a mountain, there are bandits who dwell in the woodland below. Also, there are tales of a strange hybrid man beast. You must be careful. This will be no easy trip.

BONSON: Well obviously! Nothing's ever easy when we're involved!

LEFIAT: Yeah, and even when it is, I manage to make it *look* hard.

BONSON: Well with all due respect, you even make Mandika look hard!

(Lefiat just looked to him and shook his head.)

LEFIAT: Yeah, whatever. Enjoy mocking me while you can, Bonson. Like Mandika always says when you're being a git to me at the castle, you're old and you'll be dead soon, so I'll have the last laugh.

(Bonson was furious.)

BONSON: What did you say, you window-licking turnip fondler?

MANDIKA: It's true though, isn't it, Bonson? I mean, it's probably only the elders who've kept you alive this long. If they remove their support and leave us alone, you might just die of old age.

(At once, Bonson's face dropped and he froze on the spot.)

BONSON: You know, you might actually have a point there.

(He then spotted Mandika trying not to laugh and furrowed his brow furiously.)

BONSON: Why, you little...

(As Mandika and Lefiat fell about laughing, Bonson swiftly scuttled away, utterly disgusted with himself for falling victim to the kind of prank he'd normally have played on them. Being outwitted by Mandika went beyond humiliation as far as he was concerned. He was thoroughly ashamed of himself and needless to say he was already planning his revenge.)

While the miserly ex-butler stood to one side and seethed, a determined looking Flaxley continued to converse with Chyna about their forthcoming mission.)

FLAXLEY: So we leave by the north exit, cross the plain until we reach the river, cross the river and head through the trees?

CHYNA: Yes! And be ever alert for danger!

FLAXLEY: Oh, I will be!

CHYNA: Once you reach the mountain you must climb until you reach the cave. You will know it when you see it. Once there, it is down to you, Derek.

DEREK: Leave it to me!

FLAXLEY: Excellent. Then I suggest we leave at once!

(He went to turn then stopped in his tracks.)

FLAXLEY: Um... Chyna?

CHYNA: Sir Flaxley?

FLAXLEY: I just want to say... Tang Yul was feared... hated even. And I mean by everyone. That's no longer the case thanks to you. Now, I can't say your father would be proud of you, but I'm certain that if he's watching you from the afterlife he'll know Tang Yul is in safe hands. You can be extremely proud of yourself.

(Chyna beamed and clutched her hands to her heart.)

CHYNA: Thank you. That means a lot! Sir Flaxley, you are a true gentleman.

FLAXLEY: And you're one hot...

(Kritz snarled then cut him off mid-sentence.)

KRITZ: Shall we go? I mean before hubby here makes me do something he regrets!

(Flaxley grimaced at her innocently.)

FLAXLEY: What? I can't help finding her irresistible, it's her thrall!

KRITZ: It'll be your testicles in a minute!

(Flaxley furrowed his brow bitterly at her for a moment then rolled his eyes.)

FLAXLEY: Fine. Let's go then.

LEFIAT: Yeah!

(Mandika looked to them and sighed unenthusiastically.)

MANDIKA: I can't believe it's happening again! How do *I* keep ending up on the missions?

FLAXLEY: Because Daman Siria keeps making it so.

MANDIKA: I hate Daman Siria.

(Lefiat shrugged.)

LEFIAT: Well, look on the bright side, we've had non-stop rain and thunder storms in Guevina for weeks now, at least it's sunny here.

MANDIKA: Well... yeah, it's not *much* of a bright side though, is it?

LEFIAT: Not really, no.

FLAXLEY: Yes, well, never mind that! We've got work to do! Now, come on!

(And without delay, Flaxley headed for the door followed closely by Kritz, Derek, Lefiat and Mandika. Flaxley, Kritz and Derek were keen to get the mission underway and took very deliberate, focussed strides. To the three of them, waiting for a mission to start was the worst part. Looking far less focussed, Mandika and Lefiat knew the importance of staying close to Flaxley in times of trouble and didn't delay in following hot on his heels. Bringing up the rear, Bonson slowly and reluctantly trudged towards the exit where Chyna's two fan waving guards had moved to guard the doorway. Looking utterly uninspired he shook his head and sighed to himself. Another mission was about to begin and he'd rather be anywhere else, doing anything else.

Deliberately walking at a snail's pace, half hoping he'd be forgotten about and left behind, Bonson looked at Chyna's two guards as he headed for the door and his self-pitying train of thought was immediately derailed. Being miserable and bitter about the mission would have to wait. He was genuinely baffled by the concept of two men being married and before he left, he just had to ask them about it. Being Bonson, he wasn't subtle either. Stopping in the doorway, he turned to face the guard on the right and mused to himself briefly before looking him in the eye.)

BONSON: So, poofa eh?

GUARD: Excuse me?

BONSON: That's a pretty pointless pastime isn't it? Being a poof! (Unsurprisingly, the guard was most offended.)
GUARD: I'm sorry; do you have a problem with that?
BONSON: Not at all... as long as you keep your hands to yourself!
GUARD: I can assure you...
BONSON: It *is* pointless though, isn't it?
(Disgusted by the old man, the guard placed his hands on his hips and pouted.)
GUARD: Well... whatever do you mean?
BONSON: The whole point of this life is to procreate and I'm sorry but whatever it is you chaps get up to just isn't going to get it done now is it?
GUARD: Well...
BONSON: No offence, but it just isn't going to cut the mustard!
GUARD: There's more to life than procreation you know!
BONSON: Oh really? Such as?
GUARD: Well, love for one. A man can love a man you know!
(Bonson nodded as if to concede he had a point.)
BONSON: Yes, I suppose... a father can love his son but that doesn't involve shoving his ding-dong where the sun doesn't shine!
(The guard was furious.)
GUARD: Oh you beastly man!
(Thankfully, Flaxley returned at this point and dragged him away before he could offend anybody any further. Naturally this just gave him something else to complain about.)

(Within a minute of leaving their meeting with Chyna, Daman's six chosen heroes headed into the streets of Tang Yul, escorted by an imperial guard. The area around the castle was indeed a pretty place. Being one of the city's more affluent areas, the houses were all made from the finest timber and their fine oriental architecture made them quite the sight to behold. Some were painted with wonderfully artistic murals and others were adorned with expensive lanterns and wind chimes. Set alongside the smooth cobbled thoroughfares, they made quite the impressive sight. The picturesque district they were pacing through, however, was of no interest to Flaxley.

Taking advice about the potential dangers they'd face on the mountainside from the guard as he led them towards the north exit, Sir Flaxley looked the very picture of dedication and professionalism. With every mission there was always a whole host of unseen trials and tribulations, quite often caused by the ineptitude of his comrades and he wasn't about to add to those difficulties by being underprepared in any way. Knowing full well his leadership and people skills would be called into action very soon, he couldn't have been more focussed. Walking by his side with her hand clutching his upper arm, Kritz half listened to the advice her husband was taking, preferring to admire the scenery. She had every confidence in his ability to lead them and didn't feel even remotely fazed or worried about what might lay ahead. When she fought alongside Flaxley, she wasn't afraid of anything.

A good few feet behind Flaxley and Kritz, Derek found himself sandwiched between

Mandika and her long suffering husband, Sir Lefiat. Mandika had a morbid fear of work and these missions were her idea of a living hell. She didn't suffer alone, however. Her constant complaining also made it a living hell for anyone in earshot of her. Even when things were going well she could rarely see past the fact that she was the queen of Guevina and was therefore too good to be doing this kind of thing. The love of her life, Lefiat was generally the one who suffered the most from Mandika's bitterness on these missions. Everything that went wrong was blamed squarely on him when in reality it was only his fault ninety five percent of the time. Even when nothing had gone wrong, she'd usually invent something to pick on him about. As did Bonson. Bringing up the rear, the aging anger-merchant looked fed up to the back teeth. Having retired several years before from his role as butler to the royal Guevina household, all he wanted was a quiet life and to be left alone to put his feet up. The fact he couldn't do that on a mission made him even more bitter and resentful than usual. And so, Lefiat looked deflated too. He knew he was in for a rough ride with nagging from his wife from one angle and cheap insults from Bonson from another. Thankfully for Derek, despite the fact he could hear thoughts as well as words, he'd somehow developed an ability to shut out the infuriating sound of Mandika and Bonson complaining. He called it selective hearing. This was the only way he could make it through these difficult times.

Once the guard had led Flaxley and Kritz to the large oriental archway that led out of the city, he called them to a halt then gave Flaxley a knowing nod. Returning the nod, Flaxley then glanced at Kritz. Receiving a positive smile in return he then stood tall. It was obvious from the looks on their faces that they were anxious to get the mission over and done with. Pacing just behind them, Derek's face painted the same picture. The same, however, could not be said of their three companions. They slowly caught up and stood there looking ashen faced and hard done by as if they were due to be executed any moment now. More than used to this being the way, Flaxley ignored their obvious discontent and nodded to the guard.)

FLAXLEY: So, we leave via this archway, do we?

(As he gestured towards the wilderness beyond the archway, the guard bowed.)

GUARD: Yes. This is the north gate. From here the mountain is straight ahead.

FLAXLEY: Yes, I can see that. It's kind of hard to miss what with it being the only thing you *can* see from here.

GUARD: Indeed. As you can see, your trip will be short... yet it will undoubtedly be fraught with danger. Beware the woodland bandits!

(Far from intimidated, Flaxley scoffed.)

FLAXLEY: Bandits indeed. Like a bunch of local trouble makers are going to be a match for *me*. Don't be such a bloody drama queen!

GUARD: I do not make a drama, Sir Flaxley. Those bandits are ruthless and they are many. There is a good reason why those who wish to go to towns on the other side of the mountain take the long route around. Only a fool would enter those woods and attempt to cross the mountain.

(Flaxley stood tall and cast an imposing aura upon himself.)

FLAXLEY: Yes well, those bandits had better be prepared then, because today that fool is me!

(Kritz shook a despairing head.)

KRITZ: Impressive.

FLAXLEY: What? I was joking!

(She looked to him wearing a patronising smile.)

KRITZ: Of course you were, dear.

FLAXLEY: I was! I knew all along I was calling myself a fool.

(Kritz just winked at him as if to reaffirm her previous words.)

FLAXLEY: Like that is it? Fine. Sod you then. There'll be no more levity from me!

(As he folded his arms and pouted like a sulky schoolboy, the guard who'd accompanied them from the castle rolled his eyes.)

GUARD: Now you have finished making super-funny, clever jokes, we can return your weapons to you.

(Upon hearing those words Flaxley's heart skipped a beat. He loved his sword dearly and couldn't wait to be reunited with it. Kritz once asked him if he loved his sword more than he loved her. As a result, he'd spent the next three nights sleeping in the spare room for giving her a far too honest answer. He'd learnt his lesson though. Next time she asked, he lied.

As soon as a sentry guard wheeled a cart full of their weapons over to them from a small hut next to the exit, Flaxley stepped forth and yanked his sword from the pile with a look of unbridled joy on his face.)

FLAXLEY: Ah, Louise... how I missed you!

(He kissed the sword then returned to his unimpressed wife's side.)

FLAXLEY: Don't look at me like that, woman!

(Kritz shook her head and headed for the cart to see if her spiked fighting gloves and magic amulet were in there. Spotting them immediately she smiled, picked them up, then returned to her husband with her eyes fixed on his all the while.)

KRITZ: See how easy that was?

FLAXLEY: Don't start.

(As they scowled at one another like petulant children, the guard at the cart took a glance inside it then looked towards Bonson, Lefiat, Mandika and Derek.)

GUARD: Okay, that leaves four amulets and...

(He pulled out a thin, lightweight sword.)

GUARD: This must be for the lady or the three foot tall green alien!

(Looking embarrassed, Lefiat raised his hand.)

LEFIAT: It's mine!

(The guard looked startled.)

GUARD: You sure? This is a little girl's sword!

(Lefiat sighed and looked at his feet.)

GUARD: There must have been a mix up.

(He called to another guard.)

GUARD: Chui? I think we brought the wrong sword out, see if there's a man's one in the lock-up will you?

(Lefiat looked up.)

LEFIAT: Look...

(Wearing an embarrassed scowl he marched over to the guard.)

LEFIAT: Stop taking the piss and give me my sword!

(Looking incensed he then tried to snatch it from him via the blade.)

LEFIAT: Ow!!! It's sharp!

(As Lefiat leapt up and down nursing his cut hand, Bonson started to smile. Seeing Lefiat hurt himself for no apparent reason reminded him how much fun he'd actually had on these missions. The hapless lad was, to say the least, great entertainment for the sadistic old man.)

BONSON: Suddenly I'm looking forward to this.

(A short minute or so later, once one of the Tang Yul guards had tied a thin strip of cloth across Lefiat's tiny cut to stop him panicking, their journey got underway. With their magic amulets and swords in place, they headed beneath the archway and stepped out into the meadow towards the foot of the mountain. Kritz was equipped with water magic, Lefiat with lightning, Bonson with fire, Mandika with ice and Derek with pretty much every magic invented, such was the tiny alien's mastery of the mystic arts.

Up on the balcony of the castle at this time, Chyna watched them head into the meadow and whispered them "good luck" under her breath. Having been responsible for dragging them into their current situation, she desperately wanted them to succeed without pain or injury. Should that not be the case, she knew she'd had trouble living with the guilt.

Oblivious to Chyna's fears, Flaxley paced forth at the head of the group with Kritz at his side. Keeping a sharp eye out for danger, he mused to himself as he led them across the soft grass and away from the city. It wasn't until they were a good half a mile from the castle, however, that he finally shared what he was thinking.)

FLAXLEY: I wonder if it's as dangerous out here as they make out it is!

(Kritz shrugged.)

KRITZ: If it's not, Daman could have asked Derek to do it rather than dragging *all* of us out here!

FLAXLEY: A good point.

KRITZ: But knowing Daman, he'd have brought us anyway just to be a pain in the arse!

FLAXLEY: Also a good point.

KRITZ: I'm sure whatever dangers there are, we'll be fine. And when it's over we can get back to the little ones and put all this behind us for good.

(Feeling quite confident, they shared a warm smile. A few short feet behind however, it was already a very different story. True to form, Mandika wasn't happy and was already laying everyone low by airing her feelings generously.)

MANDIKA: Great. Stuck out here in the wilderness with *them*!

(She threw an arm in Flaxley and Kritz's direction.)

MANDIKA: We're in the hands of two people who hate us so much they never wanted to see us ever again. Two people who'd rather we were dead so they didn't have to help Daman anymore. They'll probably sacrifice us to the first beast we come across.

(Bonson rolled his eyes.)

BONSON: If you're going to do nothing but complain all the way there, I'll sacrifice *myself* to the first beast we see just so I don't have to listen to *you* anymore!

MANDIKA: What?

BONSON: Sorry, that was ridiculous! I'll sacrifice *you* to the first beast we see! That makes far more sense.

(Mandika frowned.)

MANDIKA: Gonna be like that, are you?

BONSON: Probably. I usually am!

DEREK: Besides, Mandika, they didn't abandon *or* forsake you. They just said we shouldn't *all* gather together in the same place. You were quite welcome to come to Tifaeris on your own. Or with Bonson or Lefiat, just not the three of you together.

MANDIKA: But...

DEREK: If anyone's been out of order and forsaken anyone, in fact, it's you!

(Mandika looked most aggrieved and frowned at him bitterly.)

MANDIKA: How can you even say such a thing???

DEREK: Mandika, I went to Guevina to visit you only three weeks ago. You flatly refused to see me!

(Not even about to entertain the idea that she may have been partially responsible for any bad feeling, or indeed anything, she folded her arms and pouted.)

MANDIKA: Rubbish!

DEREK: No it isn't!

MANDIKA: Yes it is!

DEREK: I went to the castle and asked for you. The guard told me you said I should "piss off back to Tifaeris, you lime green, frog faced midget".

MANDIKA: That's 'cause I thought they said... um... I thought they said Berek was here to see me!

DEREK: Berek?

(Sensing they might not believe her, she looked sheepishly at the doubting threesome of Bonson, Lefiat and Derek and found three unimpressed glances coming her way.

Desperate not to look like a liar, she then decided to embellish her story a little further in the hope it ended up plausible.)

MANDIKA: Yeah... Berek is a... um... he's a dwarf, that's right and he sells green paint. He came from Tifaeris originally, you see?

(She chuckled.)

MANDIKA: He's always spilling that green paint on himself, he's a card. Um... anyway, I wasn't in the mood to see him or his froggy face and rudely told him to leave.

(With that, she looked away hoping against hope her tale had been believable.)

DEREK: Okay Mandika, just remember, you're as guilty as they are. You stormed out before anyone could explain. Nobody abandoned you. The only one who refused to see anyone was you.

MANDIKA: But... but I explained that!

LEFIAT: Yeah, she told you. She thought it was Berek!

(Bonson chuckled.)

BONSON: You know, Lefiat, as much as I wish you'd die prematurely, I'd actually miss your stupid comments if you did.

LEFIAT: Eh?

MANDIKA: Anyway, it was *their* idea to stop seeing everyone, not mine. So it's their fault.

DEREK: I already explained, they didn't decide to...

(Before he could finish, Bonson tapped him on the shoulder.)

BONSON: Don't bother, old chap!

DEREK: Yes, I'm wasting my breath, aren't I?

BONSON: Somewhat, yes!

(Taking that as a victory, Mandika nodded to herself then proceeded to complain some more.)

MANDIKA: I shouldn't act surprised really. Kritz is a first class bitch. She's been trying to turn Flaxley against me since the day she met him!

(Lefiat immediately sensed danger and whimpered.)

LEFIAT: Oh no.

(Mandika was not amused.)

MANDIKA: Oh no? Oh no, what?

(Choosing his words carefully, Lefiat looked ahead at Kritz then back at Mandika.)

LEFIAT: It's just... she might hear you!

(Mandika shrugged.)

MANDIKA: Then you'd better be ready to protect me 'cause I'm having my say!

(Lefiat gulped.)

LEFIAT: Cripes!

MANDIKA: Look at her mincing along in that short skirt! She looks like a prostitute.

That thing barely covers her arse and yet she still won't wear underwear. The slut!

(Lefiat tried to cringe at Bonson only to find that he and Derek had deliberately dropped way back to get away from Mandika.)

LEFIAT: Aw crap!

MANDIKA: There she is prancing about with her tits swinging from side to side in that tiny rag she laughingly calls a top. Doesn't she have any dignity? That's why men look at her, 'cause she's a cheap tart. No other reason. If she dressed properly people wouldn't be so quick to drool.

(As Lefiat bit his nails and prayed Kritz wouldn't overhear, Mandika continued unabated.)

MANDIKA: I tell you, it's a good thing she doesn't have to rely on her intellect. She's what? Twenty seven, is it? And the thick cow still can't read!

(She then sighed and a miserable pout formed on her lips.)

MANDIKA: I thought she was my friend, I even had her as my maid of honour and yet she kicked me out of Tifaeris like I meant nothing...

(As she bit her lip and fought back a tear, Lefiat look enlightened. He understood that Mandika was bitter at what Flaxley and Kritz had decided, but some of the hateful things she'd said about Kritz had been vile to say the least. They were ugly comments even by Mandika's standards. Finally, he knew why. Mandika had never had a real friend before and when Kritz had made that decision, it broke her heart. She wasn't just angry, she was devastated. Having made this realisation, Lefiat gave her sympathetic smile then reached to place a hand on her shoulder. As he did so, however, Mandika raised her head and returned to the rant.)

MANDIKA: And I'll tell you another thing, once this thrall is removed properly Flaxley will see she's nothing but a cheap tart and dump her sorry arse. Strutting around almost naked indeed. I tell you what...

(Just then, Flaxley yelled out with extreme urgency in his voice.)

FLAXLEY: Look out!!!

(In a panic, Mandika looked up and saw Kritz charging straight for her. Immediately she screamed and burst into tears, throwing her arms wildly about herself as she did so.)

MANDIKA: I didn't mean it!!!

(Fearing a pounding, she then covered her head and screamed again. Not about to let that happen, Lefiat swiftly reached for his sword. Before he even got a chance to pull it however, Kritz rushed past Mandika and yelled to him.)

KRITZ: Take care of Mandika, Lefiat!!!

(Much to his relief, he watched on as Kritz raced between a bemused looking Bonson and Derek and laid into an advancing hoard of over thirty well-armed bandits that had been sneaking up on them from behind.)

LEFIAT: Oh. Well, thank heavens for that!

(As he stood there looking relieved, Mandika suddenly yelled at him.)

MANDIKA: Bandits, Lefiat!

LEFIAT: What? Eh?

(It took a while but eventually he realised what she meant.)

LEFIAT: Bandits? We're under attack!!!

(Immediately he went into 'defend Mandika mode' and snarled around himself defying anyone to come near. Luckily for him, Kritz, with help from Derek and Bonson had managed to halt their charge and keep them at bay. Unfortunately, Flaxley wasn't haven't as much luck with a second wave of bandits who'd mounted a full on assault from the front.)

FLAXLEY: One at a time, you pansies!

(Flaxley may have been a legendary swordsman with skills other knights could only dream of but even he couldn't stop a hoard of over 30 men from advancing on his own.)

FLAXLEY: Two at a time then!!!

(Realising that holding them back wasn't going to have the desired effect, he then opted to cull them instead.)

FLAXLEY: Have it your way!!!

(Immediately, two bandit's heads spun into the air, severed by Flaxley's blade. This new tactic however, did Lefiat no favours. With Flaxley no longer merely holding them at bay, several had broken through and were now bearing down on him instead.)

LEFIAT: Shit!!!

(Astonishingly, Mandika immediately adopted a fighting stance and snarled like a fearless warrior.)

MANDIKA: Ice and dice, Lefiat!

(Completely flustered, Lefiat threw her a nervous glance and whimpered.)

LEFIAT: This isn't good!

MANDIKA: Calm down, stupid! I'm supposed to be the girly one here, not you. Just slice them as I ice them, okay?

(Reassured by her firmness, Lefiat nodded.)

LEFIAT: Right, yeah... okay!

(It wasn't like Mandika to be brave, but she'd been so scared at the thought of Kritz beating her up, the hoard of bandits didn't seem so bad. In her heart she felt she'd already dodged an arrow and now she felt invincible.)

As was so often their tactic, Mandika cast her glacier magic on the ground causing their enemies to slip and slide all over the place so that Lefiat could finish them off with his sword. It was a system that had served them well on several occasions and this was to be no exception.

A good many metres behind Lefiat and Mandika at this time, Kritz, Derek and Bonson were having an easy time reducing the enemy numbers on their side of battle. It could have been even easier still but unfortunately, violence was too much like fun for Kritz and rather than letting Bonson hold them back with flames while Derek struck them down with powerful bolts of lightning, she'd leapt into the fray to take them down hand to hand. As a result, Bonson and Derek had to be careful where they cast their magic.)

DEREK: What is she doing?

BONSON: Well, give her some due, she's kicking arse in there!

DEREK: But she's slowing the battle right down!

BONSON: That's true.

(He then glanced over his shoulder to see how the others were doing.)

BONSON: Uh-oh! You cover Kritz, I'd better help Flaxley!

(Sure enough, Flaxley was starting to get swamped. The bandits had seen their comrades slain by Mandika and Lefiat's combined attack and had decided to swarm solely on Flaxley instead. If he hadn't been such a magnificent swordsman he'd have been overpowered with ease by now. In this moment, it he was all he could do stop them from crushing him with sheer weight of numbers. And all Lefiat and Mandika were doing was watching.

Not about to let Flaxley keep up the struggle alone, the determined looking Bonson raced over to his aid.)

BONSON: I'm coming, Flaxley!

(As soon as he said it, however, he stopped dead in his tracks.)

BONSON: What the fuck am I doing?

(Realising he'd come perilously close to doing something brave and selfless, he stepped back then yelled at Lefiat and Mandika.)

BONSON: You two!!! Fire your magic or something! Help Flaxley!

(Unable to hear Bonson's voice over the screaming hoard, Lefiat and Mandika looked to one another.)

LEFIAT: What did he say?

MANDIKA: I dunno, just wave!

(As they waved back at him and smiled, Bonson snarled.)

BONSON: I might have known they'd do that!

(As he watched Flaxley struggle to fend off the hoard with his fists and his sword, Bonson then sighed miserably. Resigned to getting his hands dirty, he then started to pace back towards Flaxley.)

BONSON: Down to me then, I suppose.

(Much to his relief, Kritz then raced past him snarling furiously. Having spotted Flaxley's woes, she'd ran off and left Derek to take care of the other side of the battle on his own. Derek wasn't sad about that. As the hoard charged the diminutive green man before them, sensing an easy kill, he simply cast sleep magic on them all then used a

single blast of inferno magic to set them all ablaze. As they woke in flames, screaming, he then casually blasted them apart with powerful lightning bolts. Massacring every last one of them took less than a minute.

As soon as the last bandit on his side of the fight was dead, Derek raced past Bonson to assist Flaxley and Kritz with the rest of the hoard. The enemy's pincer attack may have failed but at this side of the battle they were still a force to be reckoned with.

As he charged in to help, Derek was a little stunned by Flaxley's lack of progress. Normally there was nothing Flaxley liked more than culling vast numbers of enemies at a time and the fact he was struggling merely to keep them at bay made no sense to him. Once he arrived on the scene, however, he soon realised just how powerful Flaxley must be. The hoard was actually swelling. Their ever increasing number was showing no sign of levelling out either. It had been all Flaxley and Kritz could do to punch or slash at them to keep them back.)

DEREK: How many are there???

(Flaxley snarled.)

FLAXLEY: Can't talk now, Derek, I'm...

(He slashed his sword downwards through a bandit's head.)

FLAXLEY: Rather busy here!

(Derek looked around at Bonson, Lefiat and Mandika doing nothing and growled under his breath.)

DEREK: Flaxley's right, people from Guevina *are* lame!

(With that, he checked his magic stock and bit his lip.)

DEREK: Fuck! Gotta use it though!

(Knowing there might not be another way, Derek raced behind Flaxley and used the last of his sleep magic by casting it over Flaxley's head and into the centre of the rampaging hoard. His hope was that enough bandits would fall asleep to give them a chance to overpower them.)

DEREK: If that doesn't do the trick then we're screwed!

(Thankfully, as the centre of the hoard folded like a deck of cards with bandits dropping like stones to the ground, the pressure at the front of the throng eased immensely.

Immediately sensing an opportunity, Flaxley bellowed furiously then entered into a frenzy of chops and slices with his ever faithful blade. The master swordsman was now in his element and his maniacal, wild swinging sent limbs and heads flying about the meadow. In complete harmony with his blade he ploughed through them like an unstoppable force. Such was his ferocity, his violence loving wife was highly aroused. Clamping her knees together and whimpering, she softly cupped her breasts then exhaled.)

KRITZ: I love him when he does that! Don't you?

(Derek shrugged.)

DEREK: I don't hate him for it, no!

KRITZ: He's *so* getting some later!

(Kritz's reaction to the violence, however, was very much unique to herself. Being a tad squeamish, Mandika had buried her head into Lefiat's chest, appalled by the gory sight before her. Bonson could only look on in awe.

As he surged forward, Flaxley looked over his shoulder and snarled.)

FLAXLEY: Come on, you lot! Let's finish this thing!

(Spurred into action by his words, Derek and Kritz raced up beside him, either blasting or snapping the necks of the few Flaxley had left alive. Not about to take such risks, Lefiat, Mandika and Bonson stayed put until they were satisfied it was safe to catch them up. Needless to say, once the bandits were all floored and Derek had set light to their bodies to make sure they were dead, that safety was pretty much assured.)

BONSON: Hmm... smells like roast pork!

(This had been a difficult victory. They'd had many a skirmish on their way to completing missions before but this was different. Such a sheer number of foes mounting a surprise attack wasn't something they'd ever experienced or expected. Flaxley had a mantra to expect the unexpected and never underestimate anyone but even he was amazed by the scale of the battle.

Having been informed by Derek that they were out of sleep magic, Flaxley could only hope they wouldn't be attacked again in a similar fashion further up the mountain. Suffice to say, as they headed onwards across the meadow, following a brief pause for breath, he knew they'd have to be a lot more careful from here on in.)

(As the bodies of the bandits burned behind them in the meadow, the party of six soon found themselves stepping from the grass and into a woodland. Having entered the woodland, Flaxley then stopped and surveyed the way ahead. It didn't make a pleasant sight. Fifty feet ahead of them lay a river. A river which was a good hundred yards wide. Once across it, the ascent up the wooded mountain could begin. With a river in the way, however, that seemed a long way off.

Knowing he'd be left to come up with a plan to cross the river, Flaxley mused to himself. He knew if they tried to swim he'd have to take Lefiat on his back what with swimming being yet another thing the hapless fellow couldn't do. Also, being unsure as to what other dangers may lurk in the river, he wasn't about to risk that just yet. And so, he stood there thinking, his five allies lined up beside him surveying the river before them.)

FLAXLEY: Hmm...

(Rubbing his chest adoringly, Kritz sighed.)

KRITZ: That looks kinda deep! Like your eyes.

LEFIAT: It *does* look deep. And god only knows what kind of nasties live in there!

(Mandika rolled her eyes.)

MANDIKA: You and your nasties!

(He glanced to her sorrowfully.)

LEFIAT: I don't like water, Mandika!

BONSON: That does explain the smell!

LEFIAT: Hey!

BONSON: What? I was only saying, you hate water and that's why you stink.

LEFIAT: Oh okay! Hey!!!

(Bonson chuckled to himself, earning a sneer from Lefiat.)

LEFIAT: I'm gonna take a pee and when I come back you can explain yourself!

BONSON: Can I now?

(As Lefiat stepped behind a bush to their right, Flaxley looked up and down the river and sighed.)

FLAXLEY: Well... swimming might be the only way!

(As he continued to think, Kritz snapped out her lustful trance then glanced at Mandika. At once, a thoughtful expression crossed her brow then she sidled up next to her.)

KRITZ: Mandika, I want a word with you, missy!

(Fearing the worst, Mandika trembled all over then tensed up.)

MANDIKA: Don't hit my face!!!

KRITZ: I'm not going to.

MANDIKA: Don't hit my body either. Hit Lefiat when he comes back.

KRITZ: I'm not gonna hit anybody, Mandika.

(She rolled her eyes then offered Mandika a smile.)

KRITZ: Look, I just wanted to say, I know we kind of fell out when you left Tifaeris last, but I hope we can still be mates.

(Mandika was baffled.)

MANDIKA: I called you a tart though!

KRITZ: Yeah, but...

MANDIKA: And a slut!

KRITZ: Well...

MANDIKA: And you should have heard me earlier!

(Kritz frowned and raised her voice.)

KRITZ: Yeah, alright! Sheesh. Even so, Mandika. I've calmed down a lot. Flaxley says it's 'cause motherhood has mellowed me. Personally I think that's crap, but either way, I aint gonna hit you, okay? Friends?

(At once, an almighty look of relief crossed Mandika's brow and she exhaled merrily.)

MANDIKA: Aw, Kritz...

(She placed her head on Kritz's shoulder.)

MANDIKA: Of course we are. I think the world of you, you know that!

KRITZ: Aw, come here, babe!

(As Mandika and Kritz hugged one another, Bonson looked on and rolled his eyes. To put it mildly, Mandika was extremely fickle. When she was at odds with Kritz she was the epitome of all things vulgar and disgusting. When they were on good terms, she was her best friend in the world.)

BONSON: Woman logic isn't like any normal sane logic, you know, Derek!

DEREK: I'm married. Of course I know!

(Just then Lefiat returned from the bush and smiled.)

LEFIAT: I wrote my name in the dirt!

(Everyone was disgusted.)

MANDIKA: You animal!

BONSON: Quite! Don't tell us that!

FLAXLEY: For heaven sake, Lefiat!

(Lefiat was baffled.)

LEFIAT: Eh?

(He looked enlightened.)

LEFIAT: No, that's gross! I meant with my finger!

(Everyone looked relieved at first before giving him sideways glances.)

BONSON: And you thought that was worth mentioning did you?

DEREK: Of all the things to get excited about!

(Lefiat was seriously narked.)

LEFIAT: Hey! I never belittle your anecdotes!

FLAXLEY: Never mind that, we need to think of a way across this river.

(He turned to face the others.)

FLAXLEY: Now, we can either swim or try walking down river a bit to see if it gets thin enough to fashion some kind of bridge. What do you think?

BONSON: I say we quit and go home but that's my answer to everything!

FLAXLEY: Thanks, Bonson. That was very helpful.

LEFIAT: I think we should use canoes!

(At once, everyone turned to face him wearing seriously unimpressed expressions.)

LEFIAT: What? What did I say now?

FLAXLEY: Canoes, eh?

LEFIAT: Um...

BONSON: Great plan, Lefiat, but you know I think we should wait a while and catch the ferry!

(Lefiat hung his head.)

MANDIKA: Lefiat, I love you but... canoes?

LEFIAT: Yeah, okay!

MANDIKA: I mean where the hell are we supposed to get canoes from?

(Lefiat shrugged.)

LEFIAT: I just thought we could use some of the canoes over there!

(He pointed to the bush he'd earlier urinated behind.)

FLAXLEY: What?

LEFIAT: There's load of them, the bandits must have come up river on them!

(Giving him a doubting glance, Flaxley stepped up to the bush and peered behind it. The others watched on intently.)

KRITZ: Well?

(Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: Yup, there's canoes!

(He turned to face Lefiat.)

FLAXLEY: Plus the word Lefiat written out in steaming, wet letters.

(Lefiat offered him a cheesy grin and stepped behind Mandika.)

FLAXLEY: Still, nice work, Lefiat!

(Buoyed by the compliment, Lefiat immediately re-emerged from behind Mandika, beaming merrily.)

LEFIAT: I know, I spelt it right and everything!

FLAXLEY: I meant with the canoes!!!

LEFIAT: Oh!

(With that, he slipped behind Mandika again.)

BONSON: Well then, canoes it is!

(As Lefiat had rightly said, the bandits had sailed up river on the canoes and left them concealed on the river bank. There were well over one hundred of them lining the bank,

stretching quite a distance upstream. They were small, one man vessels carved from solid oak that narrowed to a point at both the front and the back. At the top was a hole just large enough for someone Flaxley's size to slip his legs into and sit down. Each one had a finely crafted oak oar inside it. Finding them was just the stroke of luck they'd needed to avoid risking any underwater dangers.

Wasting no time whatsoever, Flaxley, Kritz and Derek immediately set about fetching six of the canoes and lining them up to face the water. All the while, Mandika bit her nails, fearing that if she capsized her hair would get wet. Never mind drowning, as long as her hair was okay, she'd be fine. Having been quite the oarsman in his youth Bonson was quick to give them tips on how to keep the canoe straight and what not to do should you capsize. His advice fell on deaf ears unfortunately as Mandika was too busy worrying and Lefiat's mind had wandered to a happy place having seen Kritz bend over to pick up a canoe. With the canoes in place, Bonson was first to climb into one. The others watched him with interest.)

BONSON: See? You slip into the water like this. Now do what I do!

(With that, he shuffled his canoe forward and pushed the earth with his oar allowing the canoes to slip into the river. Grinning merrily, he yelled back to them.)

BONSON: See you on the other side, losers!

(Kritz allowed herself a sly smile.)

KRITZ: That's what he thinks!

(With that, she rushed up to Flaxley, placed a lustful kiss upon his lips then leapt into her canoe. Turning back to give Flaxley one last sexy glance, she then set off after Bonson.)

DEREK: Interesting!

(He then looked Flaxley up and down.)

FLAXLEY: What are you doing?

DEREK: Just checking to see if you're wearing a knee length leather skirt.

FLAXLEY: What???

DEREK: Kritz. She's acting exactly like you did on that glacier when *she* was wearing one!

(Flaxley beamed.)

FLAXLEY: I remember.

DEREK: She was livid.

FLAXLEY: Yes, but...

DEREK: Just saying. Women do love their double standards, don't they? If you were acting like that...

FLAXLEY: She'd love it!!! She was pregnant on that glacier and my drooling only annoyed her because her hormones were all fruity.

DEREK: Right, yes. You tell yourself that.

FLAXLEY: I will. In fact, I have done ever since.

(Derek rolled his eyes.)

DEREK: Right. Well, on that note, here goes then. See you chaps in a bit!

(With that, he too leapt into a canoe and set off into the river. Left behind with Mandika and Lefiat, Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: Right, I'll go last! Don't be nervous, you two. You can do this!

(Lefiat sighed.)

LEFIAT: Yeah, you say that about a lot of things and yet I never seem capable of doing any of them! Why do you lie to me, Flaxley?

FLAXLEY: I don't lie to you, Lefiat! I merely credit you with some intelligence. Only a little, yet still miles too much!

(Standing aside her canoe, Mandika bit her lip uneasily then whimpered.)

MANDIKA: Guys, can you get me started? Please, I'm not confident!

(She then gave them her best puppy dog look. Both keen to give the lady a hand, Lefiat instantly knelt by the canoe so she could lean on him as she lowered herself into it while Flaxley held her hand. Once she'd managed to lower herself in and sit down, Flaxley smiled then started to push the canoe towards the water.)

MANDIKA: Wait, I'm not ready!!!

(Seconds later, as the canoe hit the water she screamed out in distress.)

MANDIKA: I hate you, Flaxley!!!

(Flaxley rolled his eyes.)

FLAXLEY: "Thank you" would have done!

LEFIAT: Yeah! But maybe she's annoyed 'cause you forgot to hand her the oar!

(Immediately, Flaxley swung his head to see Lefiat holding her oar.)

FLAXLEY: Oh crap!

(With that, he grabbed the oar, leapt in the river and waded out to her. Naturally, without an oar she hadn't got far.

Having passed Mandika her oar and offered her some encouraging words, Flaxley waded back onto the bank then looked to the heavens.)

FLAXLEY: Might as well swim now, I'm soaked already!

LEFIAT: Um... Flaxley!

(Flaxley gave him an icy glare.)

FLAXLEY: I'm *going* to help you, okay? Why do you think I opted to go last?

LEFIAT: Right, cool. Thanks, Flaxley!

FLAXLEY: I'm not doing it for your benefit! If *I* don't start you off, you'll just get stuck on land and *I'll* be the one who has to come back and get you.

(Lefiat chuckled heartily.)

LEFIAT: Yeah, you have to laugh 'cause that sort of thing happens practically every time.

(Upon noticing Flaxley's scowl however, Lefiat quickly realised that he been wrong about him having to laugh.)

LEFIAT: Oh, okay then!

FLAXLEY: Just get in the canoe!

LEFIAT: Yeah alright, calm down!

(Just then, Kritz could be heard laughing from out on the water. At once, they both looked up to see her paddling past an exhausted looking Bonson, poking her tongue out and mocking him as she did so.)

KRITZ: See you on the other side, slowcoach!

BONSON: You cow!

(With that, he swung his oar at her. Thankfully, she ducked and he missed her head by inches.)

KRITZ: You fucking psycho!!!

(She then rowed twice as fast to get away from him before he could do it again.)

BONSON: Bloody show off!

(Noticing everyone was making steady progress, Flaxley then returned to the matter in hand.)

FLAXLEY: Why haven't you got in the canoe yet?

LEFIAT: Eh? Me?

FLAXLEY: Well who else, you tit?

LEFIAT: Alright, alright!

(Annoyed at Flaxley's tone, Lefiat stomped towards the canoe.)

LEFIAT: You know, if you were a bit nicer I might not get so nervous and make so many mistakes!

(With that he placed one foot into the canoe and slipped on its polished oak bottom.)

LEFIAT: Crap!!!

(As his desperate attempt to balance failed, he fell backwards kicking his legs out and casting the canoe into the river. Barely able to act surprised, Flaxley just shook his head and pointed to the bushes on the right.)

FLAXLEY: Go and get another one!

LEFIAT: Sorry, Flaxley... um... can you help me carry it though?

FLAXLEY: For the love of life, man!!!

(Having fetched another canoe, Flaxley held it firm to the ground while Lefiat fumbled his way into it. He wasn't about to risk letting Lefiat slow them down even more by kicking another one into the river. Having made two failed attempts to sit down, Lefiat finally managed to get it right at the third attempt then beamed to himself joyously.)

LEFIAT: Hey, that wasn't so difficult!

(Flaxley was astounded.)

FLAXLEY: Then why make it *look* so difficult???

(Lefiat hung his head.)

LEFIAT: Sorry!

FLAXLEY: Right, remember, just paddle the same way they all are. Even your wife can do it. Have some pride and get it right for once!

LEFIAT: I'll try!

(With that, Flaxley pushed his canoe into the river for him.)

FLAXLEY: Finally!

(Satisfied he'd done all he could, Flaxley then climbed into his own canoe and pushed off. With a couple of brief strokes of his oar, he very quickly cruised alongside Lefiat.)

FLAXLEY: Remember what to do?

(Lefiat nodded determinedly.)

LEFIAT: Yeah, I've got it!

FLAXLEY: Good man, see you over the other side then!

LEFIAT: Okay! And thanks, Flaxley!

(Flaxley offered him a friendly smile.)

FLAXLEY: All part of the service, Lefiat! We're a team, remember?

(And with that, he paddled away.)

FLAXLEY: You can do it, Lefiat. I know you can!

(Unfortunately however, as Flaxley paddled forth intently, the end of his oar came up

through the water and thudded into the front of Lefiat's canoe.)

LEFIAT: Hey!!!

(Flaxley was so focussed on his rowing he didn't even feel his powerful stroke of the oar push Lefiat's canoe back onto the river bank from whence it came.)

LEFIAT: Flaxley!!!

(Unfortunately for Lefiat, Flaxley was so focussed on his rowing, he'd blanked out the world. Staring straight ahead as he swiftly made his way across the river, Lefiat's cries for help fell on deaf ears.)

LEFIAT: Flaxley, you pushed me back onto dry land again!!!

(Having made it to the other side already, Mandika stepped from her canoe then joined Kritz, Derek and Bonson in watching on bewilderedly at the sight of Flaxley paddling merrily across the river while Lefiat sat on dry land in his canoe, waving frantically. Having not seen what'd happened they were utterly perplexed.)

KRITZ: What's Lefiat doing there?

BONSON: I thought Flaxley was going to help him!

MANDIKA: Clearly not!

(Feeling extremely frustrated, Lefiat hung his head.)

LEFIAT: Why does everything always have to happen to me?

(Allowing himself a moment of self-pity, he then looked up and snarled.)

LEFIAT: No more. I need to start doing these things for myself. I'll just do what Bonson did!

(He then proceeded to rock himself from side to side.)

LEFIAT: Um... that isn't helping!

(He then remembered something.)

LEFIAT: Oh yeah! Push with the oar!!!

(Looking determined, he then thrust the oar into the dirt with such a force he couldn't get it out again.)

LEFIAT: For fuck sake!!!

(While Lefiat continued to struggle with his oar, Flaxley reached the other side of the river and climbed from his canoe. Having done so, he then joined the others in staring at Lefiat in bewilderment.)

FLAXLEY: How in the hell did he get back on the river bank???

MANDIKA: You said you'd help him!

FLAXLEY: I did, I pushed him into the river!

(Bonson looked flummoxed.)

BONSON: Surely even he isn't dumb enough to have rowed backwards onto the bank again is he?

(Flaxley snarled.)

FLAXLEY: He's plenty dumb enough! How else could he have got back on there?

DEREK: Well, to be honest, if he'd somehow managed to find himself sitting in the canoe half way up a tree, would you really be that surprised?

BONSON: I wouldn't!

(They all nodded in solemn agreement.)

FLAXLEY: There is no hope for that lad!

(Knowing Bonson would deride him for this forever, Lefiat was becoming increasingly flustered. The oar was stuck in the dirt and simply wouldn't budge.)

LEFIAT: Stupid oar!!!

(With that, he let go of the oar and climbed out of the canoe.)

LEFIAT: Bloody Flaxley, sabotaging me!

(He then yanked the oar free and sat beside the canoe.)

FLAXLEY: What the hell is he doing?

KRITZ: I've given up trying to guess!

(As they watched Lefiat gingerly swing his legs into the canoe and carefully climb in they simultaneously gave an understanding "ah" and folded their arms to watch closely.

Having achieved the task of getting in the canoe unaided, Lefiat suddenly felt confident.)

LEFIAT: I'll show them.

(With that, he kicked forwards and snarled.)

LEFIAT: Move you bastard!!!

(Much to his delight, the canoe then slipped forwards into the river.)

LEFIAT: I did it, I did it!!!

(Finally in the water, he felt certain he could now achieve his goal and prove something to himself.)

LEFIAT: Time to shine!!!

(With that, he proceeded to paddle furiously on the left side of the canoe, causing it to go round and round in anti-clockwise circles.)

LEFIAT: Eh? What?

(Being Lefiat, rather than think about what he was doing wrong, he then decided to solve the problem by paddling even faster.)

LEFIAT: What's going on? Hey, go forwards! I feel dizzy!

(He was so disorientated he didn't hear the others cry out for him to paddle on both sides of the canoe and continued to make a fool of himself.)

LEFIAT: My canoe's broken!!!

(And still he didn't stop paddling for all he was worth.)

LEFIAT: Help! Save me, Flaxley!!!

(Baffled as to why he was going round in a perpetual circle, he snarled and thrust his body to the right in a bid to stop the canoe from making this eternal left turn. As a result the canoe tilted and despite Lefiat begging it not to, it capsized. Rather than helping him, his allies all groaned.)

BONSON: We'll be here forever!

(In a blind panic, Lefiat struggled to himself free then clambered onto the top of his upturned vessel. Looking flustered, he quickly made sure his whole self was out of the water then scanned the surface for what he liked to refer to as nasties.)

LEFIAT: I don't want to be a knight anymore!!! I wanna go home!

(Flaxley rolled his eyes.)

FLAXLEY: I'll go!

(Kritz nodded.)

KRITZ: Then you'd better hurry, he's floating off down river!

(Sure enough, with no force to propel the canoe forwards, the current was starting to carry it away.)

LEFIAT: Eh? It's going sideways on its own now!!!

(To make matters worse, the shape of the canoe was such that the current made it spin around as it carried it away.)

LEFIAT: I'm gonna die!

(Upon the river bank, Flaxley nodded determinedly.)

FLAXLEY: Worry not, Mandika, I'll save him!

DEREK: Flaxley, wait!!!

FLAXLEY: We don't have time to wait!

DEREK: There's a new magic I haven't tried yet that might just be able to help!

FLAXLEY: Then do what you need to, old chap! His life's at stake!

BONSON: Again!

(Derek stood as tall as a three-foot tall alien possibly can and nodded positively.)

DEREK: Leave it to me!

(Much to their amazement, he then ran into the river and swum across with astonishing speed.)

KRITZ: What the?

BONSON: Wow!

FLAXLEY: Feet like hands! That's how!

BONSON: Eh?

FLAXLEY: Probably! Um... never mind me; Derek's already on the other bank!

KRITZ: Damn, that was quick!

(They then watched on with bated breath as Lefiat and the canoe continued to disappear down river. Thankfully, a determined looking Derek swiftly started to gain on him as he charged along the river bank.)

FLAXLEY: Go on, Derek. You can do it!

(Sure enough, Derek was soon racing alongside.)

DEREK: Stay calm, Lefiat!

(There was little hope of that. Lefiat was in tears, screaming for his mother like he hadn't done since last time he was in mortal danger. Determined to put an end to the lads torment, Derek stopped running and thrust out his hand in readiness to cast his new magic.)

DEREK: I just hope this works!

(With that, he flicked out his fingers and muttered one word.)

DEREK: Tornado!!!

(As soon as he uttered the word, a blast of wind fired from his fingers, blowing Lefiat straight off the canoe and into the water.)

DEREK: Oops! It was meant to blow the canoe ashore!

(Struggling against the current, Lefiat flapped in the water struggling to keep his head up.)

LEFIAT: I hate you, Derek!!!

DEREK: Stay calm, Lefiat! I'll try to blow you ashore!!!

(And once again, Derek cast his magic at Lefiat, this time blowing him under the surface.)

DEREK: In hindsight, maybe this magic wasn't the best idea.

(With that, he leapt into the water. On the river bank in the meantime, Mandika was clinging onto Kritz for dear life.)

MANDIKA: Let him be okay, please let him be okay!

(Fearing the worst, they watched the surface of the water for what seemed like an eternity but nobody emerged. Unable to stand the suspense, Mandika started to cry and threw her

arms around Kritz.)

MANDIKA: Kritz!!!

(Staring fearfully at the surface of the water, Bonson clenched his fist and growled to himself.)

BONSON: Come on, Derek, resurface. Just *you* though.

MANDIKA: Come on! Come on!!!

(Suddenly, there was an almighty splash as Derek and Lefiat thrashed through the surface of the water.)

MANDIKA: Thank heavens, oh my god, thank heavens!!!

BONSON: Bugger it! I said just *you*, Derek!

(Struggling desperately against the tide, Derek then swum them both to the edge of the river where Flaxley was on hand to pull them out.

Thoroughly exhausted, they both lay on the water's edge, panting. Mandika was quick to kiss Derek's head then grab Lefiat and cover him with kisses. Watching on, Flaxley turned to Kritz and gave a sigh of relief.)

FLAXLEY: That was too close!

(Kritz nodded, like the others, she too was out of breath from all the adrenaline and excitement. Cuddling up closely to Flaxley, she puffed out then glanced to the sky.)

KRITZ: Thank heavens, they're okay!

(Looking extremely disappointed, Bonson knelt next to Mandika as she stroked Lefiat's hair lovingly.)

BONSON: So... he survives again. Must be something Daman's doing, nobody's *that* lucky.

(Lost in her own world, Mandika didn't hear his comment and looked to him with wonderment in her eyes.)

MANDIKA: He's okay, Bonson, he's okay!

BONSON: Yes, well... you can't win 'em all, I suppose.

(He then looked to Lefiat and smirked.)

BONSON: I say, Lefiat, before we crossed, I took my pen out of my pocket and I seem to have left it on the other side of the river. You wouldn't mind popping back over there and getting it for me, would you?

(Immediately, Mandika snarled.)

MANDIKA: Bonson, you're an arsehole!

(Bonson reared back then climbed to his feet.)

BONSON: It was a joke!

KRITZ: There's a time and a place, Bonson!

(He shrugged.)

BONSON: Whatever. There's always a time for levity. And I thought it was funny.

(He then looked away and mumbled.)

BONSON: So, sod you lot!

(Very much relieved that they'd come through everything unscathed somehow, Flaxley glanced around at his five allies then paused to take stock of the situation. They were now at the foot of the mountain. All that remained was to scale it and find the cave. The next move was obvious.)

FLAXLEY: Let's take a quick break here chaps, the mountain isn't going anywhere and

we've quite a climb ahead of us!
(Unsurprisingly, he received no argument on that score.)

(As the six allies took a well-deserved rest they had no idea they'd been watched every step of the way. From the majesty of their marble palace, the sanctum of light, hidden somewhere in the ether, the elders had been observing their every move with the use of a crystal sphere. The head elder, a man known simply as "Liege" was extremely nervous. Sitting to his right, Daman Siria tried his best to reassure him.)

DAMAN: They *will* prevail, Liege. I've overseen them on many occasions and though I've often had to intervene they've always come through in the end. Trust me, I've picked the perfect six souls for the task in hand.

(Liege stroked his chin.)

LIEGE: Well, you say that... this Lefiat chap...

DAMAN: I know what you're going to say. We chose him for his pure heart and innocence.

LIEGE: Yes, but why make him so horribly incompetent?

DAMAN: Well, *knowing* he's incompetent, like he does, protects him from becoming arrogant. It keeps him humble. His humbleness after all, is the perfect counterweight to Flaxley's arrogance. It's all about karmic balance, you see.

(He nodded.)

DAMAN: Also, Lefiat's errors keep the others alert and focussed to the fact that *anything* can happen.

LIEGE: But doesn't his incompetence hinder their efforts?

DAMAN: Frequently, Liege. But his good points outweigh his bad ones! It's all part of my grand design.

(Liege gave Daman a distrusting look.)

LIEGE: Grand design, my arse. Daman, that's a hat!

DAMAN: A hat?

LIEGE: A falsehood! Humility, my foot! I understand the need to counter one person's arrogance with another's humility but the fool is nothing but a burden. You made him overly mistake prone by accident didn't you?

(Daman looked apologetically to his feet then sighed.)

DAMAN: I confess, Liege. He wasn't supposed to reach such a level of ineptitude at all. It's been hard work keeping him alive, in fact. He's been obscenely lucky.

(Liege nodded.)

LIEGE: The truth was all I asked, Daman.

DAMAN: I apologise, Liege!

LIEGE: Worry not. Other than that one mistake, you have done great work. That knight, Flaxley, he's just the strong leader we needed. His wench is also a force to be reckoned with...

DAMAN: Indeed, though she prefers to be called Kritz!

LIEGE: Don't be flippant, Siria!

(Daman hung his head.)

LIEGE: The Leramite, Derek, I'm impressed that you selected one so noble.

DAMAN: Thank you.

LIEGE: And the princess or indeed queen of Guevina, well, considering what's to come her role was inevitable. As for that butler, Bonson...

(Unsure as to what Liege would make of the grumpy old man in question, Daman looked nervously to Liege.)

LIEGE: Perfect. As a part of the Guevina royal household, when the time comes, his spiteful nature will serve us well. He's the perfect blend of brains and vindictiveness.

(Daman drew a sigh of relief.)

LIEGE: Overall you have done great work, Daman.

DAMAN: Thank you, Liege!

LIEGE: And they know nothing of what lies ahead?

DAMAN: Not a thing.

LIEGE: Excellent.

DAMAN: Everything is as it should be, Liege. Everything we need to eradicate the great threat which looms over this world is now in place.

(Liege nodded.)

LIEGE: It's just a shame King Falbury had to die so that Mandika could become Queen. He was that rarest of noble kings.

(Daman nodded remorsefully.)

DAMAN: What could we do? We needed Mandika to ascend to the throne... so when the plot to kill him came to light, it just made sense to let it happen.

(Liege forced a smile.)

LIEGE: I'm not judging you harshly for that, Daman. His death was a small price to pay and most certainly won't have been in vain!

(Daman bowed to acknowledge his words.)

LIEGE: So the dark souls have been gathered and now we await the sphere.

DAMAN: That's correct.

LIEGE: You know, once the soul sphere is empowered with the dark souls we will have a phenomenal weapon in our struggle...

(Liege paused as an uncertain look crossed his brow.)

DAMAN: Liege?

LIEGE: It still may not be enough.

DAMAN: I know.

LIEGE: Even with an army. Any army will only serve as a distraction and should the soul sphere fail then everything we've done will have been for nothing.

DAMAN: I prefer not to think about it that way, Liege.

LIEGE: Oh no?

DAMAN: The army shall be raised, though they may not know they are one. Amidst the chaos the summoning *will* prevail.

(Liege nodded.)

LIEGE: I pray it is so for the very survival of this planet.

DAMAN: We cannot, must not and shall not fail, Liege.

(Liege nodded positively.)

LIEGE: Then it shall be done. The evil came close to destroying this world once and it cannot be allowed the chance to try again. While the evil has been restrained we've had four hundred years to plan for the day he returns.

DAMAN: Exactly, if we can't defeat him with that long to plan it then we never will.

(Liege nodded.)

LIEGE: We risked using great powers to preserve our existence for such a time. I'm relying on you to see it to the end now, Daman.

DAMAN: Thank you, Liege.

LIEGE: Despite the mistake with Lefiat and informing them all of the thrall, you have achieved every goal thus far. They're all still alive and we have the dark souls we desire. Now get me that sphere.

DAMAN: It will be done, Liege.

(Liege looked into the crystal sphere again.)

LIEGE: Those innocent warriors down there may not know it but once they hand us the sphere, they might just be handing us the survival of this very world.

(The innocent warriors in question, having enjoyed a short breather, were now lined up before the mountain looking up the path ahead of them. The path was a simple dirt track that rose up the mountainside then disappeared beneath an umbrella of trees.)

KRITZ: I bet it gets really steep later on doesn't it.

BONSON: Well, mountains tend to do that, yes.

FLAXLEY: You up to this, Bonson?

(Bonson shrugged.)

BONSON: Flaxley, I'm old but there's life in the old dog yet. I'll do my best.

MANDIKA: He'll be fine; it's me *I'm* worried about. My dainty feet aren't cut out for this kind of thing.

BONSON: Dainty feet? Your feet are massive!

MANDIKA: Excuse me???

BONSON: Well look at them. Big giant clodhoppers compared to Kritz's feet. But then she would have tiny feet...

KRITZ: If you're going to make that joke about nothing growing in the shade, I'm going to punch you, Bonson.

(Bonson sighed sorrowfully.)

BONSON: Heard it, have you?

KRITZ: Several hundred times!

(She furrowed her brow.)

KRITZ: Men and their boob jokes. No they're not heavy and I don't want you to hold them for me!!! And they wonder why I punch them in the face!

(Mandika was flabbergasted.)

MANDIKA: Wait! Bonson... did you insult my feet just so you could make a weak joke about Kritz's boobs?

BONSON: That wasn't the *only* reason. I really like insulting you.

LEFIAT: You're horrible, Bonson.

BONSON: Shut up, fuck nut. I'm still mad at you for not drowning. Building up my hopes like that, whatever next?

LEFIAT: Mean!!!

FLAXLEY: Look, never mind that. You chaps ready to get going?

MANDIKA: I guess so. I just hope it doesn't get too steep.

DEREK: I guess there's only one way to find out if it does. Let's go.

FLAXLEY: Indeed.

(With that, Kritz took Flaxley's arm then they all proceeded to head up the path before them.

As always Flaxley's main concern was being alert for danger. Lefiat was also unusually focussed, convinced that if anything bad was going to happen it was almost certainly going to happen to him. Having been far from enthused when the walk began, Mandika and Bonson soon passed the point of bemoaning the journey and finally started to accept what they had to do. Walking either side of Sir Flaxley, both Derek and Kritz ambled casually forth, happy to do whatever he required of them.

With the gradient beneath their feet only slight at this point, the ascent was more like a gentle walk and with the beautiful forest for a backdrop, tensions were reasonably low. This could also have been because Mandika wasn't complaining and Bonson was too deep in thought to stir up any commotion. With nobody moaning for once, the hum of the flowing river behind them and the sound of bird song in the air, made it all seem rather pleasant.)

KRITZ: Isn't it a shame when beautiful places like this are ruined by bandits.

DEREK: What do you mean?

KRITZ: I mean, if there weren't violent thugs on the loose, I'm sure more people would visit.

DEREK: Yeah, but then it'd be overrun by tourists.

FLAXLEY: I hate tourists. I hate bandits too but luckily I can swing a sword so they're not a problem for me.

(He shrugged.)

FLAXLEY: I guess, if you can't swing a sword, you'll just have to stay indoors. You shouldn't be out here if you can't handle a few bandits anyway.

KRITZ: That's a pretty cold way of looking at it, my love.

FLAXLEY: Maybe, but that's the way things are, I'm afraid.

KRITZ: Even so. It's a shame.

(As if that conversation wasn't pointless enough, Bonson then capped it spectacularly by airing his thoughts out loud.)

BONSON: Gays are stupid!

(Everyone immediately turned and looked at him.)

KRITZ: Any particular reason for that statement, Bonson?

(Having not realised he'd been speaking out loud, Bonson was a little startled.)

BONSON: What? Who?

KRITZ: Why are gays stupid?

(Much to Bonson's dismay, everyone had stopped to hear what he had to say. Never wanting anyone to think he'd ever say anything without profound substance, he straightened his tie and stood tall.)

BONSON: Well...

(He mused to think of something deep and meaningful.)

BONSON: Because they are!

(Mandika rolled her eyes.)

MANDIKA: Well I'm convinced.

BONSON: No, I mean it's just silly. Why do such a thing? There certainly isn't any logic behind it.

(Kritz frowned at him.)

KRITZ: For a guy who claims to be wise, you don't know shit, do you?

(He wasn't about to take *that* lying down.)

BONSON: I know *you're* an illiterate tart with all the intelligence of your average halibut!

(Much to Mandika's amazement, Kritz merely held her arm out and wafted her hand at him dismissively.)

KRITZ: Whatever, Bonson!

MANDIKA: Wow, Kritz, you really have mellowed. If someone called you a tart a few years ago you'd have gone all psychotic on them.

KRITZ: Don't worry, Mandika, as soon as we find a steep enough cliff, he'll soon see I haven't changed that much.

BONSON: Look, I was just saying... what was I saying?

KRITZ: Some crap about gays being stupid.

BONSON: That's right. Well... gays *are* stupid!

(Everyone sighed.)

DEREK: That's your well thought out take on it, is it?

(Bonson could only look shifty.)

BONSON: Um... yes!

KRITZ: Pillock.

BONSON: What are *you* getting so annoyed about anyway, Kritz? You're a woman, you should agree with me. If every bloke was a poofta, after all, your gender would be pointless. I bet you're glad Flaxley there isn't an arse bandit.

KRITZ: Even so, you know nothing.

BONSON: Don't I now?

KRITZ: No. I'll have you know that back when I was in the Trepe tribe, there were hardly any men around and we girls had to make do with each other.

(Unsurprisingly, after those words she had all the males including Derek's full and undivided attention.)

FLAXLEY: Care to elaborate, dear?

LEFIAT: Please!

KRITZ: Well... we were an all-female tribe except for the men who'd been captured as sex slaves. We used to make out with each other all the time. There was one particular area on the patrol route, up by the woods on the cliff top, that was a regular make out point.

(Flaxley's mouth fell open.)

FLAXLEY: That's exactly how I fantasised Trepe village would be.

LEFIAT: Me too... or it would have been had I heard of it.

KRITZ: Anyway, it was just normal. Women have needs and there were no men around. (Bonson shrugged.)

BONSON: That's different. I'm talking about two men. That's plain wrong.

KRITZ: It's the same!

(Failing to disguise his excited expression, Flaxley enquired further.)

FLAXLEY: So... um, did you... you know... did you ever take part in these activities?

KRITZ: Well... I'm not ashamed and I certainly don't have to justify myself. I enjoyed many a time with other women. Suma wasn't the first, Flaxley. It doesn't make me a lesbian though.

(She turned to gauge his reaction and was quite peeved to see him staring into space with a delighted look on his face.)

KRITZ: Hey!!! Stop picturing it!

(Mandika had a similar problem with Lefiat.)

MANDIKA: Oi!!!

LEFIAT: What?

KRITZ: Like that is it, you perverts?

DEREK: Well, what did you expect? They're only human!

MANDIKA: You're not, what's your excuse?

DEREK: Um... peer pressure! Leave me alone.

FLAXLEY: Besides, Kritz, we're men, we're supposed to find women erotic! Especially when they're... doing stuff together... kissing and... more.

KRITZ: Right...

(Just then an idea for a prank that was too good to ignore, entered Kritz's head. Feeling devious, she gave Mandika a knowing smile then turned to scan the faces of the men.)

KRITZ: Two girls kissing is erotic? Rubbish! Seriously you guys, what's so erotic about this?

(With that, she slowly approached Mandika with a sexy glint in her eye.)

KRITZ: Come here, babe!

(Mandika looked horrified.)

MANDIKA: I already told you, Kritz, that's one fantasy you can forget!!!

(As Kritz scowled at her and urged her to play along, Mandika looked enlightened.)

MANDIKA: Oh, right... yeah, okay. You are my best friend, I suppose. One lingering kiss with tongues won't hurt.

(As Mandika and Kritz slowly walked to one another giving each other sexy smiles, Flaxley, Lefiat and interestingly, Derek couldn't believe their luck. Anticipating what was about to happen, they all craned their necks forward excitedly. Bizarrely, Bonson looked horrified.)

LEFIAT: They're gonna kiss!!!

BONSON: Don't do it!!!

FLAXLEY: Shut up, Bonson!!!

(Stepping into one another's arms, Kritz and Mandika then softly drew their lips towards one another, much to the excitement of the lusty threesome and the disgust of the tortured looking Bonson.)

FLAXLEY: Go on.

LEFIAT: Yeah, go on.

(Before their lips met, however, the two girls stepped back and laughed.)

KRITZ: You lot are so gullible.

MANDIKA: I can't believe you fell for that.

FLAXLEY: Hey! That was a downright nasty trick.

LEFIAT: Yeah, leading us on like that.

(Derek hung his head.)

DEREK: I can't believe I got so excited. I think I need therapy.

(Bonson however said nothing. He'd turned away having not been able to look.)

FLAXLEY: Bonson, you okay?

BONSON: Have they finished?

FLAXLEY: They didn't even start.

BONSON: Good!

(And with a face like thunder he turned and stomped away up the path ahead.)

BONSON: Now are we climbing this mountain or aren't we???

(As he stamped away angrily, the others watched him go and raised baffled eyebrows.)

LEFIAT: What's eating him?

FLAXLEY: I don't know!

KRITZ: I don't think he liked our prank.

FLAXLEY: He didn't see it; he turned away for some reason.

MANDIKA: Turned away? You'd have thought he'd love watching two women kiss.

FLAXLEY: *Most* men do. I certainly can't deny that *I* do.

(Kritz looked extremely peeved.)

KRITZ: No, you can't, can you?

(Casting her mind back to the time he'd convinced her to have lesbian sex with the busty Trepe warrior, Suma, while he watched, she snarled at him distrustfully.)

KRITZ: You were loving every second of it when I was with Suma! Pervert!!!

FLAXLEY: I already explained that, Kritz. I only did it out of love. You needed to punish me to make yourself feel better. So I let you think that watching you and Suma do the filthy was a punishment. Like a good husband should, I was simply putting *your* needs first. If that makes me a bad person then I don't know what to say.

(Feeling a tad guilty, Kritz took Flaxley's arm and nestled up against him lovingly.)

KRITZ: You're right. I'm sorry, darling.

(Delighted with Kritz's on-going gullibility over the matter, Flaxley beamed.)

FLAXLEY: It's forgiven, my love.

(Kritz squeezed herself tighter against his arm then resumed watching Bonson as he paced furiously away up the hill.)

KRITZ: That's really strange! He's a complete pervert that man, and yet he doesn't like seeing two women kiss!

MANDIKA: Well... nor do I to be fair!

KRITZ: Yeah, but Bonson's a man. For a man, it's strange.

DEREK: It's not that strange.

(With that, Derek followed after Bonson.)

DEREK: If you knew his secret then you'd know he has his reasons.

(As Derek walked away one thing was clear. He'd just said the most stupid thing he could possibly have said. Kritz had been especially keen to learn the huge secret Bonson had been concealing and her mind ran riot.)

KRITZ: His secret? He doesn't like girls kissing 'cause of his secret?

MANDIKA: Maybe his ex-wife left him for a woman!

FLAXLEY: No, I met her once. *He* left *her*.

MANDIKA: You sure?

FLAXLEY: Yeah, she did nothing but complain about it all the while I was in her company.

KRITZ: Then why does he find girl on girl romance so obscene?

(Flaxley was first to look alarmed.)

FLAXLEY: Great googly moogly, Bonson's a poofa!

LEFIAT: Eh?

(They all froze as the revelation hit them.)

FLAXLEY: Think about it, that explains everything!

KRITZ: Yeah, that's why he left his wife!

MANDIKA: Oh my lord, come to think of it we've never seen him with a woman, have we?

LEFIAT: Hang on, what about that Trepe warrior he went off with that time?

FLAXLEY: We've only got his word that he actually did anything with her.

LEFIAT: Yeah, but Derek read his mind and confirmed it was true.

KRITZ: Yeah well, Derek's known Bonson's secret all along. I bet he was covering for him.

MANDIKA: It'd certainly explain why Bonson's so bitter all the time. I mean he's had to hide that truth all his life.

KRITZ: And it explains why he gets so funny if anyone tries to connect with him on an emotional level.

FLAXLEY: I put my hand in his shoulder once and he got all uncomfortable.

KRITZ: See? Overcompensating!

MANDIKA: Just like when he lusts over you all day long, Kritz. Overcompensating!

(They then stood there in silence for a few moments allowing it to sink in.)

FLAXLEY: Well, I'll be buggered.

(Immediately he realised what he'd said and frowned at himself.)

MANDIKA: Nice choice of phrase, Flaxley!

FLAXLEY: Wasn't it just?

(Again they mused in silent shock.)

FLAXLEY: So, he's a poofa then!

MANDIKA: Looks like it.

KRITZ: Yeah.

LEFIAT: Wow.

(Hoping this news wouldn't have any repercussions or affect their mission adversely in any way, Flaxley stood tall.)

FLAXLEY: Well, let's not let on that we know. Just act normal, okay?

MANDIKA: Sure.

KRITZ: No problem.

FLAXLEY: Kritz! I mean it now. Don't start quizzing him. I know what you're like. Promise me you won't question him!

KRITZ: I said, no problem!!!

FLAXLEY: Kritz?

KRITZ: Fine, I promise.

FLAXLEY: Excellent. Then let's go. Remember to act normal.

(Lefiat grinned.)

LEFIAT: Fine, but if he tries to hold my hand, I'm out of here.

(Trying to look professional, Flaxley swiftly swung his head in Lefiat's direction trying to force the urge to laugh back into his body. He failed.)

LEFIAT: I made a funny.

(Kritz and Mandika who'd also enjoyed a chuckle at his comment started to head off.)

MANDIKA: Well, you were due a funny.

KRITZ: Yeah and you kind of owed him.

(Lefiat nodded sternly.)

LEFIAT: Damn right I did.

(With that, Lefiat and Flaxley also started to head up the path.

With the gradient increasing with every step, slowing the pace, it didn't take long to catch Bonson and Derek and they all proceeded forth in a group again. With such a steep ascent ahead, the shade provided by the trees all around them would undoubtedly prove to be a godsend.)

(Despairingly for the six travelling allies, within five minutes of resuming their trek, they found themselves heading up a thirty degree gradient which was quite a strain on Bonson's aging legs. Tiring very quickly, he soon fell behind.

Unsurprisingly, Kritz's promise not to question Bonson had proven to be something of a lie. Flaxley might have known there'd be no way on earth she could just let it go. And so, while Derek, Flaxley, Mandika and Lefiat led the way, Kritz brought up the rear with Bonson. Under the guise that she was simply being kind and keeping him company, she proceeded to engage him in conversation in the hope she could make him slip up and confirm what they suspected about his sexuality.)

KRITZ: Tiring, isn't it?

BONSON: Obviously!

KRITZ: Good thing the trees are giving us shade to keep cool. That doesn't stop it being achy on the old legs though, does it?

(Suspicious from the very start, Bonson raised an inquisitive eyebrow. Kritz had been trying to uncover his secret since the moment she found out he had one.)

BONSON: Um... yes, obviously again!

KRITZ: Maybe a chat would take our minds off it!

(Not about to entertain her attempts to fish for information, Bonson scowled at her.)

BONSON: Oh, really?

KRITZ: I think so, don't you?

BONSON: Maybe I don't want to take my mind off it.

KRITZ: Don't be silly. So, tell me about your ex-wife!

(Maintaining his scowl he spoke in his most condescending voice.)

BONSON: If you must know, she was an underdressed, overly violent tart, who didn't understand the concept of minding her own bloody business.

KRITZ: Really?

BONSON: No! I'm talking about you.

(Kritz was most offended.)

KRITZ: That's not very nice!

BONSON: I apologise, you see I often get the two of you confused. Must be 'cause you both inspire the same sense of nausea. Now go away!

(Unfortunately for Bonson, when Kritz wanted to know something it'd take more than a

few insults to discourage her.)

KRITZ: Don't be like that, Bonson.

BONSON: How would you like me to be? All cute and kitten like? Go on, bugger off!
(Sensing Bonson would be a tough nut to crack, Kritz grinned to herself and resorted to plan B, playing the helpless little girl. Faking a single cry, she sniffed and hung her head.)

KRITZ: Don't be mean to me, Bonson.

(She looked to him through saddened eyes.)

KRITZ: I just wanted to talk to someone, that was all.

(Looking fed up to the back teeth, Bonson stopped and glared at her.)

BONSON: Look. That act might work on Flaxley but it certainly won't work on me. I can see straight through you, Kritzeveltia! You're fishing. That's the only reason you're back here. Well, listen here, woman, I'm not discussing my secret with you and I never will. Now either make yourself useful by getting your tits out and dancing for me or piss off and leave me alone.

(Well and truly rumbled, Kritz's complete lack of acting skills didn't help her at this point.)

KRITZ: Excuse me?

(She placed her hands on her hips.)

KRITZ: I'd *never* try to trick you into discussing your secret. I don't even care about that! Your being gay makes no difference to me!

(Bonson looked horrified.)

BONSON: Gay???

KRITZ: Oops!

BONSON: Gay???

(She offered him an apologetic grin.)

KRITZ: I think I said too much.

(As Bonson scowled at her, she quickly scampered off to catch up with the others.)

BONSON: Good thing she's pretty!

(He then exhaled adoringly.)

BONSON: And has such enormous tits!

(With that, he shook away his glazed expression, sighed merrily then resumed the walk.)

(As they continued upwards through the picturesque, hillside woodland, Flaxley soon started to feel a little uneasy. Bonson was wearily pacing forth at the back all on his own and he couldn't help but feel somewhat guilty about it. Glancing backwards as he soldiered forth with Kritz, Derek, Mandika and Lefiat at his side, he bit his lip and mused to himself. Satisfied he couldn't deprive his aging comrade of company for much longer he nodded to himself then looked at Lefiat.)

FLAXLEY: Lefiat. Go and walk with Bonson.

(Lefiat glared at him then shook his head.)

LEFIAT: No way. Bonson hates me.

FLAXLEY: Lefiat...

LEFIAT: Nobody's exactly over-fond of me, but Bonson...

FLAXLEY: He's all on his own back there, Lefiat. You should do the decent thing and

keep him company.

(Lefiat pouted.)

LEFIAT: You just want to get rid of me.

FLAXLEY: Nonsense!

DEREK: Is it though, Flaxley?

FLAXLEY: Shut up, Derek.

LEFIAT: If you love him that much, *you* walk with him!

(Flaxley glared at him.)

FLAXLEY: Love him???

LEFIAT: Um...

FLAXLEY: I don't love him! I just don't think it's right that a man his age should be left to walk on his own.

LEFIAT: You walk with him then!

(Flaxley looked most incensed.)

FLAXLEY: I'm leading the way, you tit. You do that from the front, that's why they call it being in the lead!

LEFIAT: Let *me* lead then!

(At once, a highly amused laugh rose up from all those around him.)

LEFIAT: What's so funny?

MANDIKA: You? Lead?

DEREK: I daren't even imagine how that'd end.

LEFIAT: Oh right, like that, is it? Just because I'm useless you lot think I can't do *anything* right!

FLAXLEY: And can you?

(Lefiat glared at him for a moment then sighed emptily.)

LEFIAT: Not really, no.

FLAXLEY: Well then.

(He rolled his eyes then flicked his head back in Bonson's direction.)

FLAXLEY: Now makes yourself useful and walk with Bonson.

LEFIAT: But, he really, really hates me, Flaxley. If I even *try* to walk with him, he'll probably hit me with something!

(Mandika rolled her eyes.)

MANDIKA: Look, I'm sure Bonson's fine.

FLAXLEY: How can you be sure?

MANDIKA: Simple. When he's on his own, he gets to be with the one he loves. The *only* person he even likes. He's one misery that *doesn't* love company.

FLAXLEY: Well, that's as maybe, but...

MANDIKA: Look, Flaxley, if it bothers you that much *I'll* go back and walk with him in a minute.

(Flaxley gave a half-hearted nod.)

FLAXLEY: I'd rather Lefiat did it, but fine. As long as somebody does.

LEFIAT: As long as I don't have to.

MANDIKA: That's settled then.

(Just then, the tree to the side of her head caught her eye and she beamed with delight.)

MANDIKA: Oh, cool!

(With that, she reached for an apple-sized piece of fruit that was hanging from one of the

branches and plucked it towards herself.)

MANDIKA: A simia fruit! I love these things!

(As soon as the fruit came free from the tree, Mandika rubbed it against her thigh excitedly.)

MANDIKA: You can't get these in Guevina for some reason.

DEREK: Good are they?

MANDIKA: Good? They taste like heaven, Derek!

(Flaxley mused to himself.)

FLAXLEY: I might grab one from the next tree then.

(As they headed onwards, Mandika slowed and proceeded to lick her fingertips so she could polish the simia fruit in her other palm. Blissfully unaware that she was falling behind, she exhaled to herself joyfully.)

MANDIKA: The thought of eating this makes me kinda glad I was kidnapped and forced to come here.

(Noticing she was cut adrift, half way between the others up front and Bonson at the back, she grimaced then picked up the pace.)

MANDIKA: Wait up, guys!

(Just then, all the trees around them shook violently and the air was filled with sound of furious monkey howls. Looking highly alarmed, Flaxley spun around and drew his sword.)

FLAXLEY: Monkeys!!! Dozen of the buggers from the sound of things.

(He then looked on in horror as the pack of furious primates rampaged from the trees and charged at Mandika.)

FLAXLEY: Mandika!!!

(Having already seen the monkey's coming Mandika took off into the woods, screaming for dear life.)

MANDIKA: Flaxley!!!

(At once, Flaxley, Kritz, Derek and Lefiat, raced off in pursuit of the monkeys. Watching them go, Bonson rolled his eyes then leant against a tree.)

BONSON: Take your time, chaps.

(As Mandika raced forth through the trees, bashing low, thin branches aside with her face, in a blind panic, the monkeys swiftly started to gain on her. In tears and terrified to the core of her being, she cried out desperately.)

MANDIKA: Leave me alone!!! I'm a queen!!! I'm too important to die!!!

(Pretty certain that Mandika's royal standing wasn't going to deter the ferocious monkeys for even a moment, Flaxley snarled and doubled his efforts to catch her up.)

FLAXLEY: Stupid primates!!! Come and taste cold steel!!!

KRITZ: Why did they single *her* out anyway???

DEREK: Probably because she's small and she was on her own!

KRITZ: Then why didn't they pick on, Bonson? He was on his own too and *he's* old and frail!

DEREK: Yes, but... I don't know. Maybe his smell was off putting.

KRITZ: Maybe... he does have that crusty old man smell about him, doesn't he?

(Leading the charge, Flaxley glanced over his shoulder and snarled bitterly.)

FLAXLEY: Stop yapping and run, you lot.

KRITZ: We are!!!

(Her eyes bulged.)

KRITZ: Look where you're going!!!

(Alas, her warning came too late and Flaxley charged head first, straight into a tree.)

KRITZ: Pillock!

(As Derek and Kritz raced past him, Flaxley jumped to his feet and snarled at himself.)

FLAXLEY: So glad Bonson wasn't here to see that.

(With that, he started to race off after his comrades when a loud cry of anguish rose up from behind him, accompanied by a loud thudding sound. At once, Flaxley spun around to see Lefiat plop to the ground, having raced into the same tree.)

FLAXLEY: You cock!

(With that, he rolled his eyes and charged off after Kritz and Derek. Up at the head of the pursuit at this time, the sprinting Mandika was hysterical with fear.)

MANDIKA: It's not fair!!! I'm so beautiful and so magnificent, why does everything want to kill me??? It's not fair.

(As the howls of the rampaging primates grew ever louder over her shoulder, she screamed once again then put her head down and tried to force even more energy into her legs. Desperate to live, she whimpered repeatedly as she bounded forth, when her heart sunk. A mere twenty feet in front of her was a ravine. A sheer one hundred foot drop.)

MANDIKA: Daddy!!!

(Consumed by terror, she glanced over her shoulder then screamed once again. The monkeys were now right behind her.)

MANDIKA: Why???

(Panicking profusely, she cried her eyes out and raced up the edge of the ravine, where she swiftly raced around a thick tree then attempted to race back the way she'd just come in the hope she could find Flaxley. Arriving at the scene just behind her, Flaxley, Kritz and Derek couldn't believe their eyes. As luck would have it, all the monkeys chased her around the tree rather than cutting her off by going the other side of it.)

KRITZ: She's a jammy little bugger sometimes.

DEREK: I'll say.

FLAXLEY: Never mind that...

(He stood tall and snarled.)

FLAXLEY: We've got some monkey killing to do!!!

(Growling angrily, he raised his sword and watched as Mandika charged towards him.)

FLAXLEY: You're safe now, Mandika. Leave those little bastards to me!!!

(Screaming past him with bulging eyes, Mandika didn't even slow down.)

MANDIKA: Happily!!!

(As Mandika raced away, her terror showing no signs of abating, Flaxley, Kritz and Derek instantly attempted to take the fight to the monkeys. Unfortunately for all concerned, however, things didn't quite go to plan. Derek was instantly flattened by one of the monkeys as it charged straight through him, Flaxley managed to cut one of them down, only to have another one jump on his face, then bounce over his head and keep going and Kritz merely managed to high kick one before being knocked straight off her feet by two others. In a matter of seconds, one monkey was dead and the rest were racing off in pursuit of Mandika again, having left Flaxley, Kritz and Derek in their wake.

Climbing to her feet, Kritz shook her fist furiously.)

KRITZ: They're too bloody quick!!!

FLAXLEY: And too bloody determined!!! They only have eyes for Mandika.

DEREK: Then we'd better hurry up and rescue her properly this time!!!

(With that, they all raced off in pursuit of Mandika once again. Thankfully, Mandika hadn't taken any chances. Had she gambled on her allies being successfully, the monkeys would have savaged her by now. Instead she'd charged onwards, past Lefiat's unconscious body at the foot of the tree, and back towards where Bonson was idly propped up against a tree on the pathway.)

MANDIKA: It's so unfair. Bonson would make a better meal. Why pick on me???

(As she bounded through the trees and appeared in Bonson's eye line, the old man raised an inquisitive eyebrow then gasped in horror.)

BONSON: Great paddling sea monkeys, they're right behind her!!!

(At once, he stood tall and prepared his fire magic.)

BONSON: Fucking monkeys!

(Just then, he spotted something in Mandika's hand and looked enlightened.)

BONSON: No wonder!!!

(At once, he lowered his fighting stance and called out to her.)

BONSON: Mandika, you silly fucker, drop the simia fruit!!!

(Crying her eyes out and panicking like there was no tomorrow, Mandika just looked back at him and screamed out in distress.)

MANDIKA: You're mean!!! Stop calling me names and help me!!!

(With that, she charged from the trees then whizzed straight past him into the woodland the other side.)

BONSON: I said drop the simia fruit, you silly fucker!!!

MANDIKA: Stop calling me that!!!

(As she bounded away, Bonson rolled his eyes then gave chase.)

BONSON: Mandika!!!

MANDIKA: Leave me alone!!!

(A short distance behind them at this time, Flaxley and Derek raced past the dazed, waking Lefiat. Taking pity on him, Kritz slowed down, doused his face with H2O magic to wake him up properly then dragged him to his feet.)

LEFIAT: Water magic? You attacked me!!! What did you do that for?

KRITZ: To wake you up obviously. Now hurry. Mandika's in deep shit.

(Lefiat looked most alarmed.)

LEFIAT: Oh, crap!!!

(With that, they both charged away to catch up with Flaxley and Derek.)

LEFIAT: And you didn't just want to splash me 'cause you thought it'd be funny?

KRITZ: Not exclusively, no!

LEFIAT: Right. Good.

(At the head of the chase at this time, Mandika was still panicking and her selective hearing was still only registering Bonson's insults and not his advice.)

MANDIKA: Stop calling me 'twat features'!!!

(Racing along behind her with monkeys all around him, Bonson remonstrated with her desperately.)

BONSON: Throw the fucking simia fruit then, you fucking idiot!!!

MANDIKA: I'm not an idiot!!!

BONSON: Throw the bloody simia fruit then!!!

(Crying her eyes out in fear for her life, Mandika whimpered in distress as she charged onwards.)

MANDIKA: What???

BONSON: They're not after you!!! They just want the fruit back!!! These are simia monkeys, they hoard simia fruit!

MANDIKA: How do you know???

BONSON: I'm wise! I read about it. As soon as anyone picks one they attack and won't stop until they get it back!!! Throw it!!!

(At once, hope returned to Mandika's eyes and she lifted the simia fruit to her face.)

MANDIKA: Throw it?

BONSON: Yes!!!

(Just as Flaxley and Derek caught up with Bonson, Mandika pulled back her arm and threw the simia fruit in the air.)

MANDIKA: I did it!!!

(Unfortunately, as she continued to run, the fruit looped up in the air then came down straight between her breasts and lodged itself in her cleavage.)

MANDIKA: No!!!

(Reacting swiftly, she threw her hand to her chest and screamed.)

MANDIKA: Why???

(Unfortunately, in her panic to remove it, she inadvertently batted it deeper down her top.)

MANDIKA: No!!! It's gone down my top!!!

(Bonson rolled his eyes and looked to Flaxley as they rampaged forth amongst the furious monkeys.)

BONSON: Do something, Flaxley!!! It's the fruit they're after and the silly sod's lodged it down her top!!! Get rid of the fruit and they'll stop chasing her! It's as simple as that!

(Flaxley snarled then glanced back at him.)

FLAXLEY: I see. Leave it to me, Bonson!!!

(With that, Flaxley sheathed his blade, put his head down and snarled. Finding extra speed from somewhere, he whizzed past the monkeys then scooped Mandika up.)

MANDIKA: Flaxley???

FLAXLEY: Leave it to me, Mandika!!!

(With that, he about turned and charged back through the monkeys, kicking one of them into a tree as he did so.)

FLAXLEY: As soon as we're in the clear, we'll get that fruit and put an end to this charade once and for all.

(Mandika swooned.)

MANDIKA: My hero!

FLAXLEY: I'm just a man, Mandika. Albeit a great one.

(Finding speed he didn't even know he had, by the time Flaxley raced back to where Kritz and Lefiat had been chasing after them, he'd got a good twenty metre head start on the monkeys. Satisfied it'd be plenty of time to retrieve the fruit and save the day, Flaxley immediately set Mandika down then cast his hand down her top. Suffice to say, having been left out of the loop, Kritz and Lefiat were far from amused.)

KRITZ: Flaxley???

LEFIAT: Hey, they're *my* boobies!!!

(Panicking horribly, Mandika stared at the incoming monkeys and screamed.)

MANDIKA: Hurry, Flaxley!!!

(As Kritz started to seethe, Flaxley felt around inside Mandika's top then beamed victoriously.)

FLAXLEY: Got the bugger.

(With that, he squeezed Mandika's boob, yanked it from the top of her dress then cast her to the forest floor.)

FLAXLEY: Shit!!!

(In some considerable distress, Mandika instantly leapt to her feet and yanked the top of her dress down over her chest.)

MANDIKA: That was my boob, you idiot!!! I should have you arrested!!!

(Just then, the simia fruit dropped to the ground and landed by her foot.)

MANDIKA: Finally!!!

(With that, she booted it as hard as she could, straight towards Lefiat.)

MANDIKA: Thank the stars!!!

(As she quickly pulled her dress back on, burning red with embarrassment, Lefiat caught the fruit and stared at it in amazement.)

LEFIAT: I caught it!!! Cool!

(He was then promptly swamped by the hoard of monkeys.)

LEFIAT: Help!!!

(Happy to take Bonson's word for it that once Mandika had rid herself of the fruit, the monkeys would no longer be a threat, Flaxley ignored Lefiat's screams and drew a sigh of relief.)

FLAXLEY: Thank heavens that's over.

(He nodded firmly.)

FLAXLEY: It didn't quite go how I expected but the main thing is, you're safe now, Mandika!

MANDIKA: I'm not talking to you!!! Rapist!

FLAXLEY: Excuse me? I was trying to save you!

MANDIKA: You threw me across the woods by my boob!!!

LEFIAT: Someone!!!

(As Lefiat continued to suffer, Kritz growled. She had no idea why the monkeys had stopped chasing Mandika and quite frankly she didn't care. Right now, she was furious at Flaxley and nothing else mattered, not even the fact that the monkeys were two feet behind her savaging Lefiat.)

KRITZ: Flaxley, you've got some explaining to do!!!

FLAXLEY: No, I haven't!

MANDIKA: Yes, you bloody well have!!!

(Just then, Derek and Bonson arrived on the scene. Derek's first reaction was to fire magic at the monkeys and save Lefiat. Bonson on the other hand, placed hands on his hips and bent double.)

BONSON: All you had to do was drop the fruit, Mandika. How the hell did you manage to lodge it down your top? I tell you, you've been spending far too long with *that* clumsy halfwit.

(He pointed to where a bruised and battered Lefiat lay dazed upon the ground. At once his brow furrowed. Thanks to Derek pounding the monkeys with magic, Lefiat had

managed to drop the simia fruit before they mauled him to death. Watching the monkeys charge away into the woods with their prized fruit, he growled bitterly at Derek.)

BONSON: What did you do that for, Derek? Those monkeys weren't doing *you* any harm.

DEREK: They were savaging Lefiat!

(Bonson sighed with dejection as the watched last few monkeys disappear from view.)

BONSON: Yes... and then you went and ruined it.

KRITZ: Look, never mind that. Flaxley, explain!!! There's only two boobies you're allowed to grope and you won't find either of them in Mandika's dress!!!

FLAXLEY: I...

(Derek rolled his eyes.)

DEREK: Look, chaps, let's get back on the path, shall we? Then we can take a break and clear the air. There could be all sorts of creatures in these woods and we stand a far better chance of spotting them from the relative clearing of the dirt track.

(Knowing he was right, Flaxley nodded then headed away.)

FLAXLEY: I agree.

KRITZ: Fine, but you'd better explain yourself, Flaxley. And it'd better be good.

(She then growled at Mandika.)

KRITZ: For your sake!

(As soon as they were all back on the path again, Flaxley took a soothing deep breath then attempted to resume their trek. Unfortunately for him, however, Kritz, Mandika, Lefiat and Bonson were having none of it. Kritz and a dazed Lefiat were demanding an explanation for Flaxley's actions and Bonson and Mandika needed a breather. As such, they all sat down and growled at him as he attempted to walk on. Siding with the majority, Derek also sat himself down. Knowing he had no option but to stop or Kritz would make his life hell, Flaxley sighed then paced back towards them. Wearing the pout of a condemned man, he sighed pitifully then sat himself down next to Kritz.)

FLAXLEY: It's all very innocent, my love.

KRITZ: I'll be the judge of that!

FLAXLEY: I had to save Mandika!

KRITZ: By groping her tits and slinging her across the woods???

FLAXLEY: I didn't grope anything!

MANDIKA: You bloody did! Both of them! Several times!!! Pervert.

(She then sneered at Lefiat.)

MANDIKA: Make sure you arrest him when this is over.

(Lefiat whimpered.)

LEFIAT: But...

MANDIKA: No buts! Just do it!

(Flaxley rolled his eyes.)

FLAXLEY: Look, this is bloody ridiculous. I made a mistake. I was feeling around for a soft yet firm, apple size piece of fruit and that's what I thought I'd grabbed.

MANDIKA: Well you hadn't!!!

(Watching them argue, Derek glanced to the treetops and mused out loud.)

DEREK: He wouldn't have made that mistake if it had been Kritz.

(At once, all eyes turned to Derek.)

KRITZ: Excuse me?

MANDIKA: I beg your pardon!

(Realising he'd spoken out loud, Derek glanced between Mandika and Kritz then hung his head.)

DEREK: I don't know.

MANDIKA: Yes, you do! You were being mean about my boobies!!!

DEREK: I wasn't!

MANDIKA: Yes you were!!!

DEREK: No, I was just thinking Flaxley wouldn't have made that mistake with Kritz because her boobs are ten times bigger than the simia fruit. And yours...

(He then hung his head and whimpered.)

DEREK: I'll be quiet!

KRITZ: Yes, you will!!!

(She shook her head angrily.)

KRITZ: The way you lot go on, you'd think I had tits the size of coconuts!

FLAXLEY: You do!

KRITZ: Okay, bad example.

(She rolled her eyes.)

KRITZ: Point is, my boobies are nobody else's business and I'd appreciate it if you left them out of your conversations in future.

(As she glanced around to gauge everyone's reaction to her request, she shuddered with rage.)

KRITZ: My face is up here!!!

(She then snarled at Mandika.)

KRITZ: That lot I can understand, but *you*, Mandika...

MANDIKA: What? I was just thinking if you'd put the bloody things away, where people can't see them, maybe they wouldn't keep getting you so much attention.

BONSON: Shut your face, Mandika, so help me I'll punch you on the nose!

MANDIKA: What???

BONSON: Her boobs are fine as they are!!!

KRITZ: Bonson!!! What did I just say???

(Seeing tempers were starting to boil over, Flaxley shook his head with disdain then spoke up.)

FLAXLEY: Will you lot stop bickering? You're like a bunch of bloody children sometimes.

LEFIAT: Yeah! If anyone should be complaining, it should be me! You all bent over backwards to save Mandika but when *I* got savaged, two feet away from you, you just stood there talking!!!

BONSON: Yes well, we like Mandika.

LEFIAT: Oh, I see. Like that is it?

BONSON: Well no, not really. When I say we *like* Mandika...

MANDIKA: Stop right there, you!!!

(As Bonson chuckled to himself, Flaxley folded his arms and nodded firmly.)

FLAXLEY: Anyway, enough of this nonsense. If you hadn't forgotten, we've got work to do.

KRITZ: I'm going nowhere until you apologise, Flaxley.

MANDIKA: Agreed.

(With that, they shared a fist bump then stared at Flaxley demandingly.)

FLAXLEY: Oh, for fuck's sake. Fine! Mandika, I'm sorry I tried to save your life. And Kritz, I'm sorry your tits are so large I forgot what small ones feel like and mistook Mandika's for a piece of fruit. Happy now?

(Unsurprisingly, they were not.)

MANDIKA: You're sorry you tried to save my life???

KRITZ: What sort of apology was that???

MANDIKA: And my boobies aren't small! They're perfect. Kritz is just a freak!

(Kritz glared at her.)

KRITZ: Fuck you!

MANDIKA: What? I meant it in a nice way!

KRITZ: The hell you did.

MANDIKA: I did!

(As Kritz growled at Mandika, Flaxley snarled then raised his voice.).

FLAXLEY: Look, fine... Mandika, I'm sorry I accidentally grabbed your boob. And Kritz, I'm sorry for whatever it is you want me to apologise for.

KRITZ: Oh, that's *so* sincere. I want you to apologise for groping *her*!

FLAXLEY: I just did!

KRITZ: Apologise to *me*!!!

(Starting to lose his temper, Flaxley slowly closed his eyes then tried to speak in a calm voice.)

FLAXLEY: Fine... my love, I apologise for groping Mandika.

MANDIKA: So you admit it!!!

FLAXLEY: Oh for the love of the gods, will you shut up???

(As Mandika reeled back, Flaxley shook his fist angrily.)

FLAXLEY: I made a mistake, okay? I fumbled for the simia fruit and I thought I'd grabbed it. Simple as that! There was nothing perverted or sinister about it, now will you just let it go??? It was a simple misjudgement and at the end of the day, what does it even bloody matter? Bottom line is, we got rid of the fruit and nobody got hurt!

(Lefiat was livid.)

LEFIAT: Nobody got hurt? Nobody got hurt???

(He gestured angrily to his numerous cuts and bruises.)

LEFIAT: I got savaged by the entire bloody pack!!! Nobody got hurt indeed! Look at me!

BONSON: He meant nobody we care about.

(Losing all his motivation to complain, Lefiat sighed and hung his head.)

LEFIAT: I knew you'd say that. I hate you, Bonson.

BONSON: Don't hate the messenger, Lefiat. I was just saying what everyone else was thinking.

LEFIAT: Bonson, you're just...

FLAXLEY: Stop complaining, Lefiat. You're not injured, so let it go.

LEFIAT: Yeah, thanks to Derek.

(Derek beamed.)

DEREK: You're welcome.

FLAXLEY: Point is, you're *not* injured and all is well, so let's just put what happened behind us.

KRITZ: Fine. Just keep your hands to yourself in future.

MANDIKA: I'll second that. Thanks to you, everyone saw my royal boobies, that's unforgivable.

(In a bid to pacify her, Flaxley offered her a playful smile.)

FLAXLEY: Well, at least now we know they match.

MANDIKA: Hey!!!

FLAXLEY: I'm joking!

MANDIKA: It's not funny, Flaxley! You've humiliated me!!!

FLAXLEY: Oh, for heaven's sake.

(Knowing he had to once again call upon all his know how to restore the morale of his party, he sighed then looked to Mandika.)

FLAXLEY: Look... Mandika, it was an accident. As your former knight I have the utmost respect for you and I apologise for making you feel uncomfortable, okay?

MANDIKA: Well... fine... just don't do it again.

FLAXLEY: Agreed. And Kritz, I can assure you I took no pleasure in holding the breast of another woman. I didn't even know it was one until it was too late. That said, I can see how it might have looked to you, and I apologise for upsetting you.

KRITZ: Well... okay, apology accepted.

FLAXLEY: And what's more, Kritz, Mandika, you both have beautiful hair.

(At once, Mandika and Kritz beamed at him adoringly then gave each other an approving glance. With the ladies pacified, he then looked to Bonson.)

FLAXLEY: You ready to start walking again? You looked a bit tired before?

BONSON: I'll be fine. I'm quite happy straggling behind, Flaxley, it's fine.

FLAXLEY: Top man.

(He then looked to Lefiat.)

FLAXLEY: Keep up the good work, Lefiat.

LEFIAT: What good work?

FLAXLEY: That's the spirit.

(He then looked to Derek and encouraged him to read his mind.)

FLAXLEY'S THOUGHT: I don't need to patronise you too, do I?

(Having read his mind, Derek sent his reply back to Flaxley telepathically.)

DEREK'S THOUGHT: No, no, I'm fine, Flaxley. You've enough to do keeping this neurotic bunch in order without me adding to your workload.

FLAXLEY'S THOUGHT: Thanks, Derek. I appreciate that.

(He then rubbed his hands together and climbed to his feet.)

FLAXLEY: Ready chaps?

(Kritz held her hand up to him and allowed him to pull her up.)

KRITZ: Ready.

(At once, the others clambered to their feet then looked to Flaxley.)

BONSON: Of you go then. You lead, I'll bring up the rear.

LEFIAT: Yeah, I bet you will.

BONSON: Excuse me?

FLAXLEY: Ignore him, Bonson.

BONSON: Gladly.

FLAXLEY: Just don't fall *too* far behind, old chap.

BONSON: Don't worry about me, Flaxley. I'll be fine.

FLAXLEY: Right. Let's go then.

(And with that, their uphill trek resumed once again. Flaxley led the way and once again, Bonson fell back almost as if his legs weren't up to the task. Fearing for his aging friend's health, this troubled Flaxley greatly.)

(As the party soldiered forth against the ever increasing gradient, Flaxley kept checking behind himself to see if Bonson was still keeping up. Surprisingly, even a good thirty minutes later, despite what had been a tiring climb, even for those with much younger legs, Bonson looked focussed and had managed to maintain a reasonably constant distance between himself and the others. Flaxley was certain that he would fall too far back eventually but every time he glanced back, Bonson was still there, pacing forth with a determined glint in his eye.

It had been a bizarre thirty minutes for Lefiat. Although he couldn't stand Bonson, the sight of the old man pacing forth at the back on his own made him feel somewhat uneasy. He wasn't about to join him, however, as Bonson had a tendency to tell him exactly how he felt about him. Their disdain for one another was very much a mutual affair. Despite his hatred of the grumpy former butler, however, Lefiat actually felt quite relieved when Mandika dropped back to keep him company. Glad somebody had done the decent thing, he gave a sigh of relief and looked to Flaxley.)

LEFIAT: It's okay, Mandika's walking with Bonson now.

(Flaxley looked back over his shoulder.)

FLAXLEY: So I see. Best keep an eye on that actually, this is bandit country after all.

KRITZ: She'll be fine.

(As he faced front again, Flaxley nodded to himself, his face bearing an impressed expression.)

FLAXLEY: You know, Bonson's quite a miracle really. Those old legs of his have carried him miles.

(Kritz nodded.)

KRITZ: They have.

FLAXLEY: Through ice, rocky plateaus, forests... a lot of younger men wouldn't have made it.

DEREK: You think it's the thrall that's made that possible?

FLAXLEY: I don't know. Possibly.

LEFIAT: I'm a bit worried about this thrall thing actually. What if they lift it and none of us like what we become?

(Everyone looked to him wearing shocked expressions.)

LEFIAT: What?

(He hung his head.)

LEFIAT: Did I mess up again?

FLAXLEY: No, I just never expected to hear you say anything so profound.

KRITZ: Yeah, 'cause not liking what we become is actually a real possibility. I mean anything could happen. I might turn out to be a right stropky mare!

(Much to her annoyance, they all gave her a disbelieving glance.)

KRITZ: Hey! I'm not that bad!

FLAXLEY: Yes dear!

(She sighed.)

KRITZ: I'm serious. Anything could happen. I mean, what if I'm suddenly a bad mum or you suddenly become a quivering coward, Flaxley?

(Flaxley scoffed.)

FLAXLEY: Darling, I can assure you *that* will never happen.

(Kritz gave him a loving smile.)

FLAXLEY: I mean, come on; me? A coward???

KRITZ: Hey!

FLAXLEY: What?

(He looked enlightened.)

FLAXLEY: Oh!!! What? God no. You'd never be a bad mother. That's why I didn't mention it, I never even considered it for a moment.

(She gave him a distrusting glance.)

KRITZ: You're lucky I'm saving my energy for the climb or I'd be clobbering you right about now.

DEREK: Well you'd be right to conserve your energy Kritz, unless I'm mistaken this is getting steeper and steeper by the minute.

(Derek was spot on in his assessment. The grass beneath their feet was becoming increasingly stony as the mountain pushed up through the earth. Any time now they'd be walking on rock rather than pasture. Pretty soon what had started as an uphill walk would become a climb.)

(As they marched onwards, they passed through the cover of the trees and out into a rocky uphill plain. The castle they'd left behind earlier in the day was now clearly visible over the treetops behind them, as were sections of the river they'd crossed. The view was quite breath-taking. Bonson, however, couldn't have cared less about the view behind them. Without the umbrella of the trees to keep him cool, he started to sweat and every step required extra effort. Somehow, however, he managed to keep going with a determined look on his face.)

MANDIKA: Wow, Bonson, you look knackered!

(He offered no reply.)

MANDIKA: I said "Wow, Bonson, you..."

(Looking extremely peeved, he interrupted her angrily.)

BONSON: I heard you the first time, damn it!

MANDIKA: Alright, alright.

BONSON: Sorry, I'm trying to keep a clear head and all your waffling isn't helping.

MANDIKA: Okay, okay.

(She smiled as she watched him pace purposefully onwards with his eyes fixed straight ahead.)

MANDIKA: Impressive.

BONSON: Thank you.

(She then glanced ahead to where the others were marching forth.)

MANDIKA: You know, it's kind of like we're downstairs and those guys are on the balcony or something.

(Remaining focussed on looking where he was going, Bonson frowned.)

BONSON: What the hell are you on about?

MANDIKA: Flaxley, Kritz, Derek and Lefiat.

BONSON: What about them?

MANDIKA: They're up there and we're down here.

BONSON: Are you really saying these words or are my ears translating them into meaningless drivel?

(Mandika pouted.)

MANDIKA: I'm just making conversation.

BONSON: That's what passes for conversation with you is it? Remind me never to come to dinner!

(Mandika folded her arms.)

MANDIKA: Like I'd ever invite you!

BONSON: Touché. Now shut up, I'm trying to focus.

(Mandika shrugged.)

MANDIKA: It is steep though, isn't it? I mean they kind of look like they're at the top of the stairs and we're...

(Unable to hold it in any longer, Bonson snapped and glared at her.)

BONSON: Oh for fuck sake, Mandika. I know it must be a shock to your system to actually be looking up at people rather than down on them, but can you just put a bloody sock it???

(Seething, he turned to face where he was going as Mandika's bottom lip drooped.)

MANDIKA: That's mean! I only said it was steep.

BONSON: Like it needed saying.

MANDIKA: Well pardon me for being nice to you.

(Staring ahead, he sighed to himself.)

BONSON: Fine, I apologise for snapping at you but please, Mandika, I get it. They're up there and we're down here. You don't have to point out to me that it looks like they're at a higher level 'cause they *are* at a higher level.

MANDIKA: Okay... but they do look funny from this angle.

(At this point, Bonson's nose started to twitch.)

BONSON: You know, you'll be seeing *me* from a similar angle in a minute when I throw you back down the mountain!!!

(At first Mandika looked angry but within moments a smile enveloped her brow.)

MANDIKA: You wouldn't do that to me!

BONSON: Oh no?

MANDIKA: Nope. You'd never admit it but you love me. Don't you?

BONSON: Right now, Mandika, I wouldn't give a toss if a tree fell on you.

(Mandika pouted. Spotting this, Bonson sighed and gave her a consoling smile.)

BONSON: I'm sorry, that was a lie. I'd probably buy the lumberjack a drink!

MANDIKA: You're mean.

BONSON: Maybe so, but at least I respect you too much to lie.

MANDIKA: Yeah, right, thanks!

BONSON: Now if you don't mind, I need to concentrate on where I'm walking. Be quiet

and let me focus.

MANDIKA: Fine.

(She then bit her lip and sighed.)

MANDIKA: Look, this is silly. Why don't we catch the others up then we can all walk together.

BONSON: No, thank you.

MANDIKA: Why not?

(He looked shifty and answered in an unconvincing mumble.)

BONSON: Because... I feel I can protect everyone better from... back...

(He sighed.)

BONSON: So much for not lying to you. Look, you catch them up if you want. I'd prefer to bring up the rear.

(Remembering the earlier revelation about Bonson's secret, Mandika chuckled.)

MANDIKA: Bring up the rear... priceless.

BONSON: What?

(She pulled a dead straight face.)

MANDIKA: Nothing!

BONSON: Weirdo.

(Satisfied she'd got away with it, she then fell silent and continued on at Bonson's side. All the while, Bonson stared forth, determined to maintain his focus and not lose any ground.

Up ahead at this time, Flaxley checked over his shoulder once more and raised an impressed eyebrow. He'd had a horrible feeling that Bonson's old legs would slow them all down but the old man's stamina had been quite stunning to this point.)

FLAXLEY: Bonson's still the same distance behind us. Incredible.

(Derek chuckled to himself.)

DEREK: Indeed.

FLAXLEY: What's so funny?

DEREK: Nothing. I agree, Bonson is quite special.

KRITZ: I just worry how he's going to cope should we come across anything so steep we have to literally climb.

LEFIAT: Yeah, like a mountain!

(He received the mandatory sideways glances.)

LEFIAT: You know what I mean.

KRITZ: We do?

LEFIAT: I mean... more mountain like... like a cliff or something.

(They all looked enlightened.)

FLAXLEY: If that happens then we'll do what we always do. We'll find a way.

(Kritz gave Lefiat a sympathetic glance.)

KRITZ: If we come to a cliff, it's not Bonson you're worried about, is it, Lefiat?

(Lefiat sighed.)

LEFIAT: You know climbing a cliff won't go well for me, that sort of thing never does.

KRITZ: Not even if Mandika promises you a kiss?

(Everyone looked to her, curious as to what she was suggesting.)

LEFIAT: What are you on about?

KRITZ: Well, if Flaxley was to carry Mandika up the cliff face first...

LEFIAT: Yeah?

KRITZ: Surely the promise of a kiss from your true love will be all the inspiration you need to climb up after her.

(Flaxley spanned his forehead.)

FLAXLEY: Good grief! Did you actually say that?

(Kritz glared at him.)

KRITZ: Excuse me?

FLAXLEY: What a complete pile of milk curdling twaddle.

LEFIAT: Yeah, I mean come off it, Kritz. That was lame.

(Looking most put out, Kritz pouted bitterly.)

KRITZ: It was romantic!

FLAXLEY: It was fairy-tale nonsense, more like. A kiss from his true love?

KRITZ: And?

FLAXLEY: You can be such a girl sometimes!

(She scowled his way.)

KRITZ: I *am* a girl! All the time!

FLAXLEY: You're a woman!

KRITZ: And a pail is a bucket!

(She lost Flaxley entirely at this point.)

FLAXLEY: Eh?

KRITZ: I mean same thing, different word.

(He looked enlightened but unimpressed.)

FLAXLEY: Right. They're not the same thing at all though, are they? You're an adult. A *woman* not a girl.

KRITZ: Oh shut up.

FLAXLEY: Sorry, Kritz, but that kind of childish, girly nonsense is the last thing I expected to hear *you* say.

(She shrugged.)

KRITZ: Well get used to it. I'm not the detached, overly aggressive person I used to be and you said you liked that. Only last week you pointed out that I've become more feminine and you said you loved it.

FLAXLEY: I do but...

KRITZ: Then allow me my girly moments now and again for fuck sake.

(She snarled.)

KRITZ: Honestly, sometimes I just wanna kick you in the face.

(Flaxley grinned.)

FLAXLEY: There you go. That's more like the woman I fell in love with.

KRITZ: Oh, stop it.

(As Flaxley and Kritz shared a cheeky smile, Lefiat sighed and shook his head.)

LEFIAT: The promise of a kiss wouldn't work anyway, Kritz. I'd be so focussed on the kiss I'd probably forget to look where I'm climbing.

(They all nodded.)

FLAXLEY: That's true. You're quite the buffoon.

LEFIAT: I know. I can't do anything right.

(He sighed.)

LEFIAT: I do try to improve myself but physical tasks always get away from me. I practice every day in the castle but something always goes wrong and I end up in the infirmary.

DEREK: Then make mental notes of where you're going wrong and make sure you don't make the same mistake twice.

LEFIAT: I would if I could, but I can never remember my mistakes.

FLAXLEY: Well, no. Concussion is a terrible thing.

LEFIAT: It's the worst.

(Derek shrugged.)

DEREK: Don't worry, Lefiat. If we come across a cliff, we'll think of something. Like Flaxley says, we've always found a way to get round these problems. And we've had far worse dilemmas than cliffs to overcome.

LEFIAT: I guess so.

(Just then a playful grin washed over his face.)

LEFIAT: Kritz's idea might help Bonson climb a cliff though. If Flaxley and I climbed up first and stuck our arses over the ridge he'd be up in no time.

(As Flaxley and Kritz tried to hide their laughter at a joke so cruel they ought to know better, Derek read their minds and looked baffled.)

DEREK: Eh? Bonson isn't gay!

FLAXLEY: What?

DEREK: You all think Bonson's gay?

KRITZ: Well... he is, isn't he?

DEREK: No! Far from it.

(Kritz was sceptical.)

KRITZ: You're covering for him again!

DEREK: No, I'm not.

FLAXLEY: Derek?

DEREK: I swear!

LEFIAT: Um, guys?

(Unfortunately for Lefiat, they were too engrossed in Derek to acknowledge him.)

LEFIAT: Look!

KRITZ: But, Derek, you said he didn't want to see me and Mandika kiss 'cause of his secret.

FLAXLEY: Yeah, and the only explanation for that is that he's a poofa!

LEFIAT: Um, you lot?

DEREK: Well, I can assure you he isn't gay. Trust me.

LEFIAT: It's important.

FLAXLEY: Pipe down, Lefiat! Derek, I think you're covering for him.

KRITZ: So do I.

DEREK: Really? Then explain this. If he's gay how come he's only managed to keep up 'cause he's been staring up your skirt for the last mile and a half, Kritz?

(Kritz looked highly alarmed.)

KRITZ: What???

FLAXLEY: The bastard!

DEREK: In his defence that's a very short skirt and you're not wearing any underwear. And yes, from down there he can see right up it.

KRITZ: You mean?

DEREK: Yup. He's been following your beaver like a donkey follows a carrot.

(Looking violated Kritz swiftly reached behind herself and grabbed the back of her skirt, obscuring it from Bonson's view. As soon as she did so, sure enough, Bonson slowed to a halt then collapsed to the ground from exhaustion.)

DEREK: His stamina doesn't seem so impressive now does it?

(Flaxley frowned.)

FLAXLEY: Never mind that, we'd better see if he's okay.

(At once they all rushed back to assist the tired old man. As he sat slumped in Mandika's arms he cut quite a pitiful sight.)

BONSON: Unhand me, woman. I can't even slump to the ground without you interfering!

(Flaxley watched on and rubbed his chin.)

FLAXLEY: Better give him some water and take another break I think. We've still a way to go.

LEFIAT: Yeah. And there's a cliff right in front of us.

(Looking horrified they all stared at the route ahead and sure enough there was a forty foot high rocky cliff to contend with just at the end of the pathway. It brought forth a simultaneous groan.)

LEFIAT: I tried to tell you but you wouldn't listen.

(Flaxley nodded to acknowledge Lefiat's words.)

FLAXLEY: You're right. If we'd only listened to you that cliff wouldn't have been there.

LEFIAT: Eh?

FLAXLEY: A cliff is a cliff Lefiat. We'll take a break and then tackle it head on. Agreed?

(His suggestion was agreed with unanimously albeit with little enthusiasm.)

KRITZ: Fine.

MANDIKA: Whatever.

BONSON: I suppose. Now where's this water you promised me?

(As his comrades took a well-earned breather and admired the view below, Flaxley's brain went into overdrive. He had no time to watch the birds circle the trees way down below or take in the wondrous sight of a small, natural ford as several horses raced through it. The magnificent view meant nothing. Flaxley's only concern was how to get an exhausted old man, a lazy royal and a hapless halfwit up a sheer cliff face. Having failed to bring any rope he knew it would be a dangerous undertaking and was unsure about the wisdom of them even risking it.

Looking uncertain, he slowly approached the cliff face and looked up above it at the peak of the mountain. It was still quite some distance away and there was quite a high chance that this wouldn't be the only cliff. Considering the lack of options in his head, he nodded to himself then approached the others as they sat or lazed on the ground admiring the spectacular sight before them.)

FLAXLEY: Everyone listen up.

(Slowly they all turned their necks or pivoted to look his way.)

FLAXLEY: If we ascend this cliff successfully, you know there's every chance that there'll just be another cliff beyond it. They may even be several. We're not exactly prepared for this. We didn't even bring rope.

(Just then a sheepish looking Derek raised his hand.)

DEREK: I have a rope!

(He glared at Bonson defying him to say anything.)

BONSON: What?

(Bonson then chuckled to himself, recalling the moment he caught Derek skipping and hailing himself as the world champion elect with full commentary.)

BONSON: You think I'm surprised you have a rope? You are the world skipping champion.

(Derek snarled at him.)

BONSON: Don't be angry, Derek. It was a great moment, the crowd went crazy if I recall.

DEREK: Shove it, Bonson.

FLAXLEY: That rope might help actually. I was *going* to suggest that Derek and I go on alone from here.

(Everyone glared at him.)

MANDIKA: And leave us here?

LEFIAT: You can't do that!

BONSON: Damn right. I don't want to get attacked with only Lefiat to protect me.

LEFIAT: Nor do I!

(Making sure to pull her skirt tight to herself to protect her modesty from Bonson's eagle eyes, Kritz climbed to her feet.)

KRITZ: Flaxley has a point. It might get too much for some of you. And you won't just have Lefiat to protect you, *I'll* be here.

(Bonson shook his head.)

BONSON: Too much for us? I completed an assault course once with several sabre-toothed monsters chasing me... okay, so I had a heart attack half way through it, but I made it. I'm not going to be defeated by a lousy cliff.

MANDIKA: Yeah, we've always found a way to do these things together, why change now?

LEFIAT: She's right. It's been hell at times but we've also done things as a five...

MANDIKA: Six!

LEFIAT: Yeah!

MANDIKA: Besides, if what Daman says is true, this will be the last time. So, it's only fitting that we're all in it together to the end.

(Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: I see what you're saying but think about it. Once the mission is complete we'll all be free of the thrall. Does it really *matter* who's there at the end?

BONSON: It does to me.

MANDIKA: Me too!

BONSON: And if you're worried I'll be a burden, don't be. Just let me die up there if I get in the way. I'm not staying here.

MANDIKA: Nor am I.

LEFIAT: I go where Mandika goes.

(Bonson raised an inquisitive eyebrow.)

BONSON: You do, don't you?

LEFIAT: Yeah, she says I'm too dangerous to be left on my own.

BONSON: I see.

(He nodded.)

BONSON: And anyway, you can quite clearly see there's trees up there, Flaxley. If you're going to abandon me *anywhere*, you can leave me relaxing under one of those.

MANDIKA: That's a good point actually. All this sunlight is bad for my delicate skin. I want to go where there's some shade.

(Bonson nodded sternly.)

BONSON: Then it's decided. No more procrastinating. We've got a cliff to climb. I don't quite know how but let's do it anyway.

(Derek gave Bonson a cold stare, determined to retaliate for the skipping rope comment.)

DEREK: You should be fine anyway, Bonson. If Kritz climbs up first, you can just follow her flange like a hypnotic lure again.

KRITZ: Hey!!!

FLAXLEY: Yeah, hey!

BONSON: You twisted alien, you.

KRITZ: From now on my minge is *also* off the list of things for discussions, okay?

(Flaxley looked most disappointed.)

KRITZ: Not you, darling!

FLAXLEY: Ah, excellent.

DEREK: Fine. Well, if we're doing this, let's go!

FLAXLEY: Absolutely.

(With that, they all rose to their feet and headed for the cliff at the end of the rocky path. Upon arriving before it a few moments later, it seemed everyone shared the same initial thought.)

FLAXLEY: Bloody hell!

BONSON: Fuck me!

KRITZ: Shit!

(Needless to say it was extremely sheer and made quite an intimidating sight.)

LEFIAT: Um... where do we even start?

(Derek nodded.)

DEREK: We start with me.

(Looking entirely unfazed by the vertical obstacle, Derek rushed up to it and started to scale it with consummate ease. Leramites were exceptional climbers and this was never going to be a challenge. As Derek eased himself over the top only moments later, Flaxley rubbed his hands together and looked to his comrades.)

FLAXLEY: Who's next?

(There was a cold silence as everyone looked to someone else to volunteer.)

FLAXLEY: Well?

BONSON: I'm still psyching myself up.

LEFIAT: I'm still shitting myself.

(Kritz rolled her eyes.)

KRITZ: I'll go.

(Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: Be careful, my love.

KRITZ: I'll be okay.

(With that she approached the cliff looking determined and swung her foot onto a protruding rock. Seconds later she lowered it again.)

KRITZ: Did you bring any spare knickers, Mandika?

(Mandika shrugged.)

MANDIKA: I was too busy being brought here against my will to pack any.

KRITZ: Good point!

(She glared at Bonson.)

KRITZ: Face the other way!

(Bonson frowned.)

BONSON: Oh come of it, I've seen your biff a million times, Kritz. You might as well take the skirt off in fact, it's not like you're hiding anything new up there.

KRITZ: Yeah, you'd like that, wouldn't you?

(Bonson beamed.)

BONSON: More than ale itself. And besides, it's not like you to be shy about people seeing it.

KRITZ: That doesn't mean I want to encourage a creepy old git like you to stare at it!

BONSON: Well, tough. I'm a man and men have perverted needs.

(At this point, Flaxley's shadow enveloped him.)

BONSON: Uh oh.

FLAXLEY: Climb, Kritz. He won't be looking up your skirt.

(Unsurprisingly, Bonson felt compelled to do Kritz the courtesy of looking away at this point, such was the weight of Flaxley's stare and the daunting size of his shadow.)

FLAXLEY: That's better.

(As a trained warrior and naturally well-toned woman, Kritz managed to climb the cliff quite comfortably. Flaxley was also likely to scale it without a problem. The same, however, couldn't be said of Mandika, Lefiat and Bonson.)

FLAXLEY: Right. Now we need to get you lot up there.

(As one, they all looked to the top of cliff where Kritz was staring back down at them.)

LEFIAT: I'm gonna die, aren't I?

BONSON: With any luck.

MANDIKA: We're *all* gonna die. It's like... vertical!

(As the three of them stood there looking tortured, Flaxley turned his back on the cliff and stepped before them like a drill sergeant about to dress his troops. Hoping he could find the words of inspiration they needed to face the task in hand, he stood tall and placed his hands proudly upon his hips.)

FLAXLEY: Lefiat... Bonson... Mandika...

LEFIAT: Yeah?

MANDIKA: What?

BONSON: What is it, Flaxley?

FLAXLEY: You may *think* you're weak. You may *think* you're incapable. The truth is, you're *not*. This kind of thing owes as much to the mind as it does the body.

(They watched as he started to pace up and down.)

FLAXLEY: If you *think* you can, then you can. A task like this, in fact life itself

becomes a lot easier if you just have self-belief. Take *me* for example, if I was a negative thinker then I wouldn't have become the man amongst men that I am today; and Kritz wouldn't have taken a second glance at me. I'd probably be sitting at home alone right now, twiddling my thumbs, and she'd be dating some twat from Wendigo or somewhere.

LEFIAT: Anyone we know?

BONSON: Not literally, Lefiat!

LEFIAT: What? I'm confused.

FLAXLEY: I'm just saying. You have to believe. If I didn't believe in myself, then I too would have failed. Believe and you can achieve anything, knighthood, the woman of your dreams, anything.

LEFIAT: So who's the twat from Wendigo? I don't get it.

BONSON: That was a throw away example, just let it go, you tit.

(Trying to overcome his temptation to strangle Lefiat, Flaxley stopped pacing and faced them again.)

FLAXLEY: I need you to trust in yourselves. Trust that you have what it takes and you'll be amazed at what you can achieve.

(Just then, a rope ladder dropped to the ground behind Flaxley, throw down to them by Kritz from the cliff top above. Oblivious to it, Flaxley continued his speech.)

FLAXLEY: Let your mind be focussed, I want to hear you tell me you can do this!

(Having seen the ladder, they all beamed.)

LEFIAT: Yeah, we can.

MANDIKA: Easy!

BONSON: We'll do it now if you like!

(Flaxley was not amused.)

FLAXLEY: Don't patronise me! I'm being serious here. You *can* if you believe.

LEFIAT: Yeah we know.

MANDIKA: We believe!

BONSON: The only thing stopping us is you, you're in the way.

(Looking fed up to the back teeth, Flaxley cast his hands in the air.)

FLAXLEY: Sod you then! I tried to help and that's how you react. Patronising me like I'm an idiot!

(With that, he barged through them and started to pace away, angrily making his feelings known.)

FLAXLEY: I didn't become a knight without knowing what I'm talking about and yet you treat me with such contempt...

(Watching him pace away, Mandika shrugged.)

MANDIKA: I aint gonna stand here and be lectured, let's go.

(Agreeing with her sentiments entirely, Lefiat and Bonson both nodded sternly then headed for the rope ladder. Mandika was first to climb up, followed by Lefiat then Bonson brought up the rear. As Kritz helped him from the top rung onto the cliff top, he stood up and looked down at Flaxley still pacing and complaining below. Watching him as he continued to lecture them with no idea they'd gone, Bonson's face lit up.)

BONSON: Sorry chaps, protest all you like, it just has to be done.

(With that, he started to pull the ladder up, much to the amusement of the others. Once it was out of sight, he then yelled down to the pacing Flaxley.)

FLAXLEY: For years I worked to overcome my fears, so I'd be ready for situations like

these. Now cliffs pose no problem. Why? Because I believed. And yet, the three of you stand there coldly refusing to try. It saddens me to see...

(Just then, Bonson's voice echoed from above.)

BONSON: Well look what happened??? We believed, Flaxley!

(As the words filtered down to him, Flaxley spun around to see where the sound had come from. Spying Bonson, Mandika and Lefiat atop the cliff, he could hardly believe his eyes.)

FLAXLEY: Bonson?

(Still struggling to believe it, he then performed a double take.)

FLAXLEY: Lefiat? Mandika?

(For several moments he stood gaping in amazement but a smile soon crossed his brow.

Looking extremely proud he nodded to himself triumphantly.)

FLAXLEY: Is there nothing I can't do?

(Convinced that his motivation skills had won the day, he then swaggered up to the cliff and started his climb. He'd only made a few feet however when he thought of something.)

FLAXLEY: Hold on... how did they get up there so quickly???

(Just then, the rope ladder unfurled right next him accompanied by howls of laughter from above.)

FLAXLEY: Bastards!

(Upon climbing to the top of the cliff, Flaxley scrambled to his feet then stood tall in an attempt to defy anyone to laugh. It proved to be a futile gesture. Finding their prank highly amusing they were all in fits of laughter. With a shake of the head, he placed his hands on his hips and sighed ruefully.)

FLAXLEY: Why must I work with such amateurs?

(Determined not rise to their mocking, he then looked about himself to see where they had to go next. The cliff top they were standing on encircled the mountain like a natural pathway. The choice therefore was to go left or right and hope the path led all the way to the top of the mountain.)

FLAXLEY: I say we go... right.

(Having made his choice, he then immediately started to head right along the cliff top path. He wasn't about to waste time waiting for his comrades to stop laughing at him before heading off, that was for certain.)

FLAXLEY: You stand there and cackle like immature witches if you have to. I'm off. Personally, I want to complete this mission.

(Wearing a wide smile left over from her laughter, Kritz nodded.)

KRITZ: Yeah, come on guys, we've got work to do.

(Heartened by the moment, the others all agreed and quickly followed on.)

BONSON: Chin up, Flaxley. You have to admit it was bloody funny.

(Flaxley spun around and glared at him.)

FLAXLEY: I do, do I?

(A smile then broke onto his face and he laughed out loud.)

BONSON: See?

(Flaxley shook his head.)

FLAXLEY: I'm not laughing at *that*.

(He pointed to behind Bonson.)

FLAXLEY: I'm laughing at *that*!

(Everyone turned around and saw a goat wearing a tartan bobble hat, frolicking on the cliff edge. It caused much levity plus a heart rendered "aw" from Kritz and Mandika.)

MANDIKA: I want one.

KRITZ: Me too!

(Flaxley wagged his finger at her and grinned.)

FLAXLEY: Think again, Kritz. We have two kids already.

(He then received several icy stares.)

FLAXLEY: Fine. Like that, is it? You lot play a childish prank and it's all guffaws and giggles. I tell a proper joke and all I get is scorn!

BONSON: It was a rubbish joke, Flaxley. It merely got the contempt it deserved.

FLAXLEY: Well that's bloody nice, isn't it?

(Kritz took his arm and beamed lovingly.)

KRITZ: Don't be angry, my love. Look at the goat again.

FLAXLEY: Why would...

(He then glanced at the goat and started to laugh.)

FLAXLEY: Yeah, okay. Staying angry is impossible while there's a goat in a bobble hat staring back at you.

(With a smile, Derek rubbed his hands together then looked to his allies.)

DEREK: Guys, as cute and amusing as that is, let's get going. I want to get this over and done with.

(Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: Agreed.

BONSON: Yes, let's go!

(Much to his surprise, not everyone agreed. Lefiat wanted to go, as did Flaxley. Kritz and Mandika were also keen and it was Derek's idea. Bizarrely, it was the goat who objected.)

GOAT: Not so fast!!!

(Just then, goats appeared from all directions. From out of nowhere they just appeared on the path all around them. Several more then appeared on the almost vertical cliff above and two even climbed from the cliff below. Having surrounded the six bamboozled travellers, they all then stood up on their hind legs, some even standing akimbo. The allies were utterly dumbfounded. These were essentially goats with human limbs and they were all wielding massive swords.)

BONSON: I *am* sober, aren't I?

(He rubbed his eyes.)

BONSON: Flaxley, you won't believe the hallucination I'm having! I'd better sit down.

(Flaxley too had to squint to make sure his eyes didn't deceive him.)

FLAXLEY: No, no, Bonson, I see it too!

(With his allies all dumbstruck, Flaxley knew he'd have to be the one to engage them.

Showing no fear, he took a step forward.)

FLAXLEY: Who are you and what do you want?

(At this point, the biggest one stepped forward.)

GOATLEY: I am Sir Goatley and we are the fabled goat-men of Takiyama. We are

sworn by the elders to protect this mountain. You shall go no further.

(Flaxley's mouth fell open.)

GOATLEY: You have nothing to say?

FLAXLEY: I'm talking to a goat!

(He shook his head.)

FLAXLEY: I'm not going to take orders from a glorified sheep!

(Goatley was incensed.)

GOATLEY: Sheep? Sheep? I'll have you know we are a proud bovid, a caprine marvel.

The elders themselves devised and cultivated our species using scientific methods you couldn't even begin to conceive of!

(Derek stepped forward.)

DEREK: Actually genetic modification is old hat on my planet.

(Goatley rubbed his chin and nodded.)

GOATLEY: So then you know!

FLAXLEY: Genetic modification, Derek?

DEREK: Yeah, it basically means altering a species with a view to improving it.

FLAXLEY: I see!

(He looked at Goatley and frowned.)

FLAXLEY: And goats were the best they could come up with?

GOATLEY: Like I told you, we're no ordinary goats and you shall go no further.

(Flaxley snarled.)

FLAXLEY: And I told you, I won't be taking orders from a sheep!

(Goatley snarled.)

GOATLEY: Very well, then you shall meet your match and die!

(With that, five more goats stepped aside him. One looked extremely old and another was half the size of the others and green.)

FLAXLEY: What's this?

GOATLEY: We are your goat equivalent.

(He gestured along the line.)

GOATLEY: I am Sir Goatley, this is Lefigoat, the old fellow is Goatson, there's Goatika, the green chap is Goatrek and the lady at the end is called Goat.

FLAXLEY: Named after us?

(Kritz shook her head.)

KRITZ: Not after me!

GOATLEY: Actually, Goat is short for Goatzeveltia!

(Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: In that case, Bonson, you'd better give Kritz a good seeing to. Go on; make sweet love to her like only you can.

KRITZ: Yes, take me!!!

(Just then several naked women charged around the corner and raced towards Bonson, calling for him to take them too.)

BONSON: Excellent!

(Just then, Bonson's whole world seemed to go out of focus for a few seconds and when his vision returned to normal, the first thing he saw was his five comrades staring down at him from above, looking deeply concerned.)

BONSON: Eh?

(Laying flat on his back, he whimpered then sat up looking mortified.)

BONSON: Where'd they go?

FLAXLEY: Who?

BONSON: The naked women, that's who!

(A realisation then hit him.)

BONSON: It was a dream?

FLAXLEY: You were unconscious!

(As they helped him to his feet, he sighed to himself.)

BONSON: Might have known it was too good to be true. What happened anyway?

MANDIKA: A goat fell on you!

(He gave her a sideways glance.)

BONSON: A goat fell on me?

(She pointed to the ridge above them.)

MANDIKA: Must have fallen off of there.

(With that, she stepped up close to him and gave him a warm hug.)

MANDIKA: I was really worried.

BONSON: Steady on.

KRITZ: Oh relax, Bonson! She thought you were dead.

BONSON: Hoped more like.

LEFIAT: No, she was genuinely concerned.

(Bonson beamed.)

BONSON: Well, that's understandable, I suppose. Where would you all be without me, after all?

(Flaxley frowned.)

FLAXLEY: Further up the mountain. We had to wait for you to come round. Now are we going or aren't we?

BONSON: Yes, and thanks for caring, Flaxley.

FLAXLEY: You're welcome, now come on.

(Just then, a goat crashed to the ground before them, forcing them all to look upwards.)

MANDIKA: Maybe we should hurry before another one falls off!

FLAXLEY: Definitely. Look lively, chaps!

(With that, they all rushed away up the mountain path. Much to Flaxley's delight, the path did indeed head upwards as he'd hoped. Better still, it was perfectly flat, almost as if it had been purpose built as a road. The allies didn't take any time to marvel at this good fortune however, as they had one eye on the cliff top above them for falling mountain goats.

Being ever alert to every danger, as they raced forth, Flaxley was quick to remind his allies of a very important point.)

FLAXLEY: Don't be so focussed on the cliff above that you run straight off this one, chaps!!!

LEFIAT: Like we'd be that Stupid, F...

(He then let out a tremendous scream as he plummeted over the cliff edge.)

MANDIKA: Lefiat!!!

(As everyone stopped and gaped in horror, Lefiat peered back over the cliff edge at them.)

LEFIAT: There's a ledge.

(Snarling furiously, Flaxley swiftly paced over to the cliff edge then dragged Lefiat back up.)

FLAXLEY: You pillock!!!

MANDIKA: You could have died!

LEFIAT: Hardly! It was a four foot drop!

MANDIKA: You didn't know there was a ledge there!!!

(Bonson rolled his eyes then looked to the heavens.)

BONSON: Why do you tease me so? Just when I think you've answered my prayers, you slap me in the face every time.

(As Bonson cursed his luck, Flaxley snarled at Lefiat, forcing him to shrink and tremble all over.)

FLAXLEY: I've had enough of your tomfoolery, Lefiat. You can't do anything right.

LEFIAT: Yeah, but...

FLAXLEY: But nothing!!! Now you have a choice, you can either hold my tunic as we run or let me carry you. And if I have to carry you, I won't be careful when I put you down!!!

(Lefiat whimpered.)

LEFIAT: I'll hold your tunic then.

MANDIKA: Flaxley, you can't humiliate him like that!

FLAXLEY: Would you rather he fell to his death?

BONSON: Actually...

FLAXLEY: I was talking to Mandika!

BONSON: Fine.

MANDIKA: Well, okay. I guess it makes sense.

FLAXLEY: Right, now let's go before one of us gets flattened by an out of control goat.

(And with that, they raced away again, Lefiat burning red with the humiliation of having to hold Flaxley's tunic as he ran.)

(After a good five minutes of running up the increasingly steep yet smooth path, Flaxley glanced up at the cliff to his side and mused to himself. The cliff was by now vertical and with the exception of the peak, there was nowhere left for any goats to fall from. Satisfied that their goat related worries were therefore behind them, he then called everyone to a halt.

Utterly exhausted they all slowed to a stop and bent to catch their breath.)

FLAXLEY: It seems to be clear now. We can walk.

MANDIKA: Are you sure?

FLAXLEY: Well, put it this way. Goats might lack in sure-footedness when they're on the slopes but I doubt they'd be stupid enough just to fall off the peak. We'll be fine.

MANDIKA: Right... cool. Walking it is then.

BONSON: I can't say I'm sad about that.

FLAXLEY: You can let go of my tunic now, Lefiat!

(Struggling to pull his hand back, Lefiat grimaced.)

LEFIAT: I can't, my finger's stuck in your chain mail!

FLAXLEY: What?

(Sure enough, he'd somehow jammed his finger in between the links of Flaxley's metallic undershirt and it wouldn't budge.)

FLAXLEY: You were supposed to hold my tunic!

LEFIAT: I tried to but the wind blew and your tunic flew up... so I missed. I got your chain mail instead.

(Flaxley just glared straight through him.)

FLAXLEY: You reached for my tunic... and missed? We were both standing perfectly still and you reached for my tunic...and missed!

LEFIAT: Yeah, but... the wind! It blew...

(He then hung his head and sighed.)

LEFIAT: And it all went downhill from there, really.

FLAXLEY: Right.

(He nodded sternly.)

FLAXLEY: Then there's only one thing we can do. If you're finger's stuck, we'll have to chop it off!

(As Lefiat panicked and frantically attempted to yank his hand away, screaming like a crazy man, Flaxley stood perfectly still and frowned.)

FLAXLEY: I was joking, you tit!

(He rolled his eyes then looked to Kritz.)

FLAXLEY: Give me a hand here, my love.

(Kritz rolled her eyes.)

KRITZ: Fine.

(As Flaxley looked beneath his armpit, Kritz stepped up to him then begun attempting to free Lefiat's finger from its metallic snare. First she pulled with all her might.)

LEFIAT: Ow!!! Don't pull my finger off!!!

(Having failed miserably, she then tried twisting the chain mail.)

LEFIAT: Argh!!! You're crushing my finger!!!

(Then she gave up.)

KRITZ: It won't budge!

(Flaxley's shoulders sunk.)

FLAXLEY: Fine. I'll have to take it off then.

(With that, he pulled his tunic over his head then cast it to the ground.)

FLAXLEY: Idiot, Lefiat!

LEFIAT: It was the wind!!!

FLAXLEY: I'll wind *you* in a minute.

(Looking fed up to the back teeth, he threw his sword down then proceeded to remove his chest plate and gauntlets. Once they were off, he then started to pull the chain mail up.

Being much taller than Lefiat, however, as he lifted the chain mail to pull it over his head, he literally lifted him off the ground.)

LEFIAT: Ow!!! My finger!!!

FLAXLEY: Stop whining, you cissy!

(Unfortunately, with Lefiat's weight holding the chain mail down, Flaxley couldn't quite get it over his head. The neck was up around his nose but it was stubbornly refusing to go any further.)

FLAXLEY: For fuck sake, Lefiat!

LEFIAT: Put it back down, you're hurting me!

FLAXLEY: Not yet, I'm not!

(Realising they were going nowhere fast, Kritz shook her head then stepped up help Flaxley lift the chain mail.)

KRITZ: Okay, let's try to get it over in one... full...

(As her eyes caught site of Flaxley's rippling chests muscles, however, her mouth fell open and she became utterly useless.)

KRITZ: Ooh, Kritzeveltia like.

(At this point, Bonson could do nothing but roll his eyes and look despairingly to the heavens. Before him, Flaxley was standing there with his chain mail half over his head; Lefiat dangling from it like an ornament, while Kritz lustfully stroked his chest in a loved up trance.)

FLAXLEY: Kritz, you're not helping there, darling!

KRITZ: Oh it's helping. More than you know!

BONSON: Good grief!

(Fearing they'd be stuck there all day, Bonson rolled his eyes then quickly barged Kritz out the way.)

KRITZ: Hey!!!

BONSON: Move, you sappy bint!

(Staggering to one side as she struggled for balance, Kritz protested bitterly.)

KRITZ: Bastard! You've no appreciation of the male body beautiful!!!

BONSON: Damn right, I haven't! I already made my feelings on that type of thing abundantly clear, I thought. Stupid woman.

(As Kritz scowled at him, Bonson then reached up to help Flaxley pull the chain mail over his head.)

BONSON: Right... now pull, Flaxley!

FLAXLEY: I am! It's coming, I can feel it!

(Suspended several inches from the ground, Lefiat whimpered desperately.)

LEFIAT: Hurry!!! I don't like it up here!!!

(Eager to help, Derek then scaled Bonson and stood on his shoulders.)

BONSON: Hey!!!

DEREK: Just hold still!!!

BONSON: Oh... fine.

DEREK: Now, let's all pull together. Go!

(Sure enough, with the three of them working together, the chain mail soon started to move.)

BONSON: A-ha, it's budging!!!

(With much in the way of grunting and groaning, they all continued to force the chain mail until eventually it slid upwards, scraping across the top of Flaxley's head.)

FLAXLEY: Ow!!!

(Moments later, the chain mail slipped back far enough for Flaxley to pull his out arms out. It then plummeted to the ground. Falling back to earth with the chain mail still stuck on his finger, Lefiat screeched and instinctively reached out for something to grab hold of. As a result, when he thudded to the ground, he ended up yanking Flaxley's crotch plate and trousers down with him. Naked from the feet upwards, Flaxley look horrified.)

FLAXLEY: Hey!!!

(At once, Kritz and Mandika both gave the widest smiles and tilted their heads to enjoy the sight of Flaxley's exposed manliness.)

MANDIKA: Like a horse!

KRITZ: Only bigger!

MANDIKA: You're so lucky, Kritz.

KRITZ: So, so lucky.

(As Kritz and Mandika exhaled longingly, Flaxley yanked his trousers up then spun around to glare at Lefiat.)

FLAXLEY: You complete knob sack!!!

(Lefiat gave him a cheesy grin.)

LEFIAT: Don't be angry, Flaxley. It worked! I got my finger out, look!

(He held his swollen, blue finger in the air.)

LEFIAT: See?

(Looking furious, Flaxley grabbed the already swollen finger and snarled.)

LEFIAT: Argh!!!

FLAXLEY: One of these days, I swear...

(And with that, his trousers fell down again.)

MANDIKA: It's like a giant snake!

FLAXLEY: Bloody things! Where's that crotch plate?

BONSON: You use it as a belt, do you, Flaxley?

FLAXLEY: Yes!

(With that, he released Lefiat's finger and bent to pick his crotch plate up, when three thick metal arrows reigned down from above, two of them fixing his trousers to the ground. Looking horrified, Flaxley grabbed his privates and swung his head up to see where the arrows came from.)

FLAXLEY: What the???

(Above them, three long-haired birdmen were circling and a fourth hovered just above them.)

BONSON: Who are you?

(The birdman flicked his hair and scoffed.)

BIRDMAN: I am Spoot, warrior and protector of the sphere. You will not go any further!

(Looking anxious, Flaxley spoke up.)

FLAXLEY: Um... Spoot? We've been asked by the elders to collect the sphere, so if you wouldn't mind...

(Spoot laughed.)

BIRDMAN: You are not the first to make such a claim! You're the first to do so whilst naked, but nonetheless, others have also made this claim.

FLAXLEY: But we even have a Leramite with is!

(He pointed at Derek.)

BIRDMAN: I know nothing of any Leramite. Ours is but to protect the sphere and we will die trying.

(Flaxley sighed.)

FLAXLEY: Yes, you will.

BIRDMAN: Now, you have but one choice...

LEFIAT: A choice or an option?

BONSON: Oh, do shut up, Lefiat!

(Flaxley rolled his eyes.)

FLAXLEY: You can *both* shut up!

BIRDMAN: You can either desist and leave this mountain, or you can die!

(Flaxley shook his head.)

FLAXLEY: Sorry, Spoot, we'll take option three. Continuing and collecting the sphere.

(Normally Flaxley was enthused by, and even delighted in such battles but with his trousers firmly pinned around his ankles, he wasn't feeling as confident as normal.)

FLAXLEY: Now, pass me my sword somebody!

(Relying on Flaxley to save the day, Bonson was quick to do so. As he grabbed the sword, Flaxley nodded to acknowledge Bonson then glared distrustfully at Spoot.)

FLAXLEY: Now are you going to use arrows or are you going to fight like a man?

(Spoot shrugged.)

BIRDMAN: I'm going to use arrows!

FLAXLEY: Shit!

(He rolled his eyes and groaned unenthusiastically.)

FLAXLEY: Prepare to die then!

BIRDMAN: Very well! Attack!

(And with that, the four foes all immediately opened fire with their arrows. It was all the allies could do to dive for cover. Flaxley however, didn't have that option. With one hand protecting his manhood and his sword in the other, he'd have to fight where he was pinned to the ground.)

FLAXLEY: This is going to be tricky, I feel!

(He wasn't wrong. Within seconds of the call to attack, he'd twice had to react incredibly swiftly to bat away incoming arrows with his blade. Scanning the skies for more incoming missiles, he yelled out to Derek desperately.)

FLAXLEY: Derek, this one's down to you!!!

(Derek leapt forth and nodded.)

DEREK: I'm on it, Flaxley!!!

(Immediately, Derek aimed his arm into the sky above himself and took out one of the birdmen with a phenomenal bolt of lightning. With a deafening bang, the birdman was blown to pieces and bits of flesh and feathers rained down.)

FLAXLEY: Now get the others!!!

(Unfortunately, as what was left of the birdman fell to earth, so did his heavy arrows.

With a clang, one struck Derek on the head and knocked him out cold.)

FLAXLEY: Fuck sake, Derek. You're not Lefiat!!!

LEFIAT: Says you with your trousers pinned around your ankles!

(Luckily for Lefiat, Flaxley's faithful blade missed him and he lived to face another day.

Thankfully for Flaxley, Derek's use of magic changed the birdmen's tactics. Knowing that these enemies had magic, they weren't about to stop and aim an arrow for fear of becoming a sitting duck. Instead, they swooped in amongst them, using the heavy arrows as batons. This wasn't much of a problem for the ultra-agile Kritz. Bonson, on the other hand, wasn't at all suited to avoiding such swift foes.)

BONSON: They're too quick!!!!

(Looking extremely panicked, he was firing his magic randomly about himself, just

praying for a lucky hit. They were flying in too fast for him to take aim and he was well and truly out of his depth.)

BONSON: Pick on Flaxley, I'm old!!!

(With that, he fired his inferno magic off again and accidentally set fire to the hem of Mandika's dress in a display of Lefiat-like ineptitude.)

BONSON: Whoops!

MANDIKA: Why, Bonson, why???

(Thankfully, Kritz was on hand to leap towards her and douse the flames before she got burnt.)

KRITZ: You okay, babe?

MANDIKA: No! I'm scared!

(Kritz snarled then looked determinedly into Mandika's eyes as the birdmen continued to swoop all around her.)

KRITZ: Don't worry; I'll take care of you, okay?

(As soon as she'd finished speaking, however, a birdman swooped and carried her off into the sky in his arms.)

KRITZ: What the fuck are you doing???

(The birdman laughed a disgusting laugh leaving her in little doubt that his intentions were very much emanating from below the waist.)

KRITZ: You animal!!! I'm a married woman!!!

(With that, she thrust her arms around his neck and started to squeeze.)

KRITZ: Not so funny now, is it!?!

(Flaxley would have been furious had he seen what'd happened to Kritz. As it was however, he'd been too preoccupied to notice. While she'd been carried off into the sky, he'd been vainly attempting to lash out at another of the birdmen with his blade. Alas, it had been just out of his reach.

Unfortunately for Flaxley, at this point, the birdmen changed their tactics once again. With Derek out of action, Kritz gone, Bonson panicking, Mandika crying and Lefiat looking lost and bewildered, they were no longer subject to any magic attacks and felt free to revert back to what they knew best. Arrows. And with Flaxley's current predicament, they decided it'd be in their best interest to single *him* out for special treatment. After all, the others all looked like they'd be easy pickings once *he* was out of the way.

And so, making full use of Flaxley's predicament they swiftly flew behind him where they could hover just off of the cliff edge and pepper him with arrows from the rear. Even with Flaxley's immense sword skills, there was absolutely no way he could repel them all. Having deflected the first six or seven, one finally slipped past his blade and embedded itself in his right buttock.)

FLAXLEY: Yow!!!

BIRDMAN: Die, fiend!!!

FLAXLEY: Fight me like a man!!! Yow!!! Not again!!!

(With arrows now protruding from both buttocks, Flaxley started to look somewhat the worse for wear. It'd only be a matter of time before an arrow struck a vein or an organ and he feared his number was up. Mercifully, however, help was soon at hand. Having

been firing magic randomly in a blind panic, endangering everyone except himself and the birdmen, Bonson picked the perfect time to come to his senses and rush to his aid. Looking determined, he sprinted to the exhausted Flaxley's side and fired his inferno magic at the birdmen. Taken by complete surprise, one of them managed to fly upwards to avoid it, but the other took the full force of the fiery attack and hurtled down the mountainside with his wings aflame.)

BONSON: Got the bugger!!!

(With crossed-eyes, a pained Flaxley nodded and spoke through gritted teeth.)

FLAXLEY: Thank you, Bonson! I owe you one.

(Bonson grinned at him arrogantly.)

BONSON: Well, you know!

FLAXLEY: Two down... two to go.

(Up above them at this time, Kritz was hanging off of one of the birdmen, her hands firmly squeezing his neck for all she was worth. As the birdman flapped wildly in an attempt to shake her off and drop her, she grabbed his midriff with her thighs and clung on, strangling him harder and harder. If she'd had time to think about it, however, she might have done things differently. As it was, the life soon drained from the birdman's eyes and he stopped flapping his wings.)

KRITZ: Uh-oh!!!

(Realising her error, she instinctively let go of him and screamed as they both proceeded to hurtle towards the ground.)

KRITZ: Shit!!!

(As her life flashed before her very eyes, she cried out in mortal terror. Knowing her time was well and truly up, she called out her children's names then stopped and did a double take at the mountainside.)

KRITZ: The cave!!! I found the...

(She then remembered her mortality and proceeded to scream again.)

KRITZ: I love you, Flaxley!

(Bracing herself for impact, she then closed her eyes and fell softly into Flaxley's waiting arms.)

FLAXLEY: I love you too!

(She opened her eyes and looked utterly perplexed.)

KRITZ: Eh?

(Immediately, he set her down and covered his privates again.)

FLAXLEY: Pass me my sword; I dropped it to catch you!

KRITZ: Oh, okay!

(As she bent to pick it up, however, the last remaining birdman swooped down before her.)

SPOOT: Not so fast!!!

(With his arrow ready and poised to fire, he snarled at her through gritted teeth.)

SPOOT: That was my brother, you bitch!!!

(As their eyes stared hatefully into one another, Kritz knew he meant business. She'd never seen so much hatred. As it happened, however, she needn't have worried. Before the furious Spoot could shoot, the birdman Kritz had strangled fell from the sky and landed squarely on his comrade's head, killing him instantly and causing the arrow to shoot harmlessly over the side of the mountain. As one, they all drew a sigh of relief.)

KRITZ: Holy crap, that was close!!!

(As they all stood there gasping for breath, their faces awash with relief, Derek suddenly came to. Looking extremely peeved, he struggled to his feet and looked about the cliff top urgently.)

DEREK: Did you get them all?

(Bonson nodded.)

BONSON: Don't we always?

DEREK: Good!

KRITZ: It was a close one though. I thought my number was up! Twice!!! First when I was falling then... just now.

(Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: We're just lucky that birdman took so much longer to fall to earth than you did, Kritz!

KRITZ: Yeah, that was a stroke of luck.

(For the first time since the trip had begun, Bonson finally had knowledge on something and wasn't about to miss the opportunity to let his comrades know that he knew more than they did.)

BONSON: Actually, it wasn't luck. Although he wasn't flapping them, his wings would have still caught air beneath them, thus slowing his descent.

(He nodded to himself.)

BONSON: And seeing as it's obvious from your faces that you couldn't give a flying fuck about what I'm telling you, I won't bother explaining any further.

(With that, he folded his arms and glanced away, complaining under his breath.)

BONSON: Bloody wasting my breath on you lot...

(As Bonson continued to snarl to himself, the semi-naked Flaxley instantly switched his focus to the next task on the agenda. With one hand cupping his manhood, he placed his free hand on his bare hip before speaking in an extremely calm tone.)

FLAXLEY: Right then! Lefiat? Where are you?

(Lefiat stepped up from his side.)

LEFIAT: I'm here!

FLAXLEY: Excellent. Now listen very carefully.

(Lefiat nodded intently.)

FLAXLEY: As a result of you pulling my crotch plate off, my trousers fell down!

(Lefiat looked ashamed.)

FLAXLEY: The upshot of that was, I had to do battle just now with my trousers pinned around my ankles and my backside on display to the entire world!

LEFIAT: Yeah... sorry about that!

FLAXLEY: Of course, my inability to move resulted in the enemy singling me out and attacking me from behind.

LEFIAT: Um...

FLAXLEY: You see, Lefiat, thanks to you I currently have two enormous metal arrows sticking out of my arse. I'd like to explain the pain to you but there are no words to describe it. I may even invent a few because excruciating doesn't quite cover it.

LEFIAT: Um, did I say I was sorry?

FLAXLEY: I hear your apology Lefiat, I do. I'm not going to shout at you, I just want to give you a safety tip for the future.

(Lefiat looked uncertain.)

LEFIAT: Safety tip?

FLAXLEY: Yes! Run!

(He smiled.)

FLAXLEY: Run like the wind, Lefiat.

(Releasing his manhood, much to Mandika's delight, he then started to pound his fist and a dark look enveloped his brow.)

FLAXLEY: Never stop running, Lefiat, because when you do, Louise and I are going to be there to teach *you* the meaning of pain in the same way you've taught me!

(Lefiat wisely started to sidle away.)

LEFIAT: Uh-oh!

FLAXLEY: Kritz, a little assistance here if you wouldn't mind!

(Kritz nodded.)

KRITZ: Of course!

(With that, she knelt and pulled an arrow out of the ground and more importantly, out of Flaxley's trousers.)

KRITZ: One down!

DEREK: You might want to make yourself scarce at this point, Lefiat.

LEFIAT: Bloody right!!!

(With that, Lefiat immediately turned and fled straight into the side of the mountain, knocking himself unconscious. As Flaxley burst out laughing, his amusement almost quelling the pain in his backside, Kritz hurriedly freed his trousers from the second arrow then paced behind him and proceeded to yank the arrows from out of his person. At once, the pain return in full and he screamed in agony.)

FLAXLEY: Holy shit wagons of the forbidden frontier!!!

(As everyone winced on his behalf, Kritz then walk around the front of him and took his penis in her hand. Inspecting it closely, she pouted nervously.)

KRITZ: Didn't hurt it, did they?

FLAXLEY: Um, no. Now unhand me so I can get dressed.

(Kritz whimpered.)

KRITZ: Just let me hold it a little longer. I was worried about it.

(Just then Mandika appeared at her side.)

MANDIKA: Can *I*?

(As everyone glared at her, she rapidly shied away.)

MANDIKA: Right... maybe it'd be best if I didn't... I'll just see if Lefiat's okay.

(As she skulked away, burning red with embarrassment, Kritz snarled furiously then released Flaxley's manhood from her grasp. Looking almost psychotic she snarled towards Lefiat and shuddered with rage.)

KRITZ: That curly-haired halfwit endangered my special friend!!! If he wasn't unconscious already, I'd knock him out!!! Then I'd kill him!!!

(Still in immense pain, Flaxley gripped his paining buttocks and winced.)

FLAXLEY: And I'd help! We should have killed that halfwit when we first met him!!!

(Bonson looked furious.)

BONSON: I said that at the time but you wouldn't let me!!! As soon as he lost the key of peace I suggested making him walk back to Guevina on his own but you were having none of it!!! We set out as a four and we'll return as a four you said! Can't have Lefiat

being eaten by a cuddyfinkle, oh no.

(He snarled.)

BONSON: Nobody ever listens to me.

(He then looked towards Mandika as she tried to rouse Lefiat's unconscious body.)

BONSON: And now we're stuck with him forever.

KRITZ: It's not forever. When this is over we'll never have to endure him again, hopefully.

FLAXLEY: Merciful heavens please let that be the case!

(He looked tearfully into the sky and bellowed out.)

FLAXLEY: We don't deserve him!!!

(It took a good few minutes for Kritz to dress the wounds in Flaxley's buttocks and of course, for him to get dressed again. In that time, Lefiat had regained consciousness and had decided to heed Derek's advice to stay far, far away from Flaxley. Lefiat didn't have many possessions but he did indeed value his genitalia too much to risk losing it.

It was during this down time that Kritz had enlightened everyone to what she'd seen while she was in the sky with the birdman. In the cliff above them was an extremely small cave entrance. The news had been greeted with much relief. If this was indeed the cave they were looking for, all that remained was for Derek to climb up there and retrieve the sphere. Their last mission would be complete and a life without Daman Siria's dangerous quests would be realised.

From the moment Kritz had mentioned what she'd seen, Derek had gone extremely quiet. As the others talked excitedly about being free from Daman forever, he'd simply walked away from them and stood there looking up at the cave with a mesmerised expression on his face.

Wondering what was on Derek's mind, Flaxley watched him closely for a moment as he allowed the pain in his backside to ease off a little. Once he felt up to it, he then left the others to talk among themselves and limped to Derek's side.)

FLAXLEY: You think it's the one, Derek?

(Derek glanced to him briefly then stared back at the sheer cliff face.)

DEREK: Well, those birdmen were flapping about in front of it and they claimed to be protecting the sphere, so I guess it must be!

(Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: You nervous?

DEREK: No...

(He looked at Flaxley.)

DEREK: I was just thinking, this cave was created god only knows how long ago. They made it long before I was born in the knowledge that one day a Leramite would go in there. And that Leramite is me. When you think about it, this is almost like my destiny. I was born to end up on an alien planet and perform this very task.

(Flaxley rubbed his chin thoughtfully.)

FLAXLEY: Actually...

DEREK: So... this is a huge moment for me. It's my very reason for being.

(Flaxley shook his head.)

FLAXLEY: No. Don't look at it like that, Derek.

DEREK: Why? This is fantastic!

FLAXLEY: Yeah, *now* it is, but what about this time tomorrow?

DEREK: What do you mean?

FLAXLEY: Are you going to declare your life void because you've achieved your destiny?

(Derek looked blank.)

FLAXLEY: Maybe it's just my way of thinking but if you think you have a destiny or a goal in life, what do you become when you've achieved it?

(Derek looked uncertain.)

DEREK: A spent force!

FLAXLEY: Well... yeah. And you're more than that, Derek. You mean a lot to everyone who's got to know you. Let's just say this an important task, not your destiny.

(Derek nodded.)

DEREK: Yeah, I like that. Thanks, Flaxley!

(A knowing smile then appeared on his face.)

DEREK: On that note... I'm off.

(And with that, he raced at the rock face and started to climb. Wearing a wide smile, Flaxley watched him for a moment then paced back to the others.)

FLAXLEY: Well, we've done all we can now. It's all up to Derek from hereon in.

(As Flaxley gestured towards the cliff face, Kritz glanced towards it and her face lit up.)

KRITZ: Oh, he's already started climbing!

(As everyone turned and looked approvingly to where Derek was ascending the cliff face, Kritz called out to him.)

KRITZ: Good luck, Derek!

(At once, everyone cheered along to her words.)

LEFIAT: Good ol' Derek!

(Flaxley glared at Lefiat.)

FLAXLEY: Go and stand where I can't see you!

LEFIAT: Fine!

(As Lefiat wandered out of Flaxley's line of sight, the others continued watching Derek and were quite shocked to see him start climbing back down again.)

FLAXLEY: What gives?

(They watched on in bewilderment as he reached the ground and raced over to them.)

DEREK: What? What is it? Why did you call me, Kritz?

(She looked sheepishly from side to side.)

KRITZ: Um... I didn't!

DEREK: You did!

KRITZ: I just wished you good luck!

(She then looked away to avoid his icy stare.)

DEREK: Great! Thanks!

(With that, he about turned and headed for the cliff face again, swearing under his breath.)

KRITZ: There's no need to have an attitude about it.

(Bonson shrugged.)

BONSON: Nothing wrong with having an attitude!

MANDIKA: You would say that!

BONSON: Yes, and so my dear, might you!

MANDIKA: I don't have an attitude!

(They all gave her condescending looks.)

MANDIKA: I don't!

BONSON: Mandika, there are times when you even make *me* look cute and cuddly.

MANDIKA: That doesn't mean I have an attitude. I just don't suffer fools easily.

BONSON: You don't suffer nice people, servants or complete strangers easily either.

(Looking most put out; Mandika thrust her hands to her hips.)

MANDIKA: Bonson, may I remind you...

FLAXLEY: There's a time and a place for squabbling, you two.

(He gestured towards the cliff.)

FLAXLEY: Derek's almost half way up already, can't you focus on that?

MANDIKA: I would, but Bonson's annoyed me now.

BONSON: Which just proves my point. If you didn't have such an attitude you'd have let it go by now.

MANDIKA: Bonson...

(She clenched her fists and shuddered.)

MANDIKA: No. I'm not going to bite this time. I'm going to watch Derek and ignore you.

(Giving him one last disdainful glance, she then looked up at the cliff face.)

MANDIKA: He's almost there. He's a fast bugger, isn't he?

FLAXLEY: Yes, he is. He can scale anything in no time.

BONSON: If it has a uniform and penis, so can Mandika.

(Mandika shuddered and gritted her teeth. Determined not to give him the satisfaction of riling her, she then offered him a warm smile.)

MANDIKA: You know, Bonson, now that I'm the queen of Guevina, your paid retirement agreement can be cancelled at any time.

(Bonson just glared at her coldly for a moment then gave a defeated sigh.)

BONSON: Fine. Well played.

MANDIKA: Thank you.

FLAXLEY: You two friends again now?

MANDIKA: Let's not get carried away.

(Just then, Kritz bounced excitedly on the spot and clapped her hands together girlishly.)

KRITZ: Ooh, guys, Derek's almost there.

(Flaxley gave her a sideways glance then mumbled under his breath.)

FLAXLEY: You're such a girl.

(Flaxley then stared up at the cliff face to continue observing Derek's swift progress. As he did so, Mandika rolled her eyes and whispered to Bonson.)

MANDIKA: Why *does* Flaxley get so rattled when Kritz acts a bit girly?

(Bonson grinned from ear to ear then returned her whisper.)

BONSON: Maybe he wishes she was a dude. He's such a gay.

MANDIKA: I know, right?

(As Bonson and Mandika giggled together, Flaxley glowered at them suspiciously then

stared back at the mountainside.)

FLAXLEY: Excellent, he's made it!

(At once, they all looked up and saw Derek disappearing into the tiny cave opening.)

MANDIKA: Yay for Derek.

KRITZ: Yay! Derek!

BONSON: Superb!

FLAXLEY: Indeed.

(He then stood tall.)

FLAXLEY: So now we wait. Hopefully when Derek comes back he'll be holding the key to our freedom.

(As everyone stood there nodding to themselves, absorbing his words, Flaxley then glared at Bonson.)

FLAXLEY: But if you call me gay again, Bonson, you'll be spending *your* freedom in a broken heap at the bottom of that cliff.

BONSON: Oh... heard that, did you?

FLAXLEY: Yes!

BONSON: Right. Oops.

(Way up above his five waiting comrades at this time, Derek found himself crawling through a dank, claustrophobic tunnel. The tiny cave seemed to get a great deal thinner the further he headed down it.

Slowly heaving his way forth, he looked far from enthused. He had absolutely no idea what he might be getting himself into and it made him feel more than a tad daunted. Determined not to let his reservations get to him, however, he crawled onwards with his eyes on stalks. Ahead of him, at the end of the passage, he could see what looked like a blue marble room. Finding a large, open space far more appealing than the claustrophobic passageway he was currently in, he then cast his reservations to one side and crawled towards it as fast as he possibly could.

Upon reaching the end of the passageway, Derek crawled out onto a blue marble floor then climbed to his feet. He was immediately taken aback by the sheer size of the place. The large circular room was made entirely of sparkling blue stone, and an immensely tall, sapphire pillar rose up from the centre. Very much awestruck, he looked around at the emptiness, before allowing his eyes to scale the pillar.)

DEREK: Wow!

(Just then, a deep booming voice echoed around the room.)

VOICE: Doth thee a Leramite be?

(Somewhat startled, Derek looked about himself.)

DEREK: Um... yes. I'm Derek, a three foot tall, green alien from the planet Tryme 17!

VOICE: Then let the first test begin!!!

(Just then, a three foot tall green alien, the very spitting image of himself charged at him from around the pillar.)

DEREK: What the? Eric... my brother? Is it really you?

(As he stood there looking utterly perplexed, the voice echoed around the room once

again.)

VOICE: Begin!!! A fight to the death!

(At once, Derek's tuft of hair stood on end.)

DEREK: To the death???

(Very much on high alert, as soon as the other Leramite reached him, he unleashed a powerful blast of lightning magic in its direction. Much to his utter dismay, however, the other Leramite did exactly the same thing at exactly the same time. Immediately, the two powerful bolts of electricity met head on then shot off in opposing downward directions, disappearing into the ground as they earthed themselves.)

DEREK: Arses!!!

(With that, he instantly proceeded to let off a string of fireballs in the other Leramite's direction. Dancing to one side as he did so, terrified that his opponent might counter with a second bolt of lightning and catch him unprepared, he snarled through gritted teeth.)

DEREK: If it's either you or me, chummy, so you can get fucked. It aint gonna be me!!!

(Infuriatingly for him, however, his opponent countered his fireballs with fireballs of its own. Almost as if it was mocking him, it even matched his sideways skipping.

Watching on in horror as the fireballs simply petered out against one another, he snarled bitterly to himself.)

DEREK: You're either very lucky or you're taking the piss!!!

(With that, Derek relented his magical assault and charged forwards to catch his opponent off guard. With every intention of impaling his foe on the razor sharp spike atop his right horn, he clenched his fists and growled furiously. The words "to the death" had struck Derek hard and his instinctive fear of mortality had taken over. One of them had to die and he was going to do his damndest to make sure it wasn't him. Much to his absolute frustration, however, the other Leramite very much matched his determination, and seemingly, his battle strategy. In what seemed like a million to one occurrence, as Derek stooped to go in for the kill, both *his* horn and that of his opponent met perfectly, tip to tip, an outcome that would have seemed virtually impossible even if they were *trying* to do it.)

DEREK: For fuck sake!!!

(Starting to lose his temper with his seemingly jammy foe, Derek instantly stepped back from the collision and threw a right hook. At last he'd struck a meaningful blow. Alas, so did his opponent. Once again, his opponent had made exactly the same move and they were both knocked back by right hooks to the left side of their chins. At once they both growled furiously then charged into one another kicking and punching each other with everything they had. There was nothing cultured or tactical about it and it rapidly became a brawl.

To say the fight was even at this point would be quite the understatement. Derek had thrown eight telling punches and landed two powerful kicks. His opponent, however, had matched them all perfectly. They'd even somehow punched each other's fists on four separate occasions.)

DEREK: Stop matching me!!! How are you even doing that???

(Getting increasingly irked by the second, Derek threw another punch then suddenly looked enlightened. Rocking backwards from his opponents perfectly matching punch, he clenched his fists and snarled.)

DEREK: Speed mind-reading! You're reading my mind quicker than I can perform the moves!!!

(Looking twice as determined, Derek then came out fighting once more, throwing several punches in quick succession. Using 'speed mind-reading' in a fight was considered cheating in Leramite society and it'd angered him greatly. He'd always thought such a thing was a myth up until now, but having been matched so perfectly by his opponent it was the only explanation. He was now a believer. This opponent was reading his intended moves and mimicking them, very much belittling him in the process. He was even letting him land blows just so he could mock him by performing the self-same move.)

DEREK: Cheating bastard!!!

(Unfortunately for Derek, his decision to step up the pace had no effect whatsoever. His opponent was still copying his every move and to make matters worse, he couldn't even use his own mind reading skill to fight back. Almost as if his opponent had used some kind of telepathy blocking spell he couldn't read a single thought in his opponent's head.)

DEREK: You make me sick!!!

(Knowing all he could do was keep on punching and hope he landed a lucky blow, Derek screamed out ferociously then put all his weight behind a left hook. It was the perfect punch and caught his opponent square on the jaw. At once, his opponent staggered sideways and turned his head away, squirming at the impact. Alas, Derek did the same, having been caught by exactly the same kind of punch. With his jaw aching, he winced then forced open his eyes; when he caught sight of his reflection in the glowing crystal wall.)

DEREK: What the?

(At once, he stood up straight and rapidly did a double take between his opponent and the reflection. It was a process he repeated several times at high speed. Every time he glanced at his opponent, he was staring back at him, but when he looked into the reflection, his opponent wasn't even there.)

DEREK: How is that even possible?

(He then glanced at his opponent again and raised a suspicious eyebrow. Nothing made sense. Two seconds ago, his opponent had been laying into him with everything he had, matching his ferocity, but now Derek had stopped fighting, so had his opponent. Very much thrown by the anomaly, he lifted his hand as if to punch the other Leramite then lowered it again. Just as he'd suspected it might, the other Leramite did exactly the same thing.)

DEREK: Right. You're not real, are you?

(The other Leramite just stared back at him silently.)

DEREK: You mimic everything except me speaking, don't you?

(With that, he performed a pelvic thrust then jumped up and down with his hands turned under his armpits to mimic a monkey. Sure enough, the other Leramite did it in tandem with him.)

DEREK: For fuck sake.

(With that, he looked to the glowing ceiling and raised his voice.)

DEREK: What kind of weird mimic magic is this?

VOICE: To the death!!!

DEREK: Bollocks! The only way I'll get hurt is if I hit that fake version of me! It's a

trick, it's not even a real Leramite, it's a magically altered reflection of *me*!!!

(He then stood tall and tipped his head back.)

DEREK: So seeing as I'm the *only* combatant and I'm still standing, *I* win!

(He nodded to affirm his words.)

DEREK: This is a ridiculous test.

VOICE: To the death!!!

DEREK: No! I'm not going to kill myself! What sort of a fool do you take me for?

(Silence then reigned for several moments until the booming voice called out once again.)

VOICE: Very well. You have passed.

(As Derek nodded to himself sternly, the other Leramite disappeared and a small nerdy voice rose up from atop the pillar in the centre of the room.)

WARF: Time for the second and final part of the test then.

(Much to Derek's amazement, a dwarf's head peered over the top of the pillar.)

WARF: Come on up!

(Feeling somewhat pleased with himself, having figured out the first part of the test, Derek nodded and headed for the pillar. He was a little apprehensive about what might lay in store for him up there but at the same time, he couldn't wait to find out. In no time at all, he scaled the pillar and found nothing but himself and the dwarf up there.)

DEREK: No sphere?

(The dwarf smiled.)

WARF: All in good time, my Leramite friend. I'm Warf...

DEREK: Warf the dwarf?

WARF: Yes... I get that a lot. Before you see the sphere, thou must prove thy self worthy.

DEREK: In what way?

WARF: Well, I have for thee, three questions.

(Derek looked enlightened and nodded.)

DEREK: I see!

(He'd read many books featuring such "questions three" and they'd all had the same catch. They were always trick questions, impossible to answer. Determined not to get caught like that, he folded his arms and listened carefully.)

DEREK: Okay, let's have question number one then!

(The dwarf nodded.)

WARF: Very well, question one is simple. A Leramite space cruiser leaves Tryme 17 and 1800hrs, travelling at a speed of 100 cosmic miles per hour. What time will it arrive at Tryme 21?

(Derek looked blank.)

DEREK: Um... there is no Tryme 21!

(The dwarf frowned at him.)

WARF: Yes there is!

DEREK: No, there isn't!

(Looking mightily unimpressed, the dwarf folded his arms.)

WARF: There is! And if you can't answer me properly then you fail!

DEREK: Tryme 21 was mistakenly identified as a planet and named accordingly. It turned out to be space debris and the name has since been rescinded!

(Warf sneered.)

WARF: How stupid do I look?

DEREK: That's beside the point, we've known for years that Tryme 21 doesn't exist.

WARF: Lies!

(Derek looked thoughtful.)

DEREK: Hold on a minute. How long have you been in here?

WARF: Excuse me?

DEREK: Well, a space cruiser going at 100 cosmic mph? Couldn't the pilot find second gear?

WARF: Gear?

(Derek frowned.)

DEREK: How old are these questions?

(Quickly going on the defensive, the dwarf rolled his shoulders.)

WARF: Fine, I'll ask you something else!

DEREK: Good!

WARF: What colour are Leramites from Tryme 18?

DEREK: That's easy...

(Remembering that the question might be a trick, Derek then raised a distrusting eyebrow.)

DEREK: Hold on a minute!

WARF: You don't know?

DEREK: I do, but...

WARF: Then answer me!

(Derek thought hard and chose his words carefully.)

DEREK: Well... some say they're turquoise. But if I say that you'll say they're green and if I say green you'll say they're blue won't you?

(Warf shrugged.)

WARF: Not necessarily!

DEREK: Hmm...

WARF: So your answer is?

(Derek sighed. He knew there was little he could do except rely on Warf to be honest.)

DEREK: They're turquoise!

(Warf rubbed his chin.)

WARF: The answer was...

(He deliberately kept Derek in suspense for a few moments before uttering the answer.)

WARF: Greenish-blue!

(Derek was naturally more than a little incensed.)

DEREK: That's turquoise!!!

WARF: No it isn't!

(Looking furious, Derek placed his hands on his hips.)

DEREK: Like that is it?

WARF: You've got two wrong so far!

(As fury raged through his body, Derek clenched his fists.)

WARF: Now would you like the third question or do you want to quit while you still have some dignity left?

(As Derek proceeded to pummel him, Warf knew he may have taken things a little too far.)

WARF: Help!!!

(Derek had forgotten all about the sphere by now. His new mission was to beat the living daylights out of the annoying twerp before him. He was achieving this goal in some considerable style. Desperate for his punishment to end, Warf threw himself to the floor and started to crawl away as Derek stomped after him.)

DEREK: Come back here, you little shit!

WARF: No! Look, fine. Have your stupid sphere!

DEREK: Sod the sphere, I don't want it anymore. I just want to kill *you*! First you make me beat the crap out of myself then you try to bamboozle me with bullshit!!!

(As Warf trembled, Derek swiftly calmed himself.)

DEREK: Wait, I *do* want the sphere, that's exactly what I want.

(With that, Warf clapped his hands together and a white discus shaped object appeared, floating in the air before him, glowing like a freshly polished diamond.)

WARF: Now take it and go!

(Derek glanced at the floating object and raised a curious eyebrow.)

DEREK: What's that?

WARF: It's the soul sphere!!!

DEREK: No it isn't. Spheres are spherical! That's why they're called spheres!!!

WARF: It's the soul sphere, trust me!!! I don't know they call it that, but *that's* what you came in for. Now, please, take it and leave me be.

(Derek raised a distrusting eyebrow and stared hard at the terrified dwarf.)

DEREK: Fine, I will, but if I find out you've fobbed me off with a shiny lump of useless metal, I'll come back and pummel you into oblivion.

WARF: Fine, just... leave.

DEREK: I *am* leaving! Just... be warned.

(As Derek grabbed the object and made off back down the pillar, Warf shook his head.)

WARF: Leramites!

(Derek didn't delay in returning to his comrades. Anxious to show them the so-called "sphere", so he could get their opinion on whether he'd been fobbed off with an oddly shaped fake or not, he made his way back through the thin, dank passageway in next to no time; raising a loud cheer from his allies as soon as his head appeared in view. It was a cheer that continued unabated as he climbed back down the wall.

As soon as he reached the end of his climb, Derek dropped down onto the rocky ground then breathed an uneasy breath before pacing back to his allies. Flaxley, Kritz, Bonson, Mandika and Lefiat were all thoroughly delighted to see him and welcomed him like a hero.)

BONSON: Outstanding work, Derek.

FLAXLEY: Top man, Derek. We owe you one.

MANDIKA: So that's the soul sphere, is it?

(Derek bit his lip then held the object up for all to see.)

DEREK: Apparently it's the soul sphere, yes.

BONSON: Doesn't look very spherical to me.

DEREK: That's what *I* told him.

KRITZ: It's pretty though!

LEFIAT: Yeah. Shiny!

FLAXLEY: Don't even breathe near it, Lefiat!

(Just then, there was a blinding flash and the entire world seemed to warp. At once, everybody jumped back to shield their eyes and Mandika and Lefiat grabbed hold of Flaxley in terror.)

MANDIKA: What the hell's that???

LEFIAT: Witches probably!!! We're all going die!!!

(Their panic, however, proved unfounded. As the blinding light dimmed, Daman Siria appeared with several other cloaked elders standing behind him. Needless to say, Flaxley, Kritz, Bonson, Mandika and Lefiat weren't the only ones who'd keenly awaited Derek's return with the sphere.

Unsurprisingly, the aging elder was greeted with the usual warmth.)

BONSON: Blind us why don't you, you git?

FLAXLEY: Damn you, Daman.

(Derek gestured to the hooded elders behind him.)

DEREK: Hey, why the welcoming committee?

(As six pairs of angry eyes stared his way, Daman said nothing and took a moment to admire the stunning view below. Slowly pacing away to take in the glorious sight beyond the cliff, he exhaled joyfully.)

DAMAN: Hmm, glorious.

(He then turned and paced towards Derek with a warm smile on his face.)

DAMAN: You have my sphere I see!

(Derek placed the object behind his back and tried to look aloof.)

DEREK: No.

(Daman gave him a questioning look.)

DEREK: Well, okay I do. Or at least I was told I do.

(He then held the sphere out towards him.)

DEREK: It's not even remotely spherical, are you sure this is it?

(Daman couldn't help but chuckle.)

DAMAN: I'm positive. And pay no heed to its shape; the soul sphere is just its name.

BONSON: Not a very precise one!

DAMAN: Even so. We had to call it something and we called it *that*.

BONSON: Scandalous inaccuracy. Sphere indeed. You might as well have called it the 'moon pendulum'.

(Ignoring Bonson's disdain, Daman held his palm towards Derek.)

DAMAN: So... may I, Derek?

(Derek nodded and held the soul sphere out towards him.)

DEREK: Fine. Just don't forget to keep *your* end of the bargain.

(Daman smiled.)

DAMAN: I won't. A promise is a promise.

(With that, he gestured to the hooded men in his company.)

DAMAN: Take the soul sphere please, gentlemen!

(Without speaking, the hooded elders immediately held out their hands in Derek's direction and levitated the sphere from his palm. Watching on, the allies were lost for

words)

DEREK: Holy crap!

KRITZ: That's...

MANDIKA: It *so* is!

FLAXLEY: And... yes.

(At this point, the cloaked mages rapidly thrust their hands over their heads and the sphere rocketed upwards and disappeared into the heavens, right before their very eyes.)

MANDIKA: Bloody hell. That was neat!

KRITZ: Outstanding!

LEFIAT: Again, again!!!

BONSON: How can they do it again, you tit? There's only one sphere!!!

LEFIAT: Yeah, but that was cool.

(Flaxley however, didn't seem so impressed.)

FLAXLEY: Hey, if all you wanted to do was levitate it then throw it away, why the hell did you force *us* to come here???

DAMAN: Flaxley, I...

FLAXLEY: Seriously! If you can move things with your hands like that, why didn't you just levitate it out of the bloody cave yourselves??? Why involve *us*???

DAMAN: Please, let me finish.

(Flaxley glared at him coldly.)

DAMAN: We're not the only ones who can perform such spells, Flaxley. Telekinesis is favoured by certain witch covens for instance. So when we made that cave, we made it impervious to *all* magic; other than one reflective illusion and another to cloak the sphere. We even made it impervious to our own magic, just to be on the safe side. Anything to ensure the sphere never fell into the wrong hands. We took every precaution to protect the cave from *everything* except Leramites. There was absolutely no way evil types would realise that a Leramite was the key to getting the sphere out. It was the perfect plan.

(He nodded.)

DAMAN: Anyway, that's why we needed *you* chaps. To escort Derek as he went about the task. It was the *only* way to get it back! Magic, like I said, wasn't capable of the task.

(With no option but to accept Daman's explanation, Flaxley gave him a disgruntled glance then shrugged indifferently.)

FLAXLEY: Fine. Makes sense, I suppose.

(Bonson however wasn't so easy to pacify.)

BONSON: That doesn't make you any less of a git, Daman.

DAMAN: Excuse me?

BONSON: You heard me. Bloody showing off and rubbing our noses in it.

DAMAN: I did nothing of the sort.

BONSON: Oh, no? Then why all the funky magic? If you wanted the sphere destroyed that badly, you could have just given it to Lefiat.

LEFIAT: Yeah, I can break anything.

BONSON: Except your habit of being a useless cock, of course.

(Lefiat sighed sorrowfully.)

LEFIAT: Yeah, except that.

BONSON: There was no need for the funky magic display whatsoever. You just wanted to make an exhibition of how powerful you are to make us feel small. Admit it!!!
(He snarled.)

BONSON: Oh, and that's another thing, you could have at least waited until we'd gone before you threw the fucking sphere away, that was just bloody rude. Making us go to all this trouble to retrieve it just so you could destroy it right under our noses, what sort of git are you?

(Daman laughed to himself and folded his arms.)

DAMAN: Bonson, please, my angry friend, the sphere isn't broken, nor is it discarded. We merely teleported it to where it's needed. Trust me; to get it *there* required a *lot* of men and a *lot* of magic. I certainly wasn't showing off and I certainly didn't make you get it back just so I could smash it.

BONSON: No? So where did you send it then?

DAMAN: The sanctum of light. A place far, far away where only we elders can ever go.

BONSON: Yes, well... you're still a git.

(As everyone snarled at him bitterly, Daman stepped forwards and smiled.)

DAMAN: You know, Bonson, in fact all of you, there's something you chaps need to understand before you start questioning my methods.

BONSON: Is that so?

DAMAN: Yes! My fellow elders and I have been dead nearly four hundred years! Any time you thought you may have seen me interact with anything or move anything, it was all done with illusions. I have no corporeal form! If I could physically interact with things, I wouldn't have involved you lot in the first place. There'd be no need. With teleport I could have got the key of peace back myself, I could have rescued Zanne, retrieved Croxton's necklace, you name it. Unfortunately, I couldn't do any of that as I have no physical form.

(Everyone looked utterly stunned.)

FLAXLEY: So if I tried to punch you, my fist would go straight through you?

DAMAN: Indeed.

FLAXLEY: Then why use that restraint magic on us if we couldn't hit you anyway?

DAMAN: Well, at the time I didn't want you to *know* I'm merely a mystic spirit. Now it's okay that you know. Your work here is done and I shall free you of the thrall.

(Bonson then stepped forward wagging his finger.)

BONSON: Before you do anything, I want to know what the sphere is. And I mean *exactly* what the sphere is. Unlike when you named that sphere, be *precise*.

(He rolled his eyes.)

BONSON: Soul sphere indeed! It's a discus. I haven't been that appalled by a name since Kritz let Flaxley name their son.

FLAXLEY: Hey!!!

KRITZ: You cheeky bastard!

BONSON: I'm just saying.

(He snarled at Daman.)

BONSON: Be precise!!! Knowing a little is as good as knowing nothing. I think we have the right to know *exactly* why we've been under your spell all our lives.

FLAXLEY: Bonson's an arsehole, but he's right. You owe us a damn good explanation.

BONSON: An Arsehole? Well, fuck you, Flaxley.

FLAXLEY: Don't push it, you old fart.

BONSON: How rude!

FLAXLEY: Would you rather I was rude or violent?

BONSON: Good point.

(He then looked to Daman.)

BONSON: Well? You owe us an explanation, don't you think?

(Daman nodded.)

DAMAN: I do actually.

(Just then, Flaxley raged at Daman with his sword aloft and swung wildly at his head. As Daman had suggested, the sword went through him like he was a ghost and Flaxley landed in a heap on the ground.)

DAMAN: Now do you believe me?

(Feeling quite foolish, Flaxley climbed to his feet.)

FLAXLEY: I suppose!

(As Flaxley trudged back to a sympathetic Kritz, Daman folded his arms and gestured across everybody.)

DAMAN: Are you ready to hear me? Are you ready to understand?

BONSON: Just say it, will you?

DAMAN: Very well. You may have heard of the great war nigh on four hundred years ago...

FLAXLEY: I've heard it mentioned.

DAMAN: Well, little truth is really known about that war. It only lasted for five days but the damage was enough to make it look like it had raged for years. My fellow elders and I were among a large group of revolutionaries who took up arms against a tyrant who was ruling the world with an iron fist. His name was Everkei...

(Everybody looked somewhat stumped.)

KRITZ: Everkei? Isn't that they guy you told us about in future Tifaeris, Bonson?

(Bonson nodded.)

BONSON: Yes it is, actually.

(He snarled at Daman.)

BONSON: I already told them about Everkei.

DAMAN: Bonson, you only know what I told you. There's more, much more.

(Flaxley scoffed.)

FLAXLEY: That story was a myth, surely! Mere folklore!

DAMAN: Wrong, Flaxley. The only myth about Everkei is that his legend is a myth.

(Lefiat raised his hand.)

LEFIAT: Can you explain it so that *I* can understand it too?

(Daman rolled his eyes.)

DAMAN: I'm not sure I have time for that, but I'll try!

LEFIAT: Thanks!

DAMAN: Sure, some people believe Everkei to be the stuff of fantasy. He wasn't. He lived and he was our enemy. Without exaggeration, he had superhuman strength that defied belief. It was as if weapons couldn't penetrate him, he was that strong. And worst of all, he was a master of necromancy.

(Kritz shuddered.)

KRITZ: That's gross. That's worse than fiddling with animals.

(Flaxley whispered in her ear.)

KRITZ: Oh... is *that* what it is? You know I *thought* it seemed odd when Bonson told us about it before, but I kept my mouth shut because I didn't want to look silly.

BONSON: I bet you wish you'd taken that approach this time too, don't you?

KRITZ: You have no idea.

(As she hid her face in Flaxley's tunic, Bonson sneered at Daman.)

BONSON: Continue.

DAMAN: Thank you, I will. His necromancy made his army invincible. If you killed one of his men, they'd get straight back up and fight you again!

(With everyone's full, undivided attention, Daman continued, becoming increasingly animated in his explanation.)

DAMAN: There was nothing we could do. Everkei could not be killed. So, we gathered together as many mages as we could and did the next best thing. We unified as many powers as we could muster. Thousands gave up their powers to help us create a spell so magnificent, so intricate and so powerful, that even Everkei couldn't stop it.

(He paused for breath then continued.)

DAMAN: During a massive battle in Guevina we unleashed the spell on Everkei and his neo-immortal army. It worked. We didn't kill Everkei, we merely entrapped him. His body, his soul and his life force and those of his men were sent to a different dimension.

(Bonson was fascinated.)

BONSON: Incredible!

DAMAN: Although he was trapped and our world returned to the relative safety you enjoy today, we feared that Everkei would not give up. A man such as he, sooner or later might find his way back to this dimension.

LEFIAT: What's a dimension, Mandika?

MANDIKA: I don't know, do I? I'm guessing it means 'place'.

DAMAN: Well, out of fear that Everkei might one day return we set a plan into action. We used all the magic at our disposal to preserve our souls, long after our deaths, so that we could remain a force in the world. Should Everkei return, you see, our wisdom and powers will be needed to defeat him. We created the sanctum of light in which our souls dwell and set about working from there, using illusions to play an active role in life on the planet. Using such illusions and other spells, we set into action our plan to stop Everkei a second time, should he dare return. As part of this plan, your lives were manipulated, as you know, to help events conspire.

(He nodded.)

DAMAN: Now, inventing the three keys was a major part of our plan. Dim Lee and Kajice were both killed by those keys...

BONSON: Never mind the keys, where does that sphere come into it?

DAMAN: Bonson, the sphere is everything. Literally! Everything you've ever done relates to the sphere. Just hear me out and it'll all make sense.

BONSON: Fine, go on then.

DAMAN: Well, we needed the right evil souls to empower the sphere, you see? So, we conspired events to make you good people gather them for us. Jacquit and Suzbit forsook mankind to adopt the staff of doom and become witches, they were evil, as was their leader Kajice. Dim Lee, he was evil in his ways and yet merely misguided in his intentions. Nevertheless, his power and his will to kill made him a must. Then there was

Sandark, a cruel, merciless demon, he too had phenomenal strength and his queen, Aurora further fuelled the evil drive. Lastly, and worst of all, the ultimate evil soul was Heiner.

(Flaxley scoffed.)

FLAXLEY: Heiner got lucky! He was a weak, pathetic wannabe who only got anywhere 'cause he bought an army.

DAMAN: Yes, but of all the evils, he was the only living human with the sole intention of enslaving and conquering his own race. Other humans. Even Aurora didn't reach that level of evil until after her death. You see, evil isn't a power. It's an intention. Give that intention the means it needs and only then will you see power.

FLAXLEY: I hear you.

BONSON: I still don't get why you need evil souls in the first place. You say to power the sphere... but how?

DAMAN: With their evil intentions and the power of Dim Lee and Sandark, it makes the soul sphere a powerful weapon to use should Everkei ever return to this dimension.

BONSON: So all this for a weapon?

DAMAN: Yes, Bonson. But no ordinary weapon, this will be a phenomenal weapon. And it needs to be, for Everkei is no ordinary foe.

BONSON: So what does it do exactly?

DAMAN: As I told you before, I pray you never need find out. All you need to know is that the five times we sent you out...

FLAXLEY: Six!

DAMAN: Not including this one! Every time we were right there with you to collect the evil souls. And yes, we would have done it ourselves but being dead kind of limits you a little.

(Bonson gave a mocking laugh.)

BONSON: Clearly. Not to mention age! You're what? 450? I shudder to think how many times *you* need to get up for a pee in the night.

DAMAN: I mean, not being able to manipulate solid earth bound objects limits us. And so you performed our tasks for us. We thank you.

FLAXLEY: And now that's it, is it? You have your weapon to fight Everkei should he return and now we're free to go?

(Daman nodded.)

DAMAN: Free to go with our gratitude and our blessing!

BONSON: Excellent. Can you make me twenty again so I can enjoy my life this time? Bastards!

DAMAN: I can but apologise for that.

BONSON: Yes, that'll help!

(With that, Daman looked to his cloaked companions and nodded to them knowingly.)

DAMAN: It's time!

(He then looked to Bonson before glancing across at the others wearing a rueful smile.)

DAMAN: Now, you may feel a little strange after this. Certain personality quirks may change and there may be the odd physical difference too. It's time to lift the thrall.

(As Lefiat closed his eyes and hoped to become someone else, Daman and his fellow elders then began a bizarre, incoherent chant. With the allies left bewildered where they stood, a vast array of light anomalies started flickering around in the air. Slowly the

lights grew brighter and brighter and the chant became louder and louder until Flaxley, Kritz, Bonson, Mandika, Lefiat and Derek all had to bend double on their hands and knees in an attempt to block it out.

Just then, the cacophony ceased. There were no lights and no chanting. Silence. One by one the allies all climbed silently to their feet. The cloaked elders had disappeared and only Daman remained. Everyone was stunned.

Immediately, Lefiat checked his body and sighed in disappointment at the fact he hadn't changed one bit while the others just looked about themselves in bewilderment. First to break the silence, Bonson looked about at his allies and bit his lip uneasily.)

BONSON: We all okay?

FLAXLEY: I think so!

(He looked at Kritz and beamed.)

FLAXLEY: You're still breathtakingly beautiful.

(She blushed.)

KRITZ: So are you.

(They shared a warm smile then suddenly looked panic stricken.)

KRITZ: Please!

FLAXLEY: Let it be so!

(Immediately, he groped her breasts and she stuffed her hand down his trousers.

Trembling fearfully, they felt around for a moment before looking mightily relieved.)

FLAXLEY: Perfect still.

KRITZ: Amen to that.

FLAXLEY: I don't feel any different.

BONSON: Nor do I but I'm probably too old to change!

DEREK: I'm still a three foot tall green alien from the planet Tryme 17!

(Sadly, there *was* one notable change. Mandika alerted everyone to it with a deafening scream. Looking mortified, she pointed at Lefiat.)

MANDIKA: No!!! I've been sleeping with that???

(She was beside herself and didn't know what to do with her hands.)

MANDIKA: I'm unclean!!!

(Amazingly, Lefiat wasn't even hurt.)

LEFIAT: Yeah, you've been sleeping with me! I don't know why though, I fucking hate you. You've been nothing but a bitch since the day I met you!

(Flaxley and Kritz looked at one another and cringed.)

KRITZ: Oh dear!

FLAXLEY: Indeed!

BONSON: Well it stood to reason really, didn't it? How *else* would *he* get a girlfriend without thrall?

(They all nodded in agreement as Mandika made her disgust known.)

MANDIKA: I want a divorce!

LEFIAT: Good!

MANDIKA: And I'm kicking you out of the castle when we get back!

(Lefiat scoffed.)

LEFIAT: Yeah, your dad tried that once and look what happened to him!

MANDIKA: That's a horrible thing to say!

LEFIAT: Well if you don't like it, *you* move out of the castle. I'm a national hero, try and kick me out if you dare.

(Mandika snarled.)

MANDIKA: Daman! This is your fault!

(She paced at Daman Siria with a look of pure hatred on her face.)

MANDIKA: You made me marry *that* thing??? How could you do that? You're beyond evil!

(Satisfied the spell had worked, Daman smiled. He wasn't about to tolerate them for a moment longer than he had to. With a final bow, he then disappeared.)

MANDIKA: What the fuck?

(Just then, Daman's voice echoed from the sky.)

DAMAN: Farewell, my friends!

(Bonson looked up into the sky and raised two fingers.)

BONSON: Fuck you!!!

(He frowned.)

BONSON: Tosser!

KRITZ: Okay, so now what?

(Flaxley stood tall.)

FLAXLEY: Now we go home. To start living our lives the way we should have done. Exactly how we want to live them. And that means without you, Lefiat!

(Lefiat shrugged.)

LEFIAT: I don't care. As long as Mandika isn't in my way, I'll do fine.

(Flaxley snarled.)

FLAXLEY: I'm sworn to protect Mandika still, Lefiat. The vow I made when her father knighted me still holds to this day. If she asks me to, then I'll happily kill you.

MANDIKA: I don't want him to die; I just want him out of my castle and out of my life.

BONSON: Out of Guevina would be nice too.

(Having travelled with Lefiat for so long, Kritz took pity on him.)

KRITZ: Guys, leave him alone. We'll be rid of him soon anyway, so just... be nice.

DEREK: I agree.

(Kritz then growled at Lefiat herself.)

KRITZ: You endanger my special friend ever again though...

(She then calmed herself and offered him a cheesy grin.)

KRITZ: Just... be careful, okay? No more fuck ups on the way back down. After we've gone our separate ways, be as clumsy as you like, but until then... be careful... or I'll *help* Flaxley kill you.

FLAXLEY: I won't *need* any help!

(Lefiat whimpered.)

LEFIAT: I will be careful, I will.

(He forced a smile.)

LEFIAT: Just... I wanna say, thanks for the support, Kritz. You too, Derek.

(He then looked solemnly to Flaxley.)

LEFIAT: And for what it's worth Flaxley, I get why you hate me.

FLAXLEY: I should hope so too. If not there's two great big holes in my buttocks that might give you a clue!

BONSON: Don't overlook *me*, Lefiat. I've hated you longer than anyone.

MANDIKA: *I* hate him more!

LEFIAT: Yeah, well, that's mutual!

(As Lefiat and Mandika shared a hateful glare, Flaxley stood tall and looked to the skies.)

FLAXLEY: Chaps?

(He paused and took a deep breath of the fresh mountain air.)

FLAXLEY: Let's go home. We've got lives to lead... finally!

BONSON: Ah yes, home. I just hope the storms have stopped.

MANDIKA: They'd better do, it's been horrible for weeks.

(Bonson sighed.)

BONSON: It's been so cold. Just my luck, eh? I have inferno magic and could quite easily light a fire to keep myself warm but I live in the one place where magic doesn't work properly.

LEFIAT: In your room?

(Not even remotely surprised by Lefiat's silly comment, Bonson nodded.)

BONSON: Yes, Lefiat. In my room.

MANDIKA: He means Guevina, Lefiat, you tit. Magic doesn't properly work inside the city walls.

BONSON: It takes me ten attempts to light a bloody candle.

(Lefiat looked baffled.)

LEFIAT: I know that.

BONSON: Then why say... never mind! Let's just go home so I can be somewhere you're not!

(With that, he started to pace back the way they'd come.)

BONSON: Are you lot coming?

(Shrugging to themselves, everyone then headed off after him.)

FLAXLEY: You hang back where I can't see you, Lefiat. That way I won't be tempted.

LEFIAT: Tempted to what?

FLAXLEY: Temptation rising!!!

(At once, Lefiat skulked to the back of the pack and sighed to himself.)

LEFIAT: Well this is gonna be a fun trip home.

(Just then, Daman Siria reappeared behind them. Having not spotted him, everyone continued on down the path obliviously. As they did so, however, he raised his voice and immediately got their attention.)

DAMAN: Sorry about that, chaps, there was something I forgot to do. How very rude of me.

(Bonson turned and scowled at him coldly.)

BONSON: Yeah, what was that then?

(The next thing Bonson knew, he was standing in the throne room of Guevina castle with an equally baffled Lefiat and Mandika.)

BONSON: What the?

MANDIKA: He teleported us home?

LEFIAT: Looks that way.

MANDIKA: I wasn't talking to you, arse face.

LEFIAT: Yeah? Well... fine. I can't compete with that.

(With that, Lefiat skulked away towards the door and Mandika stamped towards her

throne to take a seat. Watching them go their separate ways, Bonson scratched his head uncomfortably for a moment then a wide smile swept across his brow. Hiding his smirk from Mandika he then mumbled to himself.)

BONSON: I get the feeling I'm going to have quite a bit of fun with you two in the near future.

(He then headed for the door, giggling all the way.

Shortly after Bonson, Mandika and Lefiat had arrived back in Guevina, Flaxley, Kritz and Derek had found themselves appearing on the thoroughfare outside Flaxley's house. Looking utterly perplexed they glanced all about themselves briefly then relieved expressions appeared on all their brows.)

KRITZ: Oh, my god, we're home.

(With that, she took off towards Phisele's mum's house to reunite herself with her children. Watching her go, Flaxley nodded to Derek.)

FLAXLEY: It's about time Daman did something nice for us.

DEREK: Yes it is. It was long overdue, in fact.

(Flaxley nodded then held his hand out towards Derek.)

FLAXLEY: Well, I'll see you at the inn this evening, perhaps?

(Derek shook his hand then shrugged.)

DEREK: Maybe. Depends. Zanne might want me home tonight.

FLAXLEY: That's understandable. Come to think of it, I doubt Kritz will be in the mood for venturing out either.

DEREK: No harm done, I'll see you there in the week, no doubt.

FLAXLEY: Absolutely.

(With that, Derek turned and headed for his house. Watching him go, Flaxley took a breath of refreshing sea air and smiled to himself.)

FLAXLEY: It's good to be home.

(Flaxley and Kritz couldn't have been happier at this moment. Reunited with their offspring, they could now begin living the life they craved. A life together as a normal family, free from dangerous missions. Derek would also finally have the same peace of mind.

In Guevina, Bonson was equally filled with joy. Having returned to picking up a generous pension and living rent free in the castle, things looked positively rosy for once.

Mandika and Lefiat, however, had never been so unsettled. Hating one another vehemently yet stuck in a marriage, they were far from overjoyed. As the hero of the people, sacking Lefiat and driving him from the castle wasn't an option for Mandika, and should he choose to leave on his own accord, Lefiat would lose everything. Therefore, they were well and truly stuck with one another.

The only plus as far as Mandika could tell was that her return home had sparked a street party. This at least proved that her subjects still loved her. Upon finding out she'd been abducted, the people of Guevina had thought she was dead. Upon finding she was alive, there were many celebrations. Lefiat was not invited.

THREE MONTHS LATER

(As Guevina entered into its fifteenth straight week of thunder storms and driving rain, its citizens were beginning to fear the worst. Paths were waterlogged and flooding looked like becoming a real possibility. Flooding, however, wasn't the only problem. The incessant downpour was having an extremely negative effect on the general mood of the people. Stuck indoors or soaked if they ventured out, their mood all too often reflected the greyness of their environment. Tempers were all too often frayed and fighting in the street was becoming common place. Entire families, stuck inside their tiny abodes together for days on end were increasingly fighting among themselves. The town's thatchers had been unable to work for weeks as had many others who worked outdoors for a living. It was safe to say, Guevina was not a happy place to be at this time. Nobody knew why they were having such inclement weather over such a prolonged time. It simply made no sense to anyone, especially when the nearby town of East Edea was enjoying a heat wave.

It would be no exaggeration to say that life in Guevina for the last few months had been difficult for almost everyone. The only ones not suffering at this time, being those who dwelt in the warm, dry castle.)

Guevina Castle – Mandika's chamber

(With her eyes almost going crossed, the look of ecstasy on Mandika's face didn't quite do justice to the exquisite feeling of her third orgasm that morning. She'd *never* had this much erotic pleasure when she was with Lefiat. That said, there was only one of him and he was never going to be able to compete with Irvine *and* Mortimer.

Having squeezed every last ounce of ecstasy from her climax, she cast Irvine off her back then rolled off of Mortimer to lay exhausted on her back and catch her breath. Life had never been so good for Mandika. She had no parents to tell her what to do and she was free and practically single again. She felt invincible, she could do whatever and whoever she pleased.

As both her men cuddled up to her, she pulled them close and smiled the happiest of smiles.)

MANDIKA: I'm so alive!

(She looked to Irvine.)

MANDIKA: That was awesome. Now get me some toast and marmalade.

IRVINE: As you wish, Ma'am.

(Then she faced Mortimer.)

MANDIKA: Coffee, please! Cream and expensive sugar.

(As they both climbed out of bed and headed towards the door, donning their robes as they did so, she sat up and giggled.)

MANDIKA: And hurry back, I feel like going again!

(She then let herself drop back onto the bed, closed her eyes and writhed with her back

against her soft silk sheets. She loved the way they felt against her skin. To her, this was how life should be; it was yet another perfect day. As she lay there at peace with her world, however, she heard an almighty commotion coming from down the hallway. It sounded as if a herd of elephants were marching down the hall, their riders yelling and clapping wooden blocks together.)

MANDIKA: What the fuck is that???

(At once her expression darkened and her nostrils started to twitch. She knew all too well what it was. It was Lefiat again!

Lefiat's popularity in Guevina had made him impossible to sack as her knight. If she'd dared to do such a thing there might well have been a revolution. After all, the people were under the mistaken illusion that Lefiat was the greatest man who ever lived and had single-handedly saved Guevina on several occasions. As a result of this misconception, she'd had no choice but to let him stay on in the castle. Divorcing him was out of the question. To get around this problem they'd reached an agreement that Lefiat would stay in the west wing and Mandika would have the rest of the castle. They'd stay out of each other's way and never speak to one another ever again.

Mandika and Lefiat's agreement might just have worked had it not be for one small oversight. Bonson. The elderly wind-up merchant hadn't had this much fun in years. He was notorious for stirring up unnecessary trouble just for the fun of it and Mandika and Lefiat had been like a goldmine to him. Playing them off against each other had been immense fun and he was loving every second of it. Even though he'd had to go against everything he stood for and start being nice to Lefiat for his deception to work, he regretted nothing. It was a small price to pay for the amount of fun he was having. Every now and again he'd either tell Mandika that as Queen *she* deserved more respect or he'd tell Lefiat that as Mandika's husband *he* was entitled to more. He'd then sit back and enjoy the fireworks. Today was no exception.

Having had her peaceful morning of sensual fun ruined by all the commotion, Mandika leapt straight from her bed as naked as the day she was born and marched angrily from her room, down the corridor and into the central hallway to see what all the noise was about. Much to her horror, Bonson was leaning against the wall, watching a group of builders erect a wall in the centre of the hall. With a face like thunder she strode up to him and yelled over the noise.)

MANDIKA: What the bloody hell's this all about?

(Bonson turned to face her and yelled.)

BONSON: Good god, you're naked!!!

MANDIKA: So? Bonson? Hey!!!

(He placed his hand over his face and peered through his fingers at her face.)

BONSON: Did you want to speak to me?

(She pointed at the builders and snarled.)

MANDIKA: What the bloody hell's this all about?

BONSON: They're building a wall!

MANDIKA: I can see that! Why the hell are they building it *there*?

(Bonson took a quick glance at the builders then looked back at Mandika again.)

BONSON: They're not building anything, they're staring at you! Put some bloody clothes on, will you?

(Looking furious she paced over to the drooling builders who, upon realising she was the queen, swiftly relented staring at her and returned to work. Satisfied she'd made her point, she then strode over to Bonson again.)

MANDIKA: Where is he, Bonson? Where's Lefiat? This is all *his* doing, no doubt.

(At this point, one of Mandika's attendants raced from the direction of Mandika's quarters with her robe and helped her slip it on.)

MANDIKA: Thank you.

(Bonson looked most relieved.)

BONSON: Indeed! Thank you, Irene!

(As Irene headed away again, Mandika tied the robe around her waist and snarled coldly.)

MANDIKA: I don't see what your problem is anyway; you don't mind leering at Kritz's nakedness, do you?

(Bonson beamed.)

BONSON: Mind it? No! In fact, I thoroughly recommend it! Her body's a joy to behold.

MANDIKA: Whatever. You won't make me feel insecure about *my* body, so don't even try, Bonson.

BONSON: I wouldn't dream of it!

MANDIKA: Now, where is he?

BONSON: Who?

(She gave him a despairing glance.)

MANDIKA: You know damn well who!!!

BONSON: You mean Lefiat?

MANDIKA: Who else?

BONSON: He won't be long, I sent him out to get me coffee!

(She shook her head and sighed despondently.)

MANDIKA: This is *his* doing right?

BONSON: Of course.

MANDIKA: Unbelievable!

BONSON: Yes, it is. You really have to have a word with him, you know. He's getting out of hand and I do hate to see you unhappy. The man's a disgrace!

(She smiled then rested her head upon his shoulder.)

MANDIKA: Thanks, Bonson! It means a lot having you in my corner.

(Having heard exactly the same words from Lefiat earlier that morning, Bonson tried not to laugh.)

MANDIKA: I'll do more than talk to him though. This is getting beyond a joke.

(Bonson nodded sternly.)

BONSON: Good for you, Mandika.

(Just then, Lefiat happened past with a cup of coffee.)

LEFIAT: Here you go, Bonson!

(Upon sighting Mandika he rolled his eyes bitterly.)

LEFIAT: You again!

(Mandika snarled.)

MANDIKA: You're damn right it's me again!

(Looking like the cat who'd got the cream, Bonson just folded his arms and leant back to enjoy the show.)

MANDIKA: What are those bloody builders doing?

LEFIAT: Building a wall obviously!

MANDIKA: In the middle of the hall???

LEFIAT: Yeah!

(She shuddered with rage.)

MANDIKA: What the fuck for???

LEFIAT: Because I told 'em to!

MANDIKA: But why?

(He stood tall and folded his arms.)

LEFIAT: So you know never to come into my *half* of the castle!

MANDIKA: Half?

(She clenched her fist.)

MANDIKA: Half???

LEFIAT: Yeah! My half!

(With a look of hate emblazoned across her face, Mandika then proceeded to poke him in the chest as she spoke, making him backtrack as she marched into him.)

MANDIKA: You're allowed in the west wing, nowhere else, the west wing. We agreed on it! What the bloody hell makes you think I'd ever let you have half this castle?

(His reply did Bonson no favours.)

LEFIAT: Bonson says that as your husband I'm legally entitled to half, that's 40 percent of everything you own!!!

(What was left of Bonson's hair immediately stood on end and he tried to creep away.)

MANDIKA: Oh, he did, did he?

(She quickly grabbed the retreating old man by his upper sleeve and growled.)

MANDIKA: And what else did you tell him? Well?

(Bonson looked horrified.)

BONSON: I told him nothing. Nothing, I say! And if I did, I only let it slip by accident. It's all very innocent, I can assure you!

(With that, he pulled his most innocent face. Having never really bothered to use an innocent face before, however, on the grounds that he didn't care who he upset, he was a little rusty and the face he pulled could only be described as unusual.)

BONSON: Tell her, Lefiat!

(Annoyed at seeing Mandika take her anger out on Bonson, Lefiat leapt to the old man's defence.)

LEFIAT: Hey, don't take this out on *him*. He's been really good to me since you and I broke up and I won't stand for it. Building this wall was *my* decision, not *his*. You leave him alone.

(Mandika gave a half-hearted snarl and released him.)

MANDIKA: Fine. Whatever!

(Seemingly off the hook, Bonson drew a sigh of relief. His relief, however, was short-lived.)

LEFIAT: Picking on an old man, you ought to be ashamed. A *nice* old man at that!

MANDIKA: Nice???

LEFIAT: Yeah! If it wasn't for Bonson, I don't know where I'd be. It was him who

convinced me to keep fighting for my rightful place in this castle when I was on the verge of moving out. It was Bonson who gave me the courage to stand up to you about getting a bigger share of the west wing...

BONSON: Silence, you fool!!!

LEFIAT: And building this wall was all Bonson's idea. Like he said, I should take what I'm entitled to, and that's half this castle! He's been behind me all the way! So you leave him alone.

(Knowing the game was up, Bonson sighed.)

BONSON: I'm going to kill you, Lefiat!

LEFIAT: What? I was just telling Mandika what a great man you've become.

(Looking absolutely outraged, Mandika folded her arms then glared at Lefiat.)

MANDIKA: Guess what, curly?

LEFIAT: Don't call me curly!

MANDIKA: It was Bonson who kept convincing me to make you move out every time I was on the verge of letting you stay. It was him who gave *me* the courage to fight you on the west wing issue. And he just advised me to have a go at you for building this wall!

(She looked to Bonson.)

MANDIKA: What was it? "The man's a disgrace", was it, Bonson?

(Bonson shrugged in defeat.)

BONSON: Possibly. Sounds like something I'd say.

(Mandika shook her head angrily.)

MANDIKA: Might have known you were just shit stirring again!

(Bonson sighed apologetically then gave her a warm smile.)

BONSON: Well, what can I say? You got me! If you need me, I'll be in my room!

(As he started to saunter away, Mandika screwed her face up and glared at him.)

MANDIKA: No!

(Bonson stopped and gave her a sideways glance.)

BONSON: No? What do you mean, "No"?

MANDIKA: No more! Now stay where you are, I'll deal with you in a minute.

(She then looked at Lefiat.)

MANDIKA: I'm the queen. This has been my family home for centuries. I've been so dumb.

LEFIAT: I can relate to that!

MANDIKA: I've had enough!

(She then called out to the two guards at the end of the hall.)

MANDIKA: Guards! Come here!!!

(With a hateful snarl, she then looked Lefiat up and down.)

MANDIKA: Lefiat, I feel sick just looking at you!

(Lefiat scoffed.)

LEFIAT: Yeah? *All* women feel like that, you aint so special.

MANDIKA: It's too much. I don't care anymore. Sod the consequences!

BONSON: Are you saying what I think you're saying, Mandika?

(At that moment, the guards arrived and saluted as they awaited her orders.)

MANDIKA: Guards, escort Lefiat from the castle will you?

GUARD: Ma'am!

MANDIKA: And make sure he never sets foot in this castle ever again!

(Lefiat's mouth immediately fell open.)

LEFIAT: You can't do that!!!

BONSON: No, you really *can't* do that, Mandika! The people will go nuts if they hear you've sacked Lefiat.

MANDIKA: Shut up, Bonson. I've made up my mind!

(As the guards started to drag the protesting Lefiat away, Bonson sucked his teeth.)

BONSON: This isn't good.

MANDIKA: Worried about him, are you?

BONSON: Don't be ridiculous!

(She shrugged.)

MANDIKA: Only if you *are* worried, don't be. You can watch out for him.

(Bonson scoffed.)

BONSON: And why would I do that?

MANDIKA: Because you're out too!

(She then called to the guards again.)

MANDIKA: When you're done with him, come back for Bonson! Same rule applies!

(As she marched off towards her room furiously, Bonson stood in stunned silence, his whole world falling apart around him. He'd lived in the castle for half his life and had absolutely nowhere else to go. Knowing he desperately had to do something to try to change her mind, he then rushed after her.)

BONSON: Mandika, listen to me!

MANDIKA: Don't bother. You've no respect for me whatsoever; I'm just a joke to you.

I won't give you the chance to belittle me again!

BONSON: But, Mandika...

(As she spun around, she had tears in her eyes.)

MANDIKA: I'm your queen, Bonson. Your queen. You helped raise me knowing I'd be your queen someday and yet you can't even *respect* me as such! You just play pranks on me and stir up trouble for me like I'm some clown who's only here to amuse you. Do you know how that makes me feel?

(Bonson looked confused.)

BONSON: Annoyed, I'm guessing! I dunno, must be a woman thing!

(She snarled.)

MANDIKA: Yeah thanks. From anyone else it'd be annoying but from you... I guess if *you* can't love me then who can? That's how low you've made me feel. Well, no more. I deserve better and I won't get that so long as you're around to make me feel worthless all the time.

(Bonson looked unsure.)

BONSON: You're not menstruating by any chance, are you?

MANDIKA: See, you don't even understand me!

(As she raced off in tears towards her room, Bonson spotted the two guards coming his way then raced after her.)

BONSON: Wait! I need to tell you something. Give me five minutes and if you still want me to leave then I'll go!

MANDIKA: No!

(Finally catching her up as she entered her chamber, he raced past her, grabbed her upper arms and looked her dead in the eye.)

BONSON: Please? Just five minutes. It's important that you know something. I've hung onto a secret for over twenty years, but it's imperative that you know. Trust me, it changes everything.

(Much to his relief, having stared hatefully into his eyes for a few moments, she nodded reluctantly then went to sit on her bed. As the guards came in for him two seconds later, Mandika asked them to wait outside then looked across him coldly.)

MANDIKA: It had better be good, this secret of yours!

(Bonson had turned somewhat pale. Feeling quite weak, he slowly approached a chair facing her bed and took a seat.)

MANDIKA: The clocks ticking, Bonson!

(Bonson could only sigh. What he was about to say would change Mandika's life forever. It wasn't something he could just blurt out in one sentence. Hardly believing he was finally going to tell her the secret he always thought he'd be taking to his grave, he shook his head and sighed again. With the room silent except for the eternal thrashing of raindrops on the window, he finally raised his head and begun.)

BONSON: Well... bear with me here. Back before you were born...

(She gave him a cold stare.)

MANDIKA: Before I was born?

BONSON: Please, bear with me. It's an important part of what I have to tell you.

MANDIKA: Fine!

(With a sigh, she sat back a little and listened.)

BONSON: Well...

(Struggling to know how to even start telling her something so life changing, he bit his lip uneasily.)

BONSON: You see...

MANDIKA: You don't have time to procrastinate, Bonson.

(Bonson sighed.)

BONSON: Well, to begin... let's just say King Falbury, your dad, he wasn't always the loving and devoted father that *you* knew.

(Already, Mandika was miffed.)

MANDIKA: Did you really ask for five minutes just so you could disrespect my father?

BONSON: No, not at all. What I have to tell you is life changing and it's hard to know where to begin!

(He sighed and tried not to get flustered as Mandika glared at him coldly.)

BONSON: Sod it, I'll just say it and if I say it wrong then it's tough on me. Mandika, your father used to be a compulsive womaniser, a gambler and a drunkard.

MANDIKA: Excuse me?

BONSON: It's true!

(Mandika shook her head and sat up.)

MANDIKA: You're done! I'm not going to sit here and listen to you sully his good memory!

BONSON: Mandika, please! He ends up being the good guy here, I promise you. But I need to start from the beginning. Please hear me out, you'll see.

(With a scowl, she sat back slightly, not sure whether to trust him or not.)

BONSON: Honestly, I'm not judging him for liking wine, women and song! He was in his early twenties and a king. Any young man would probably have been just the same!

(As Mandika raised a distrusting eyebrow, Bonson shuffled uneasily in his seat and continued.)

BONSON: Anyway, at the time... before he became the great chap we all came to know... he was a little, shall we say, slack in his duties.

(Mandika shrugged, being slack in performing royal duties was hardly something she could condemn anyone else for.)

BONSON: Anyway, being a young, carefree man, his marriage to the princess of Ashrin came as something of an inconvenience. It had been pre-arranged when he was still only a prince and there was nothing he could do to break the arrangement.

MANDIKA: So? What's that got to do with your secret?

(Bonson forced a smile and continued.)

BONSON: I'm coming to that. Well you see, right after their honeymoon your father came back to the castle and straight away returned to his old life of womanising, gambling and drinking.

(Mandika hung her head.)

BONSON: Your mother was lonely. She came very close to returning to Ashrin on several occasions but never quite went through with it.

(He mused happily.)

BONSON: I'll never forget the time... and I mean never...

(He nodded to himself wearing the heartiest of smiles.)

BONSON: I brought her a nightcap, the drink not the headgear. Your father was in another wing partying like he did every night while she sat and read alone. I left her the drink, gave her some patronising drivel like "your wine, your magnificence" or something and turned to leave.

(He nodded proudly.)

BONSON: She asked me stay. I was amazed. You know, she asked me about butlership? I didn't quite know what to say so I told her the truth. I told her I hated brown-nosing to upper class nobodies who think they're better than me. And you know what? She sympathised. She wasn't patronising me either! She was genuinely interested in what I had to say!

(As Bonson marvelled on about her mother, Mandika sat forward and placed her chin on her fists to listen. She didn't remember much about her mother and loved to hear him speak so highly of her as he always did.)

BONSON: You know, we talked for hours. In the end I forgot I was talking to the queen. She didn't see me as expendable help, she saw me as a man. A man with a tale to tell. A man with a life as precious as her own.

(Despite finding the notion of anyone considering the lives of servants to be important, utterly ridiculous, Mandika continued to listen with a smile.)

BONSON: You know, we became friends after that. I don't mean like a butler and his charge, I mean real friends. We even went to the theatre together a few times.

(He looked Mandika in the eye.)

BONSON: Mandika, your mother was the greatest women to ever walk upon this big old world.

MANDIKA: She was?

BONSON: She was. I disliked your father at the time though!

(Mandika bit her lip.)

BONSON: He wasn't treating her right and she was miserable. I couldn't stand it.

(He took a deep breath.)

BONSON: She used to tell me all about her misery. I was just glad to be there for her. You know, they talked things through once and decided that a baby might bring them closer together.

(Mandika beamed.)

MANDIKA: This is where I come in, isn't it?

BONSON: Well... yes.

(He sighed.)

BONSON: It took a while though. You see, despite promising her a baby and letting your mother get excited about it, your dad was always either too drunk to perform or had already filled his boots earlier with one of the many floozies he kept in with.

(Mandika shook a saddened head.)

BONSON: Don't be sad. He changed, as you know. I remember the day to the exact hour in fact. It was ten minutes after your mother died. You were just a child and you cried so hard. It was hard for me to see.

MANDIKA: Did you look the other way?

BONSON: No. I was a nice bloke back then! I went to hold you but much to my surprise, the king beat me to it. Up until then I'd been the one you'd run to. I was the one who helped your mother raise you while he continued to live the highlife. I don't know what it was that made him start acting like a father, maybe the sight of you crying by the side of your mother's body was too much to bear. I don't know. From that day on though, he gave you everything and loved you with everything he had.

(Mandika smiled.)

BONSON: He turned you into the peasant hating, deluded, upper class, rude little madam you are today. He spoilt you horribly.

(Mandika was not pleased with his choice of words.)

MANDIKA: Hey!!!

BONSON: It's true. He loved you to death but by crikey you'd have turned out differently if your mother hadn't passed away.

(Quite annoyed by his assessment of her, Mandika sat up and folded her arms angrily.)

MANDIKA: So, what about your secret then? Nothing you've said so far is life changing, is it? So my dad wasn't always great, the one I remember was!

(Bonson bit his lip and looked uneasily to the floor.)

BONSON: Well... thing is, you see, your parents tried for you for three years but your father couldn't impregnate her. So I... um... kind of helped out a bit...

(Immediately, Mandika's eyes bulged and stared at him in abject horror.)

MANDIKA: No way!!!

BONSON: Afraid so.

(He gave her a nervous grin as she whimpered in distress.)

MANDIKA: Tell me it isn't so!!!

(He winced.)

BONSON: Sorry, Mandika. Can't.

(He shrugged.)

BONSON: I was in love with her and she wanted a baby, so I kind of did us *both* a favour!

(With that, Mandika almost screamed the castle to the ground and threw herself face down on her bed.)

BONSON: Um, you see. Now you know why I couldn't tell anyone my secret.

(He continued nervously elaborating as Mandika cried her heart out.)

BONSON: In the end I left my wife. And your mother and I continued our love... thing. We were raising you as our own pretty much, you see?

(He then dropped his head into an open hand.)

BONSON: Fuck it. I'm your father. There, I've said it.

(Stunned at having finally revealed his secret, Bonson then sat there in a state of shock while Mandika continued to cry for what seemed like an eternity. In the end Bonson wasn't sure if it was because she'd found out the king wasn't her real father or whether it was because *he* was.

After a good ten minutes or so of silently watching Mandika cry, Bonson finally plucked up the courage to speak.)

BONSON: So... you okay, Mandika?

(Immediately, she flipped over and sat up rigidly. With a snarl, she answered him coldly.)

MANDIKA: What's it to you?

(She growled.)

MANDIKA: Huh, dad?

(Bonson hung his head.)

BONSON: Don't call me that!

MANDIKA: Why not? It's true isn't it?

(She shook her head angrily.)

MANDIKA: So, I'm the bastard daughter of a peasant butler and a slut of a mother who couldn't keep her legs shut!

(Bonson instantly leapt to his feet.)

BONSON: Don't you *ever* talk about your mother like that!!!

(Mandika scoffed.)

MANDIKA: What's this? Parenting? Fuck off, Bonson!

(She looked away and snarled.)

BONSON: Parenting??? If I'd been given the chance to do any of that, you'd be a far better person today, I can assure you!

(He shook his fist.)

BONSON: Do you think it's been easy for me to watch you turn into the person you are today? Do you think it was fun listening to the king teach you how to belittle people like me? Do you think I enjoyed having you look down on me all the time?

(Without looking up, Mandika snarled.)

MANDIKA: Get stuffed.

BONSON: I lost the love of my life, Mandika; then I had to stand by and watch as the king swooped in and took my daughter away too. Every single day, serving this family as if nothing was wrong; watching you getting more and more distant every bloody day. (He shook his head.)

BONSON: Well, you wondered why I've been bitter all my life. Now you know!

(Calming slightly, Mandika looked up at him.)

MANDIKA: So is that why you covered your eyes earlier? And is that why you didn't want to see me kiss Kritz? Because I'm...

BONSON: Yes... correct.

(She sighed.)

MANDIKA: You committed adultery with my mother. I could have you beheaded, you know!

(Bonson shook his head.)

BONSON: Yes, but you won't.

(Mandika then gasped in horror. For several moments, she gaped in dismay then her expression transformed into that of someone who'd discovered the ugliest truth known to mankind. She'd made a realisation that stunned her to the very core of her being. Staring back at her, Bonson could only whimper.)

BONSON: I don't like that look!

MANDIKA: You're fucking unbelievable, you are!

BONSON: What?

MANDIKA: Fathering *me*! That big secret you've carried around all this time. One you swore you'd take to your grave... you decided to tell me *now*!

(He looked from side to side.)

BONSON: Well... it was important that you knew!

MANDIKA: Important for who?

(He grimaced.)

BONSON: I see. I kind of hoped you wouldn't ask me that!

MANDIKA: You told me that for *your* sake!!! You complete pig! You turned my entire world inside out and upside down, just in the vain hope I'd take pity on you and let you stay in the castle!!! It wasn't important that I knew for *my* sake, at all!!!

BONSON: Hmm... I guess it does seem a bit off when you look at it like that!

(She frowned furiously.)

MANDIKA: How else can I look at it???

(Trying to look sincere, Bonson nodded sternly.)

BONSON: Look at it like *this*... your father is alive and well and loves you very, very much!

(Wearing a loving smile he then threw open his arms and winked at her.)

BONSON: Come here, my sweet!

(Minutes later, as the guards dragged the protesting Bonson and all his belongings out of the castle, he couldn't help but think that maybe his plan had backfired somewhat. Mandika was twice as furious and had told him so in no uncertain terms. He'd no longer be welcome at the castle and if he or Lefiat should attempt to gain entry they would be slain on sight. She wasn't joking.)

Four hours later

(Guevina inn was not a happy place. Since the storms had taken hold of the city, people used it to drown their sorrows and there was very little in the way of drunken merriment. There were a lot of drunken fights but nothing in the way of laughter or singing like the inn used to be renowned for. The inn had become a stop off for the disillusioned and the

miserable. It wasn't unusual for people to deliberately pick fights with the biggest man in there in the hope they'd beat them to death and end their misery. All day and night it was packed to the rafters with the desperate, defeated citizens of this struggling settlement. The saddest sight of all however, couldn't be found in the bar. To feast your eyes on *that* display of depression and misfortune, you'd have to go to room 207 where Bonson and Lefiat had taken refuge.

Convinced that a miserable, lonely hotel existence was all life would have in store for him from now until the day he shuffled off this mortal coil, Bonson sat by the window watching rain drip down from the gutters and the trees bend in the forceful wind. Now and again, he'd enjoy the sight of someone falling over in the boggy earth that used to be a thoroughfare, but for the most part he just watched the weather and sighed. Under no illusion that he'd also had his day in the sun, Lefiat just lay on his bed and stared at the ceiling. Trying to understand just how he'd fallen for a woman who'd shown him nothing but contempt, he replayed his relationship with Mandika over and over in his mind. The only solace he could find was that at least they'd had sex. Without her there was very little likelihood of him ever doing that. Everything else just seemed strange, as if they'd never had any good times. She was even mean to him during sex! Understandably, he felt somewhat foolish.

Such was their misery, Bonson and Lefiat had barely spoke a word to each other since Mandika had kicked them out that morning. With neither of them in the mood to speak, it took a rumbling noise from Bonson to eventually break the silence.)

LEFIAT: Hungry, Bonson?

(Without turning to face him, Bonson replied in a bitter growl. He despised Lefiat and the very sound of his voice made his skin crawl.)

BONSON: No.

LEFIAT: But, your stomach rumbled!

BONSON: That wasn't my stomach!

(Lefiat gave him a disapproving glance.)

LEFIAT: Animal!

BONSON: Everybody farts, you tit! Even women.

LEFIAT: You aint a woman!

(Bonson rolled his eyes and snarled.)

BONSON: For pity's sake. Like getting thrown out isn't bad enough, why do I have to share a room with *you* of all people?

LEFIAT: Because you had nowhere else to go, you silly old git. You're just lucky I was nice enough to let you stay here, otherwise you'd be homeless.

(Bonson glared at him furiously for a moment then his shoulders sunk and his head dropped. In that moment, the harshest reality of all had struck him across the head with a steel mallet. He had nothing. Lefiat at least had a room, he didn't even have that. As a result, he'd become dependent on accepting charity from the world's biggest buffoon just to keep a roof over his head. It was quite the depressing revelation.)

LEFIAT: Bonson?

(He bit his lip uneasily.)

LEFIAT: This isn't like you. Normally if I call you a silly old git, you rant at me until

you go red in the face. What gives? You've gone all quiet.

(Bonson sighed then slowly looked up at him.)

BONSON: Yes, well... I've got nothing to shout about, have I?

LEFIAT: You don't have to shout, to be fair. I'm sitting right here.

(Bonson gave him a sideways glance then started to chuckle.)

BONSON: Idiot.

(Much to Lefiat's amazement, Bonson then smiled at him. Having realised that Lefiat had been there for him in his hour of need, continuing to hate him felt wrong. Knowing it was time to act like a man and make peace with the lad, he nodded and spoke up in a calm tone.)

BONSON: You know, I've always hated you, Lefiat.

LEFIAT: Yeah, I had spotted that actually.

BONSON: Out of sheer hatred, I've been a git to you from the start and yet, in this, my darkest hour, you've offered me a place to stay.

LEFIAT: Well... I didn't exactly *offer*, did I?

BONSON: Yes, well... the receptionist said there were no rooms left, so when I spotted you heading up the stairs I knew I had a choice to make. I could either gate-crash *your* room or die outside in the freezing rain.

(He sighed.)

BONSON: They were both chilling prospects, but I opted for the former.

LEFIAT: Yeah well, you're just lucky there's two beds in here.

(Bonson scowled at him.)

BONSON: Lucky? Stop saying I'm lucky, that's twice now!!! This morning I lived in a castle, now I'm shacking up with *you* in a crappy hotel room, how is that lucky???

LEFIAT: Well... because it could have been even worse.

(Bonson stared right through him for a moment then glanced out of the window again.)

BONSON: I suppose that's one way of looking at it.

LEFIAT: Yeah well, the other way of looking at it is too depressing.

BONSON: Yes. Yes, it is.

(He then nodded sternly.)

BONSON: Lefiat, it was very noble of you to take me in like this, especially in light of how I've always treated you. Such an act of kindness goes way beyond what I deserve.

LEFIAT: It's fine.

BONSON: I owe you a debt of gratitude, Lefiat. You won't ever hear any though. Being grateful makes me feel humble and I don't like it.

LEFIAT: Right...

BONSON: I will say *this* though. In return for your kindness, I'll try to stop hating you. I can't promise anything, in fact I can almost guarantee nothing will come of it, but I'll try to tolerate you a bit.

(Lefiat looked stunned.)

LEFIAT: Wow. Okay.

(He beamed.)

LEFIAT: Who knows? We may even become friends.

BONSON: Yes and little Phisele might grow up to become a porcupine.

LEFIAT: Eh?

BONSON: Fucking idiot.

LEFIAT: That's you being tolerant, is it?

BONSON: I said I'd *try* to be tolerant, I didn't say I would be.

(He shrugged.)

BONSON: That time I failed. Just looking at you makes me feel nauseous so tolerating you might take a while.

(Lefiat glared at him coldly.)

LEFIAT: Fine. If you hate the sight of me that much, you can always go to the bar!

(Bonson sighed.)

BONSON: No... that place is bloody depressing!

(With that, they both resumed looking devastated and it fell silent again.)

BONSON: I can't believe I got thrown out of the castle!

(Lefiat swiftly sat up.)

LEFIAT: Me either!

BONSON: Yeah, right. I knew *you'd* be thrown out sooner or later!

LEFIAT: I was talking about *you*. I knew it was only a matter of time before she kicked *me* out!

(In that moment, the animosity between them rapidly faded away and a conversation broke out. Finally having something in common, they talked to each other like civilised human beings for the first time since Lefiat lost the key of peace.)

BONSON: Honest to god, man. I tell you. Such a jumped up little cow.

(Lefiat looked uncertain.)

LEFIAT: You mean Mandika, right?

BONSON: Obviously!

LEFIAT: Don't worry. She won't be queen much longer.

BONSON: Oh no?

LEFIAT: No. When the people hear she's chucked their beloved me, Lefiat out...

(Bonson looked enthused.)

BONSON: Yes, that's not going to look good for her.

(He mused to himself.)

BONSON: Though you know, it might not be enough. She can be quite cunning, you know!

(Lefiat nodded.)

LEFIAT: Yeah, I know that only too well!

BONSON: Yes, of course you do.

LEFIAT: I hate Mandika!

(Bonson sighed.)

BONSON: I don't hate her!

(A dark cloud then swept his brow.)

BONSON: But I am going to make her pay!

(He gave Lefiat a knowing smile.)

BONSON: I'll be back in the castle within a week, you see if I'm not!

LEFIAT: You have a plan then?

BONSON: No, but it can't be that difficult to outsmart Mandika.

(Lefiat sighed.)

LEFIAT: I never managed it!

BONSON: You couldn't outsmart a dead person, Lefiat. I'm talking about me.

(He nodded confidently.)

BONSON: I can either sit here and feel miserable or go and get my revenge on her for kicking me out.

LEFIAT: I'll help!

BONSON: I dare say you will, but I'll manage it anyway.

(In stark contrast to their earlier depressed lethargy, they were now enthused by a new thirst for revenge.)

LEFIAT: Let's get planning then. What shall I do?

BONSON: Okay. Go downstairs...

LEFIAT: Right.

BONSON: Go out of the inn!

LEFIAT: Out of the inn, gotcha!

BONSON: Go to the city gates...

LEFIAT: City gates... okay...

BONSON: Go through them and just keep on walking. The last thing I need is you cocking up all my plans!

(Lefiat nodded determinedly.)

LEFIAT: Right!

(And with that, he leapt off of his bed and headed out of the door. As he watched him go, a wide smile cracked onto Bonson's face.)

BONSON: Well I never! I wonder how far he'll get before he realises!

(Despite the fact they were on the second floor and the way out was quite a distance away, when Lefiat eventually returned, he was soaked to the skin. This indicated to Bonson that he'd at least made it outside before he'd realised.

As the embarrassed looking Lefiat marched towards his bed with a furious look on his face, Bonson had to laugh.)

BONSON: You're a tit! Thanks, old boy, you've really made me laugh.

(Lefiat frowned.)

LEFIAT: It's not funny. I fell in the horse trough!

BONSON: Eh? That wasn't even on your route!

(Lefiat hung his head.)

LEFIAT: I know, I tripped on the stairs and fell out of the window.

(He frowned.)

LEFIAT: It's not funny!!!

BONSON: Poor Guevina's gonna miss having you as its sworn protector, isn't it?

LEFIAT: Arsehole!

BONSON: Easy, Lefiat. We just made peace, let's not ruin it now.

LEFIAT: Peace??? You just tricked me into making a tit of myself!!!

BONSON: I was joking! I didn't think you'd actually go running out of the room.

LEFIAT: Yeah, well, you ought to know by now, I'm not very bright.

BONSON: And you should know I can't resist a joke.

(Lefiat sighed and shook his head.)

LEFIAT: Fine.

BONSON: Then we both know where we stand?

LEFIAT: Yeah, okay... whatever. It's just, this isn't the time for jokes. I was serious

about this, Bonson. I want to get Mandika back for making my life a misery. She treated me like dirt for years.

(Bonson looked him dead in the eye and nodded.)

BONSON: Good, I'm glad you're serious about that, because so am I. Mandika messed with the wrong ex-butler! I lived in that castle before she was even born and so help me, I don't care how low I have to sink, I'm taking back what's mine!

(As Lefiat went to speak, Bonson groaned and cut over him.)

BONSON: And that's my place in the castle!

LEFIAT: Oh, right!

(He grinned.)

LEFIAT: Then we should start by telling everyone that I've been sacked. They all love their Lefiat and the sooner we tell them...

(Bonson gave him a baffled look forcing him to pause in mid-sentence.)

LEFIAT: What?

BONSON: Good god, Lefiat. That's inspired. Why *wait* for them to find out when we can spread the word ourselves? Why didn't I think of that?

LEFIAT: Well considering the source, I'd say it's probably a really crap idea! That's why *you* didn't think of it.

BONSON: On the contrary...

LEFIAT: There must be something wrong with it.

BONSON: No it's perfect!

LEFIAT: No. You can't have thought this through!

BONSON: Nonsense, it's a great way to set the ball rolling!

LEFIAT: No! Sorry, Bonson. I'll have no part in any plan that *I* came up with. It's doomed to failure!

(Bonson rolled his eyes.)

BONSON: Sod you then, nobody believes you're Lefiat anyway. They all think Lefiat is a manly man. You don't have to be there when I tell everyone.

(He rubbed his hands together.)

BONSON: It's time I went to the bar to spread the news I think!

LEFIAT: Can I come?

BONSON: Well, it *was* your idea!

LEFIAT: Forget it then!

(With that, he sat down upon his bed.)

LEFIAT: But...

(He then stood up again.)

LEFIAT: I *do* fancy a drink!

BONSON: Then what are we waiting for?

(With that, they rushed out of the door and headed for the bar on the ground floor.)

(Looking forward to hearing the people's anger at the news of Lefiat's sacking, Bonson and Lefiat hurried down the inn's stairwells then raced into the saloon wearing devious expressions. Having expected to see a bar full of angry drinkers, however, they were most taken aback to see very few people in there. The few who remained were all jockeying for a good position to see out of the window.)

BONSON: What's going on?

(A drinker glanced over to them from where he was peering from the window excitedly.)

DRINKER: There's something happening at the castle!!!

(Bonson and Lefiat looked at one another.)

BONSON: Well you're here so it can't be on fire!

LEFIAT: That's what I was thinking!

BONSON: Let's take a look! Come on!

(With that, they rushed out of the inn and into the pouring rain.)

BONSON: Crap!

(He snarled and lifted his jacket over his head.)

BONSON: Will this rain never cease?

LEFIAT: It doesn't bother me, I'm wet already!

BONSON: Indeed you are. Let's go!

(Curious to find out exactly what was going on, they rushed on towards the castle.

Before them, a crowd had started to gather beneath the main balcony where generations of royals had made their announcements to the public.

As they made their way into the crowd, Bonson looked up to the balcony and saw Mandika waving to her public beneath a distinctive black and gold umbrella. At once, his nostrils flared.)

BONSON: That's *my* bloody umbrella!

LEFIAT: Well it aint hers. Hers is a flimsy, white cotton thing with loads of girly patterns on it. Silly cow only uses it hot weather and then she accuses *me* of being thick.

BONSON: You are! That's her parasol you're thinking of.

LEFIAT: Eh?

BONSON: Never mind.

(Once they were satisfied they were in earshot of the balcony, Lefiat and Bonson stopped and awaited Mandika's message, Lefiat shielding his eyes from the rain as it pelted them head on.)

LEFIAT: I hope she's quick about it.

(Peering from under his raised jacket, Bonson frowned.)

BONSON: It's unlikely! You know what Mandika's like.

(As it turned out, Bonson couldn't have been more wrong. Anxious to get out of the rain, only moments later, Mandika held her arms aloft and called for quiet.)

LEFIAT: Oh, she's starting.

BONSON: Then I stand corrected. I hate that!

(Up on the balcony at this time, Mandika held her arms out before her then gently lowered them as if conducting an orchestra to quieten. In that moment, she received the full attention of the royal-loving citizens. Satisfied she could be heard, she then began her speech.)

MANDIKA: Ever loyal subjects of Guevina. I bring you an important message in these tough times.

(Bonson and Lefiat looked to one another, then back up to the balcony.)

MANDIKA: I know it hasn't been easy for anyone lately. These endless storms have left many of you suffering. I just want you know that I'm here and that your plight is not being ignored.

(As a section of the crowd cheered, Bonson growled to himself. He knew full well she couldn't care less about their plight.)

MANDIKA: I can't stop the rain, only the gods can do that. I just need you to know that should disaster strike, we as a nation must keep the faith. After all, we *do* have a hero.

(She cast her arms aloft magnificently.)

MANDIKA: The mighty Sir Lefiat won't stand by and let you suffer!!!

(As the crowd erupted to celebrate their hero and saviour, Lefiat was stunned.)

LEFIAT: Eh?

BONSON: Hmm... I think I know what's coming!

LEFIAT: You do?

MANDIKA: People!!!

(As the crowd quietened once more, she stepped aside and gestured to her right.)

MANDIKA: I give you, Sir Lefiat!

(Much to Lefiat's horror, his well-built childhood nemesis, Irvine, clad in a suit of armour, stepped up the edge of the balcony with his arms raised aloft to signify his place as the champion of the people. At once, the crowd erupted into a frenzy of excitement and celebration once again. For almost all of them this was the first time they'd ever seen the mighty warrior in person. Those who *had* seen him before, hadn't done so for six years and had long forgotten what he looked like. As a result Mandika's moment of deceit was a complete success. Naturally, the real Lefiat was furious.)

LEFIAT: What the fuck? That aint me!!! That's Irvine!!! He's not Lefiat, I am!!!

(Alas, his cry was drowned out by the excited crowd. Even if it hadn't been, however, nobody would have believed that the real Lefiat was a mighty hero anyway. Their plan had been well and truly thwarted. Bonson could but frown and say nothing.)

LEFIAT: I'm finished. Done for. She's fitted me up like a...

(He hung his head.)

LEFIAT: I'm no good at similes!

(As Mandika bid the crowd farewell and returned to the castle, the crowd immediately started to disperse. Many were chatting excitedly about the thrill of seeing a mighty hero like Lefiat up close.

Last to leave the scene, Lefiat and Bonson stood face to face looking crushed.)

BONSON: That's thrown that plan out of the window. I told you she was cunning!

(Lefiat sighed.)

LEFIAT: We might have guessed she'd do that!

BONSON: Well you're not wrong. For once.

LEFIAT: Why did it have to be Irvine though? That bastard used to make my life a misery. I bet she only gave him a job at the castle to piss me off. Wish I hadn't told her about him now. I hate Irvine.

(Having been the one who'd suggested she should appoint Irvine, specifically to annoy Lefiat, Bonson swiftly changed the subject.)

BONSON: So... she anticipated our move and countered it with a new, fake Lefiat. Now what do we do?

LEFIAT: Dunno, but telling people she sacked Lefiat isn't going to work now.

BONSON: Indeed. We're actually kind of lucky she did that *before* we'd got a chance to tell everyone she'd fired their precious Lefiat.

(Lefiat nodded solemnly.)

LEFIAT: Yeah, imagine trying to explain that one away.

BONSON: Exactly. We could never prove *he's* the fake and that'd make *us* look like the liars.

(Lefiat shook his head.)

LEFIAT: We don't have a plan B, do we?

(Bonson mused to himself.)

BONSON: Well... getting out of this rain would be our next move I suppose, but after that...

(He sighed.)

BONSON: Nope. We've been defeated by her lies.

(Lefiat frowned.)

LEFIAT: If only we had a lie we could spread about her!

(As Lefiat's words filtered into his mind, Bonson's frown very slowly turned upside down and a devious look enveloped the ex-butler's brow.)

BONSON: Our own lies, you say? Lefiat, you sir, are a genius!

(Lefiat scoffed sarcastically.)

LEFIAT: Yeah, I'm the bloody brains of Guevina, I am.

BONSON: Well fair enough, you're certainly not a genius but you have had another fantastic idea!

(Lefiat shuddered and waved panicked hands in front of himself.)

LEFIAT: I want out!!!

(Bonson gave him a cold stare.)

BONSON: Relax; something you said gave *me* an idea!

(Lefiat looked uncertain.)

LEFIAT: Right... so this isn't my idea then?

BONSON: No, this is way too cunning for you.

LEFIAT: Are you sure, Bonson? You know how I feel about my ideas!

BONSON: Of course I'm sure.

(Lefiat gave him a doubting glance.)

BONSON: Do you even know what the idea is?

(Lefiat looked blank.)

LEFIAT: Um... no!

BONSON: Then how can it be your idea?

(As Lefiat paused for thought and curiously counted on his fingers, Bonson rolled his eyes.)

LEFIAT: Wait.

(Following a few seconds more deliberation, Lefiat nodded.)

LEFIAT: You're right! Count me in.

BONSON: Good grief. Look, your role is very simple...

LEFIAT: Don't tell me to leave the city this time.

BONSON: I'm not going to. For this plan to be a success you need to do one simple thing. It's so easy even an idiot can do it.

(He nodded.)

BONSON: Good thing too, really.

LEFIAT: Yeah, okay. So what is it?

BONSON: Whatever you do, don't back me up. Just don't say a word. Can you do that?
(Lefiat scoffed.)

LEFIAT: Of course I can.

BONSON: Are you certain?

LEFIAT: Look, I can do it, okay?

BONSON: Good. So don't interrupt. Your role is to stand there and say nothing.

LEFIAT: Gotcha!

(Bonson nodded determinedly.)

BONSON: Right then. Time to put this puppy into action!

(With that, Bonson headed purposefully towards the inn. Fifteen seconds later, he stopped.)

BONSON: For the love of boobies!

(He then turned round and glared at Lefiat.)

BONSON: What are you doing?

(Having not moved from where he was standing, Lefiat shrugged.)

LEFIAT: You told me to stand here and say nothing!

(Bonson's shoulders dropped.)

BONSON: Unbelievable!

(He looked at the confused Lefiat with a defeated expression on his brow.)

BONSON: I didn't mean *there*!

LEFIAT: You said "stand there and say nothing"!

(Bonson sighed.)

BONSON: Fine. Do that then. At least you'll be out of harm's way!

(As Bonson headed away, Lefiat mused to himself.)

LEFIAT: Where then?

(With that, he raced after Bonson.)

LEFIAT: Bonson, you've lost me!

(As he headed forth with his jacket over his head, eager to get out of the downpour, Bonson growled.)

BONSON: If only. Look, just follow me... not literally! Come with me to the bar and when we get there just say nothing. Got it?

LEFIAT: Right. Well why didn't you say that in the first place?

(Lost for words, Bonson could only growl. Sensing tension, Lefiat hung his head and they returned to the inn in silence.)

(With the queen's display over, the citizens had resumed going about their business. This meant the bar was now full once again. Despite Mandika's reassurance that Sir Lefiat would be their saviour, however, the mood was no better. All the people knew was that their lives were awful right now and promises meant very little. Times had been so tough they'd pretty much lost faith in everything. This was what Bonson was counting on. As he strolled into the bar he surveyed the miserable faces of the drinkers and nodded to himself. He was well respected amongst the drinking community and had every reason to be confident about his words. His only doubt was Lefiat. Keen to make sure he wouldn't ruin everything, he spoke quietly to him first.)

BONSON: Right, remember, just stand there and say nothing.

LEFIAT: Gotcha!

(With that, Bonson took a step forward and raised his voice so that all could hear.)

BONSON: Listen up, everyone. I've got something to tell you all and you're not going to like it.

(At once, every patron in all four corners of the sizeable tavern, turned to face him with misery etched on their faces. Even the landlord, a particularly popular figure in Guevina, stopped what he was doing to glance his way.)

LANDLORD: Something on your mind, Bonson?

(Bonson nodded to him courteously.)

BONSON: Indeed there is, Landlord!

(With that, Bonson cleared his throat then related his woes to his attentive audience.)

BONSON: Queen Mandika has thrown me out the castle!

(Much to his delight, he immediately received the disgusted reaction he was looking for.)

LANDLORD: What?

DRINKER 1: You're kidding!

DRINKER 2: But why?

LANDLORD: Bonson, you've been part of that household since...

(He mused for a moment.)

LANDLORD: Well I've been landlord here for twenty years and you were there then.

(Bonson sighed.)

BONSON: Nearly 40 years I was there!

DRINKER 3: And she just threw you out?

DRINKER 1: What gives, Bonson?

BONSON: Well, put it this way, King Falbury was a great, great man. Am I wrong? He was honourable and kind.

(Everybody nodded and looked to one another in agreement.)

BONSON: Unfortunately his kindness doesn't seem to have been passed down to his daughter.

DRINKER 1: Really? She seems okay to me!

(Landlord shrugged.)

LANDLORD: Well... to be honest, what do we really know about her? She's only been in power a short while.

DRINKER 2: That's true.

(One of the drinkers then thrust his glass onto the table angrily.)

DRINKER 1: This is just typical. Even Bonson, a life-long servant of our great nation, is in a mess. I don't know what's going to become of this place, I really don't.

BONSON: It gets worse I'm afraid.

(He received disturbed looks from one and all.)

LANDLORD: Worse, Bonson?

BONSON: Yes, much worse!

(He sighed.)

BONSON: You see, whereas King Falbury ruled for the people and used our taxes to fund the things we need, Mandika... well...

(He shook his head.)

BONSON: She intends to double our taxes and stop funding schools.

(Everyone looked mortified.)

LANDLORD: But... but why?

BONSON: To pay for refurbishments to the castle and fund her trips overseas!

(He then pulled an extremely convincing tortured expression and looked to the heavens.)

BONSON: I told her it was insanity, a cruelty beyond cruelty. I demanded that she stop the madness... that's when she threw me out and had me banned from the castle forever. (Having somehow failed to realise that Bonson was lying through his teeth, Lefiat was devastated.)

LEFIAT: Mandika's going to do all that???

BONSON: Yes! And she intends to stop all donations to the church too!

(Several drinkers angrily rose to their feet.)

DRINKER 4: What???

DRINKER 1: She can't do that!

BONSON: Oh, but she can.

LEFIAT: She wouldn't! I know she's a cow but that's beyond even her!

(Fearing Lefiat would give the game away, Bonson turned and glared at him. He needn't have worried, however. He'd already said enough. The entire tavern was outraged.)

DRINKER 3: We *need* our schools! This can't be happening!

DRINKER 1: Well obviously it *is* happening. Bonson wouldn't lie!

DRINKER 2: And tax is already too high. People are struggling as it is!!!

DRINKER 1: How could our queen even consider such a thing?

(The landlord thumped the bar with his fist.)

LANDLORD: This happened once before if I recall. A new leader was elected in East Edea ten years ago and immediately stopped the bonuses for all the dock workers. My brother was ruined.

DRINKER 4: It's greed! That's what it is! The queen has become consumed by greed and she's abusing her powers to bleed us dry!

DRINKER 1: I have a family to feed. I won't stand idly by and allow this to happen!

DRINKER 2: Nor will I. I've worked hard for thirty years and now I'm living off of my savings. There's no work at the moment and I'll be damned if I'm going to let her take what money I *do* have!

(Before long the bar was reverberating to the sounds of angry citizens berating their greedy queen. The depression had been replaced by anger and everyone was united in their new found hatred. Many had thanked Bonson for opening their eyes to their evil queen and her intentions. Pretty soon they were talking about a revolution and the landlord started referring to the drinkers as "comrade" as he handed out the ales. There was, however, one dissenting voice.)

LEFIAT: That's ridiculous. Mandika would never go that far!

DRINKER 1: Royalist idiot. Don't you see?

LEFIAT: Look, Mandika is far from perfect and I hate her more than any of you, trust me, but she'd *never* double the taxes.

LANDLORD: It's people like you, you curly-haired imbecile who keep tyrants like her in power, believing all their propaganda!

LEFIAT: But...

(Bonson chuckled to himself. Despite the outrageousness of his claim, the only person left to convince of its authenticity was Lefiat. Determined to do just that, several drinkers were starting to round on him.)

DRINKER 3: I say if this curly-haired fool isn't with us, we should kick him out!

DRINKER 5: Yeah, you're either with us or against us!

LEFIAT: I'm not against anyone! I'm just saying it sounds a bit far-fetched.

(Bonson snarled at him.)

BONSON: I thought I told you just to stand there and say nothing, Lefiat.

LANDLORD: Lefiat? Oh, aye; Bonson raises a good point there. Lefiat! Surely he'll make her stop her, won't he?

LEFIAT: Me?

(Bonson whispered in his ear urgently.)

BONSON: They mean the *fake* Lefiat! Now be quiet, will you?

(He then raised his finger in the air.)

BONSON: But you see, Landlord, being a knight he's sworn to protect Mandika no matter what she does. His hands are tied by the knight's code!

LANDLORD: Well, Lefiat or no Lefiat, something has to be done.

(Bonson stood tall.)

BONSON: Indeed. We must rise up against this tyranny. Now go! Tell your neighbours, tell your friends. Tell everyone you see! Let the people know what a tyrant our queen is. Let nobody be ignorant to her evil.

(At once, a large cheer went up from all around the saloon.)

BONSON: Tonight we march on the castle!!!

(With that, an extra loud cheer went up and the bar cleared in under a minute. Fired up to bring forth change, the drinkers flooded from the bar and raced to spread the word. Even the landlord headed for the exit.)

BONSON: Landlord?

LANDLORD: Watch the bar, Bonson. I'm going to buy a sword!

(Then he too joined the excited exodus. Left alone with just Lefiat and a pub full of beer, Bonson grinned with delight.)

BONSON: Revolution *and* free ale. Today hasn't turned out so bad after all!

(Lefiat shook his head and sighed.)

LEFIAT: This is too much; Mandika would never do those things she's being accused of!

(Bonson gave him condescending glance.)

BONSON: Obviously, you tit. I made it up.

(Lefiat looked enlightened.)

LEFIAT: God I'm slow! I forgot it was a ploy.

BONSON: Yes, but even *you* couldn't cock this one up despite giving it your best shot. Those saps were willing to believe whatever I said on the matter.

(Lefiat hung his head.)

LEFIAT: I'm such an idiot.

BONSON: Yes, yes you are. Still, no harm done! Luckily for us nobody cares what *you* think.

(Lefiat looked at him coldly for a moment then sucked his teeth.)

LEFIAT: I'm not sure about this plan, Bonson. People aren't stupid.

BONSON: Compared to you they're not, no.

LEFIAT: They *will* figure out you lied, you know.

BONSON: Oh but they won't!

LEFIAT: And you won't stop Mandika with a hundred drunks either.

(Bonson beamed merrily.)

BONSON: That's the beauty of it. Propaganda.

LEFIAT: What?

BONSON: Word spreads like wild fire round here, Lefiat. People are very gullible. It only takes a small group to believe it and pretty soon everyone does. And even if they don't believe it entirely they'll still have their suspicions about her. We've sewn the seed.

LEFIAT: Right...

(He looked more than a little uneasy.)

LEFIAT: But if Mandika asks anyone how the rumours got started, they'll all point the finger at *you*. And if she ever finds out that you were the one who started it, she'll have you beheaded.

(Bonson chuckled.)

BONSON: Lefiat, it doesn't work like that.

LEFIAT: No?

BONSON: If she tried to have me beheaded, people would be even *more* suspicious of her. They'd think she was doing it to stop me spreading the sordid truth about her.

That's the way I'd paint it anyway. Propaganda is a beautiful thing.

LEFIAT: Right...

BONSON: Besides, if I thought for a minute my life was in danger I'd be on the next carriage to Tifaeris before you could even blink.

LEFIAT: Okay, so what happens now?

BONSON: Now we treat ourselves to some ale and wait and see what this evening brings.

(When evening came, even Bonson couldn't possibly have expected it to bring so much chaos with it. Despite the heavy winds and driving rain, people had gathered outside the castle from all over Guevina to either rally against or protect their queen. Whether they were for or against her they were all extremely passionate about their stance.

Many believed the royal family to be the very heart of Guevina and the reason for what little prosperity they had. They simply refused to believe the rumours currently circulating about Mandika and would protect her with their lives. Others, however, truly believed the gospel according to Bonson. Purely driven by anger or fear, they were as devoted to removing the monarchy as the royalists were to preserving it. Thus, there was chaos. Guevina stood on the brink of civil war. Even sections of the army, including Mandika's personal guards had been fighting among themselves. Thankfully for her, the dissidents had been driven out of the castle before they could do any major damage.

Out in the main square just in front of castle, the army had been struggling to keep order to the point where they'd had to retreat to the castle's main entrance to concentrate on keeping protestors out of the castle instead. Over a thousand people had gathered to either vent their anger at the queen or protect her from those calling for her head. Tempers were frayed and fights were breaking out all over the place. There had even been deaths. Such was the extent of public rage, the fact magic didn't work inside the city walls was quite a relief. The people were certainly angry enough to use it if they

could.

Needless to say, the man who'd caused all the trouble in the first place wouldn't even go out there. Rather than get involved, he watched open-mouthed with Lefiat from the safety of the inn's stairwell window that faced onto the square.)

LEFIAT: I think the plan worked, Bonson!

(Bonson gaped in amazement.)

BONSON: Didn't it just?

(Watching the chaos continue, he then rubbed his chin uneasily.)

BONSON: Did I go too far, Lefiat?

LEFIAT: Well... if you *meant* to put Mandika in mortal danger then no.

(Bonson shook his head.)

BONSON: Oh my.

LEFIAT: Well what did you think was going to happen?

BONSON: Actually, this is exactly what I was hoping for!

(Lefiat gave him a contemptuous look.)

BONSON: Don't judge me, Lefiat! I don't want them to *harm* her. I just want them to make her abdicate.

LEFIAT: What does that mean? If it means to give up her throne, you obviously don't know Mandika very well. She'd never do that.

(Bonson bit his lip.)

BONSON: Good point. I hate it when you're right.

(He then raised his head again and nodded sternly.)

BONSON: But you know, every revolution needs a leader and no doubt that'll be me. I'll just order my minions to make sure they don't harm her.

LEFIAT: What makes you think they'll pick *you*?

BONSON: Lefiat, you saw them in the bar earlier. They were eating out of my hand.

(Lefiat looked puzzled.)

BONSON: Stop taking everything literally!!! I'll just make it clear that we must be honourable and make sure Mandika is exiled and not harmed.

(He beamed.)

BONSON: That'll make me look quite the hero, don't you think?

(Lefiat shook his head.)

LEFIAT: I'm worried!

BONSON: Relax, let's go down to the bar and start spreading the word.

LEFIAT: The fight isn't in the bar!

BONSON: No but some of the fighters will keep dropping in, I can assure you. We can tell them then.

LEFIAT: You just want an ale!

(Bonson looked most offended.)

BONSON: How could you say that?

LEFIAT: Because it's you!

(Bonson sighed.)

BONSON: Right. Again, good point. Come on.

(Just as Bonson suspected they would, those citizens who stopped by the inn for a drink, did indeed repeat his message that the queen was in no way to be harmed. Within an

hour, the chant of “Death to Queen Mandika” became “Queen Mandika out” and talk of using violence against her subsided. The two sides did, however, continue to violently beat the living daylight out of each other, both blaming one another for the aggression.)

(As the evening wore on, the crowd started to swell and the violence became more and more intense. Every guard in the castle was now on full alert. Guevina was in the grip of the worst civil disorder in its history.)

As she nervously watched events in the square from a tower within the castle, Mandika soon started to fear for her safety. Even when the news that she wasn’t to be harmed filtered through to her, she still didn’t feel any easier. Biting her nails as she stared, wide-eyed through the tower window at the chaos below, Mandika turned to the gentleman in her company and spoke with a tremble in her voice.)

MANDIKA: This can’t be happening.

(The gentleman in question, Irvine, one of several she’d been enjoying intimate relations with since she’d returned from Tang Yul, shrugged indifferently.)

IRVINE: Yeah, whatever. This is boring. Let’s go back to your room and have a shag. (Naturally, Mandika was far from impressed.)

MANDIKA: What?

IRVINE: A shag. Sex. You never know, it might cheer you up a bit.

(Far from cheered by his suggestion, her mood immediately darkened. Looking sick to the back teeth, she shook her head solemnly then glanced towards the window again.)

MANDIKA: Just go away, Irvine. I don’t care how far, just go.

IRVINE: But...

MANDIKA: Don’t make me call a guard!

IRVINE: Fine... whatever.

(As Irvine skulked away, Mandika hung her head and pouted sorrowfully. His words had laid a sorry home truth on her. She didn’t have a proper friend in the entire world. Irvine was quite obviously only into her for her wealth and sex drive and she didn’t feel any more confident about her other lovers either. With the painful feeling of loneliness stinging her heart, a tear ran down her cheek and she sighed in defeat. Ironically, in that moment, she missed the old Lefiat. Despite all his faults, before they’d headed to Tang Yul, Lefiat had always loved her unconditionally. Alas, those days were gone.)

As she stood there feeling empty inside, the head of her royal guards entered and marched up behind her.)

GUARD: Ma’am! I have a report!

(Mandika sighed.)

MANDIKA: And?

GUARD: The castle is under siege from all sides. We’ve officially declared a state of emergency.

MANDIKA: Is it that bad?

GUARD: I’m afraid so, ma’am!

(Staring back out of the window at the chaos again, she snarled to herself.)

MANDIKA: Bonson! *He’s* behind this, I bet you!

GUARD: Well ma'am, the rumour as I understand it is, that the crowd are protesting against plans to cut schools and double taxes... oh and something about cancelling church donations.

(Mandika looked miffed.)

MANDIKA: I don't plan to do any of those things!

GUARD: Well, reports suggest that Bonson was ejected from the castle for arguing with you about those plans, ma'am!

(She snarled.)

MANDIKA: The bastard!

(Her face dropped.)

MANDIKA: How could he do that to me?

(She thought to herself about his earlier revelation and her heart sunk. If he really was her father then how could he do this to her? She then remembered what a vindictive, old miser he was.)

MANDIKA: Par for the course I suppose. Look, if you can find him then capture him. Just don't kill him. *I* want the pleasure of doing that.

GUARD: Ma'am.

(As the guard started to go, she hung her head and pouted. The loneliness she felt at this time was unbearable. She may have had an army behind her and half the city in her corner, but she had nobody to hug her and tell her everything would be okay. Dwelling on the misery of it all for a moment, her bottom lip protruded, when an enlightened glint appeared in her teary eyes. In that moment, she'd remembered a promise. An unbreakable vow. It reminded her that she wasn't alone after all.

Reacting swiftly, she about turned and yelled to the guard just as he reached the door.)

MANDIKA: Guard?

(The guard about turned and saluted.)

GUARD: Ma'am?

MANDIKA: I need to get a message to someone as soon as possible. Send our fastest rider on our quickest horse.

GUARD: Yes, ma'am!

MANDIKA: Tell them to go to Tifaeris and give Sir Flaxley the following message...

GUARD: Isn't Sir Flaxley dead, ma'am?

MANDIKA: No.

GUARD: But his wife wore a mourning dress and carried a wreath at your wedding!

(Mandika sneered.)

MANDIKA: That was another of Bonson's tricks. Flaxley is alive and well.

(The guard looked uncertain.)

GUARD: I see.

MANDIKA: What's that face for?

(The guard scratched his head.)

GUARD: Well... forgive me but... isn't Flaxley a bumbling buffoon?

MANDIKA: No! Somehow people here got that impression but no, far from it.

(The guard forced a smile, more than a little unconvinced by her words.)

GUARD: Well, if you're sure, Ma'am.

MANDIKA: I am! Now listen carefully. I need the message to tell Sir Flaxley I'm in

great danger and he should come at once.

GUARD: Ma'am!

MANDIKA: Oh, and tell him to bring Kritz!

GUARD: Kritz, ma'am?

MANDIKA: His wife.

(She sighed.)

MANDIKA: And the only real friend I've ever had.

GUARD: Very well, ma'am.

MANDIKA: Oh and Derek too. Just tell them I'm in danger and I need their help.

GUARD: And to come at once?

MANDIKA: Yeah... look, you've got the gist. Just make it urgent, okay?

GUARD: Ma'am.

MANDIKA: Dismiss! And don't delay!

(As the guard rushed out of the room, Mandika looked down at the chaos again and chuckled to herself heartily.)

MANDIKA: Well, well, Bonson.

(She remembered how Flaxley had once stated that in a battle between himself and the Guevina army the smart money would be on him and laughed to herself.)

MANDIKA: Let's see how your drunken mob do against the greatest living fighting machine the world has ever seen.

(She then remembered the mighty Dim Lee.)

MANDIKA: Well, the second anyway.

(In Guevina's main square the chaos raged on. The crowd continued to grow and the use of violence increased to the point where people started to bring weapons with them. Such was the sour mood that had weighed heavily over the city for the last few weeks, there seemed little chance of the rage subsiding any time soon. For the vast majority the hard times they'd endured had sent them over the edge and the current frenzy was a welcome break from silently feeling sorry for themselves. The civil disorder was giving their lives meaning. Even those who cared little about the disputed issue of the monarchy had turned up just to fight and quell their boredom.

As a large fight broke out in the west of the square, nobody noticed the city walls radiate and expand in and out briefly. Their impassioned screams as they laid into one other drowned out the deep hum and cacophony of bizarre growls and voices that had started to emanate from between the bricks. Some did however notice a bright flash, like a spark from a sword swung across metal that spat from the weathered cement.)

FIGHTER: What the fuck was that?

(Another fighter scoffed.)

FIGHTER 2: That was the sound of me pummelling your stupid face!

(As the fight resumed they instantly forgot the bizarre phenomena and concentrated on pulverising one another. All over the city, the walls were behaving in strange and bizarre ways, thudding, groaning and sparking. Yet, all over the city, the citizens were too caught up in their struggle to notice or even to care.)

Township of Tifaeris – Sixteen hours later.

(In stark contrast to Guevina, Tifaeris was bathed in glorious sunshine and apart from the sound of children laughing down on the beach, all was quiet. It was just another beautiful day in paradise.

Enjoying the sunshine, Sir Flaxley was sitting on a wicker chair, supping an ale on the large wooden decking outside his front door. At his feet, his beloved Kritz sat watching her young protégé “Phisele” teach their two toddlers how to use building blocks. The last three months had been truly amazing for Flaxley and Kritz. They’d always been an extremely fiery couple. When they fought, they did so with a passion and a rage that very nearly brought the house down. When they loved, well that nearly brought the house down too. Since the goings on in Tang Yul, however, they’d learned how to relax and simply enjoy the silent wonder of being together. Their fieriness remained but it no longer dominated their relationship. Suffice to say, they’d never been as close as they were now.

Having just enjoyed a mellowing sip of his ale, Flaxley smiled to himself joyfully. Placing his tankard down by his side, he then looked adoringly down at the top of Kritz’s head before glancing across at Phisele and the twins. Feeling very much at peace with the world, he then took a deep breath of fresh air and leant forward to place his hands on Kritz’s shoulders. Wearing a loving smile, she leant her head back and looked up into his eyes. At one time the adoring coming together of their gaze would have resulted in them rushing to the bedroom to ravish one another immediately. Instead, they both smiled; the glint in their eyes a result of knowing what was to come at bedtime. As Kritz lowered her head, she looked to Phisele and smiled. It was her eleventh birthday and her mother was currently out collecting her present. It had taken a while to calm her down. She was very much an active child and keeping her quiet wasn’t easy at the best of times. Seeing her calmly play with the twins was a rare joy. Normally the only time Phisele was quiet was when Kritz was teaching her to focus for battle or when she was asleep.)

KRITZ: You don’t see that very often, Flaxley!

(Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: You certainly don’t.

KRITZ: Maybe she’s growing up!

FLAXLEY: Perhaps. But, you know, Kritz, that girl’s already quite grown up!

(Kritz nodded.)

FLAXLEY: She knows how to kill a man with her bare hands and yet she’s playing with those two so carefully. You have to be reasonably mature to be able to handle the responsibility that comes with knowing how to fight.

KRITZ: You’re right.

(She chuckled.)

KRITZ: She could have ended up like I used to be.

(Flaxley shuddered.)

FLAXLEY: Oh god no!

KRITZ: As soon as the Trepe taught me to fight I wanted to hit people. I didn’t need

much of an excuse either!

(Just then Phisele climbed to her feet and pouted at them.)

PHISELE: Where's my mum gone? It can't take that long to buy bananas!

KRITZ: Bananas, huh?

(Phisele beamed.)

PHISELE: Yeah. I get them every year as a birthday treat!

(Flaxley mused to himself about when he was a child. He too used to cherish birthday bananas.)

FLAXLEY: It's good to see some Tifaeris traditions haven't changed.

(Kritz chuckled.)

KRITZ: You know what we used bananas for in Trepe village?

(Flaxley was appalled.)

FLAXLEY: Not in front of Phisele!!! Good god, woman!!!

(Kritz matched his revulsion.)

KRITZ: Not that, you animal!!!

(Before Flaxley could squirm and pretend he hadn't thought what he had, the sound of a horse approaching rapidly drew everyone's attention. Looking curious, Flaxley and Kritz both rose to their feet. Kritz instinctively shuffled across to stand in front of the twins, while Flaxley coolly walked along the decking and stepped down onto the grass.)

FLAXLEY: Looks like a messenger!

PHISELE: Cool.

(She beamed.)

PHISELE: Do you think my mum would buy me a horse for my birthday?

KRITZ: Um... you'd better ask her!

(To nobody's surprise, the messenger slowed as he approached the house. Flaxley was, after all, the leader of Tifaeris and messengers weren't that unusual. As the messenger brought his steed to a halt, Flaxley folded his arms and patiently waited for the rider to dismount. Looking thoroughly exhausted, the messenger took a deep breath before slowly sliding off his saddle. Kritz gave him a welcoming smile.)

KRITZ: Welcome to Tifaeris!

(The messenger forced a smile and tried to catch his breath.)

MESSENGER: Give me a second. Sixteen hours on a saddle.

(Flaxley mused to himself.)

FLAXLEY: 16 hours? Have you come a long way or did you just get horribly lost?

(The messenger gave a single laugh.)

MESSENGER: No, no, I've come a long way!

KRITZ: Then you'd better come in; I'll get you some water!

MESSENGER: Thank you!

(As Phisele kindly held the door, Kritz picked up the twins and went inside the house.

A minute or so later, inside the living room of their abode, Flaxley and Kritz stood waiting for the messenger to finish his drink while Phisele kept the twins entertained on the floor. Flaxley could be extremely impatient and tapped his leg awaiting the messenger to state his business.)

FLAXLEY: No hurry!

(Kritz nudged him.)

KRITZ: Don't be so rude!

(As he took the tankard from his lips, the messenger looked to Flaxley.)

MESSENGER: I apologise. Now...

(With that, he reached to pull a folded scroll from his tunic.)

MESSENGER: I bring you a message from her majesty Queen Mandika the first of Guevina.

FLAXLEY: Mandika?

KRITZ: Is she okay?

(The messenger gave them a blank look.)

MESSENGER: I just deliver the messages I'm given.

(With that, he pulled open the scroll and leant back to read it in his best regal voice.)

MESSENGER: The message reads as thus, "For some reason the queen wants that useless twat Flaxley to come as soon as possible, though god only knows why. Like things aren't difficult enough without that bumbling buffoon in the way..."

(The messenger gulped as he looked at Flaxley's rapidly reddening face.)

MESSENGER: I didn't write it. I just read what's on the scroll.

(Although what he was saying was true, Flaxley was far from appeased.)

FLAXLEY: And what else does it say?

MESSENGER: Okay... just remember that I didn't write it!

(He nervously cleared his throat then continued.)

MESSENGER: It says "And that fit wife of his has to come too. Phwoar, I wouldn't mind bending her over the battlements, I tell you."

(With Flaxley growling at him from only a few feet away, the messenger started to sweat as he read on down the page.)

MESSENGER: It goes on to say, "Oh, and tell them to bring some guy called Derek. And something about it being urgent, imperative or something like that. Not that a cock like Flaxley would know what imperative means. Tell them she's in great danger, I don't know, just make it sound urgent."

(With that, he lowered the scroll and trembled.)

MESSENGER: He must have dictated it!

(Receiving nothing but icy stares by way of a reply, the messenger shrunk and spoke up in a small voice.)

MESSENGER: Please don't kill me!

(Looking decidedly livid, Flaxley threw his arms into the air.)

FLAXLEY: Fucking Guevina. How can one place have so many village idiots?

(Dismayed by Flaxley's reaction to the message, Kritz scowled at him urgently.)

KRITZ: Flaxley, weren't you paying attention?

FLAXLEY: Oh, I was paying attention alright!

KRITZ: Mandika's in danger. We have to help her right now!

(Flaxley looked baffled.)

FLAXLEY: She's in danger? What in the world makes you think that?

KRITZ: The message said so!

(Flaxley gave her a doubting glance.)

FLAXLEY: What are you talking about, Kritzeveltia?

(Kritz frowned.)

KRITZ: All you heard were the insults about you, wasn't it?

FLAXLEY: There was other stuff in there?

KRITZ: Yes, numb nuts. That was Mandika's cry for help!

FLAXLEY: What? Funny way of asking for help, isn't it? Come to Guevina and help me, you useless cock!

(He then paused and looked to the ceiling thoughtfully.)

FLAXLEY: Though that does sound like something she'd say!

KRITZ: *She* didn't say those things, for fuck sake. Messenger, tell her we're on our way!

MESSENGER: Right. I apologise for having read that. When I get back to Guevina I shall tell the queen your reply then find the guard who gave me that message and run him through with my horse.

(And with that, the messenger was on his way again.)

KRITZ: Flaxley, get your sword! We're going to Guevina!

(Flaxley stamped his foot like a disagreeable infant.)

FLAXLEY: Oh, but Kritz!

KRITZ: Go on!

FLAXLEY: Do I have to?

KRITZ: Yes!!!

(Flaxley hung his head.)

FLAXLEY: Fine! But I'm doing this for you. You know I hate Guevina!

KRITZ: Yes, you have mentioned that once or twice!

FLAXLEY: They think I'm Lefiat, Kritz!

(He pointed at his chest.)

FLAXLEY: According to them I'm the bumbling idiot. Me!!! And they think *he's* the hero!!! I mean, how stupid are they? I don't want to go!

(Kritz rolled her eyes.)

KRITZ: Look, I'll get the kids sorted while you sort out the carriage. If you're quick I'll give you a treat while you're driving.

(If there was one thing that would always motivate Flaxley, it was a "treat" from Kritz. Making no further complaints, he swiftly raced outside to prepare the carriage with a delighted expression on his face. Left behind, Kritz allowed herself a chuckle then looked down to where Phisele was playing with the toddlers.)

KRITZ: Sorry to miss your birthday, Phisele, but Flaxley and I have will have to go away as soon as your mum gets back.

(Phisele pouted at her sorrowfully.)

PHISELE: But... I wanted you to come to my party.

KRITZ: I know, sweetheart, but we can't. I tell you what, we'll buy you an extra present when we get back. I know it won't make up for not being here with you...

PHISELE: The hell it won't. I accept! Make it something expensive.

(Kritz looked most put out.)

KRITZ: What an appalling attitude!

PHISELE: I'm eleven! I like presents. Sue me.

(As Phisele climbed to her feet and headed for the toilet, Kritz watched her go and sighed to herself.)

KRITZ: She's so much like me, it's frightening.

(When Phisele's mum returned with Phisele's present a few minutes later, she wasn't

surprised to be asked to baby-sit again. Nor did she mind. Not only did she adore children, but she charged by the hour and whenever Flaxley and Kritz went away, they tended to rack up quite a hefty bill. It was an expense that Flaxley and Kritz were happy to accept, however. Knowing their children would be in safe hands was priceless.)

(Having not been listening to the messenger properly, Flaxley was very much unaware of the urgency with which his presence in Guevina was required. This didn't slow him down, however. The impending treat from Kritz was all he needed to be ready in no time at all. Having collected Derek, the carriage was ready to leave within 20 minutes of receiving the message.

As they set off, Derek found himself travelling in the compartment alone, desperately trying to block out the sounds of Flaxley expressing his delight at the oral pleasuring he was receiving from Kritz as he led the horses forth. It was a plight that doubled when, half way through the trip, Flaxley and Kritz went in the compartment and he had to drive. As he struggled to keep the rocking carriage on all four wheels, he could barely contain his contempt.)

DEREK: That's just wrong, that is!

(The reason Kritz was so determined to throw her husband copious amounts of sex along the way was simple. Despite its poor delivery, the message sounded urgent. Reading between the lines she could picture a terrified Mandika, and being intimate with Flaxley was just what she needed to take her mind off of it. Having read her mind, Derek fully understood her urgency and he too could have done with some company along the way. Instead he had to listen to Flaxley and Kritz doing the filthy. Suffice to say, he was not a happy alien. Mercifully for him, however, twelve hours into the trip, the exhausted Kritz gave up the ghost and dosed off. Peace at last. Rather chuffed with himself for having worn out his extremely athletic wife, Flaxley then joined in him atop the carriage and he finally had someone to talk to.

Despite Derek telling him otherwise, the urgent nature of their visit to Guevina didn't hit Flaxley until they neared the end of the long eighteen hour journey. He'd convinced himself that Mandika's crisis was probably something trivial, such as having a bad hair day that she wanted Kritz to fix. As a result, when Guevina finally came into view, he received the shock of his life. At once, his jaw dropped. He could barely believe his eyes. Derek had understood the urgency from the off, but he too was horrified by the sight before them.)

FLAXLEY: Well, I'll be...

DEREK: What the hell?

(Guevina, normally a glorious sight on the horizon at this point of the journey was directly beneath the blackest rain cloud they'd ever seen. The top of the tallest tower had disappeared inside the cloud and bolts of lightning were firing down every few seconds. Despite being only a short mile away, however, the carriage was still under blue skies and a burning sun. Immediately, it was obvious that this was more than just an ordinary weather anomaly.)

DEREK: I've got a bad feeling about this, Flaxley!

FLAXLEY: So have I. That's no ordinary storm, Derek.

DEREK: I know. It's magical; you can smell it in the air.

(Flaxley clenched his fist and gritted his teeth.)

FLAXLEY: Damn it, Mandika and Bonson are in there!

DEREK: And Lefiat!

FLAXLEY: Priorities, Derek! Can't this thing go any faster?

(Derek gave him a sideways glance.)

DEREK: You know damn well it can't!

FLAXLEY: Well... good thing we came as soon as we could, though god knows what we'll find!

(Just then, Kritz's voice rose up from the carriage.)

KRITZ: Fucking hell!!!

(Flaxley looked over the side of the carriage and saw Kritz with her head out of the window staring open mouthed at Guevina in bewilderment.)

FLAXLEY: You okay, my love?

(She looked up at Flaxley.)

KRITZ: What in the hell is that?

FLAXLEY: I don't know but you can bet your arse it's not a natural.

KRITZ: Shit, Flaxley... if that's something magical we ought to turn around go back to Tifaeris right now!

(Flaxley was dumbfounded by her suggestion.)

FLAXLEY: But... Mandika's in there!

(As the wind whistled through her hair, Kritz mused for a moment then looked up to Flaxley again wearing an uneasy expression.)

KRITZ: I know but... look, she's had a good innings...

FLAXLEY: She's 23!

KRITZ: Even so...

FLAXLEY: I can't believe you'd even suggest for a minute that we don't save her! It's not like you to shy away from a fight!

(Having read her mind, Derek nudged Flaxley.)

DEREK: She isn't worried about a fight; she's worried about what'll happen to your kids if anything happens to you two. Go easy on her!

(Flaxley looked to him and nodded to acknowledge his words before leaning back over the side of the carriage again.)

FLAXLEY: Kritz?

KRITZ: Yeah?

FLAXLEY: Don't be such a pathetic wimp! Whatever mystical force is causing that storm is irrelevant, our friend is in there and we need to rescue her!

(Pouting sorrowfully, Kritz then slipped back into the carriage and out of sight.)

DEREK: So much for going easy on her!

(Flaxley folded his arms.)

FLAXLEY: Derek, that's the different between you and me. I know how to handle my women. Sometimes they need the man to take charge and guide them with a firm hand. (Just then, there was a tremendous ripping sound as Kritz's head tore straight through the cloth roof just behind them. Looking utterly furious, she immediately started to whack Flaxley on the head with her boot.)

FLAXLEY: Hey!!!

KRITZ: Don't *ever* call me a pathetic wimp!!! I'll give *you* a firm hand, you bastard!

FLAXLEY: Oi! Ow! You ripped the roof you dozy... ouch!

(Satisfied she'd hit him enough, she desisted then looked at the freak cloud over Guevina wearing a lost expression.)

KRITZ: You think witches are doing that?

(Rubbing his sore head, Flaxley turned and glared at her.)

FLAXLEY: I don't know but whatever it is, facing that will be nothing compared to facing you.

DEREK: I doubt it's witches, Kritz. To conjure a storm like that takes more power than a thousand witches could ever muster. The mages behind this must be exceptional and they mean business, that's for certain.

(When Derek made reference to the power of the mages behind the storm, he could have had no idea how right he was. The mages creating the storm were indeed a power beyond human or alien conception. That power was the elders. Watching everything that was happening in Guevina from the sanctum of light, via a crystal viewing sphere, Daman and Liege were on edge to say the least.)

DAMAN: The pieces are falling into place, Liege!

(Liege shook his head anxiously.)

LIEGE: I don't like it, Daman; Everkei grows stronger by the minute. If he breaks out any time soon...

DAMAN: Liege, we must not panic, the actors are all on the stage. We just need to them learn their parts. It's not far away.

LIEGE: Four hundred years, Daman. To mess it up now would be unforgivable.

DAMAN: I know. Not that there'd be anyone left alive *to* forgive us.

(Liege held his head in his hands.)

DAMAN: Try not to panic, Liege. The soul sphere is already charged... all we can do now is pray we've timed everything else perfectly.

(As the elders continued to stare down into Guevina and pray for time, Flaxley, Kritz and Derek arrived at Guevina's city gates. On foot. Having had to stash the carriage in the relative safety of some trees then walk the last two hundred feet after their horses refused to go any further, the first thing they came across was a huge hole in the main gate blown out by the lightning. Hunching their shoulders in a vain attempt to protect themselves from the violent downpour that had terrified the horses, they surveyed the damage anxiously.)

FLAXLEY: Shit!

(Kritz bit her lip.)

KRITZ: Let's just get Mandika out as quickly as we can, I don't like this!

DEREK: I agree!

FLAXLEY: Okay. Let's go!

(As they made their way through the gaping hole, they all stopped dead in their tracks and gaped in disbelief at the sight that greeted them. It had been nearly thirty five hours

since Mandika had made her request for their assistance and the troubles had escalated immensely. Once proud buildings were burnt out wrecks and smoke was billowing out from the smouldering wreckage of others. There were bodies strewn about the square and people were fighting in every direction. Fist fights, sword fights, unprovoked stabbings, all in the cold light of day. You could practically smell the anger in the air. Watching on in dismay, Derek gritted teeth and looked to Flaxley.)

DEREK: This storm... it's the source of the rage!

(Squinting as the rain lashed onto his face, Flaxley glanced down at him uneasily.)

FLAXLEY: What do you mean?

DEREK: Something mystical is going on here, Flaxley. Whatever's causing this kind of anger isn't normal. It has something to do with the storm, I'm sure of it.

FLAXLEY: I reckon you're right, Derek.

KRITZ: Look, never mind nattering, let's just get to the castle and find Mandika.

FLAXLEY: Right. Good point. We came to save Mandika so let's do that.

(As they started to hurry forth in the direction of the castle, however, two men charged at them from the side of a burnt out house. Looking almost rabid with anger contorting their faces, they made no secret of their desire to kill them, screaming it out loud for all to hear.)

FLAXLEY: Think again!

(Flaxley swiftly pulled his blade and skewered one while knocking the other out with a deft left hook.)

FLAXLEY: Fools!

(He then looked to Kritz and Derek with urgency on his face.)

FLAXLEY: They won't be the last, I feel. I hope you're feeling fit, Kritz, Derek... it's time to run the gauntlet!

(Kritz nodded.)

KRITZ: Whatever, I'm more than ready to kick arse!

DEREK: I'm in!

FLAXLEY: Then, to the castle!

(With that, they sprinted off in the direction of the castle flattening anyone who got in their path. At first it was easy to shove aside the potential trouble makers but as they neared the castle, the crowd grew thicker and thicker until they were forced to slow to a complete standstill.)

FLAXLEY: Crap!

(Being taller than most, Flaxley peered over the top of the thick crowd and snarled.)

FLAXLEY: It aint gonna be easy getting through there.

(Sure enough, the angry mob they were standing behind was a thousand strong, made up of those determined to remove Mandika from power. In front of *them* stood several hundred loyal royalists and the army on guard at the gates.)

KRITZ: Now what?

(Flaxley slipped his sword back in its sheath.)

FLAXLEY: Well, Mandika asked for our presence and that's what she's going to get!

DEREK: Okay, so what's the plan?

(Flaxley tried to hide the urge to smile.)

FLAXLEY: It's bulldozer time!

(Just then, an out of control, drunken rioter made the fatal mistake of feeling up Kritz's

behind.)

RIOTER: This one's mine, lads! She's fucking fit!!!

(As his unconscious body hit the ground, Kritz blew on her fist and nodded to Flaxley.)

KRITZ: Go for it, my love, this is no place for a babe like me!

(Flaxley beamed.)

FLAXLEY: Just follow my trail!

(He then put his head down and proceeded to plough through the crowd. With extraordinary strength, he barged and threw everyone in his path, clearing a route for Kritz and Derek to follow. As the two of them raced behind, watching in amazement as people were cast aside with swift regularity, Kritz received several unwanted slaps to her shapely backside. As a result, when it came to the public of Guevina, she was very quickly coming round to Flaxley's way of thinking.)

KRITZ: Next one that slaps my arse is going to lose his hand!

DEREK: You're arsehole aint *that* big, Kritz. Bonson *maybe*!

(Kritz was highly amused, although somewhat surprised to hear such a thing from Derek of all people.)

KRITZ: I can't believe you said that!

DEREK: He's said far worse about *me*!

KRITZ: Well, yeah, that's true.

(As Flaxley reached the middle of the enormous crowd, where the anti-royalists met their royalist counterparts, his grin grew even wider. Now they were facing him and he'd be able to see the looks on their faces as he grabbed or threw them. It wouldn't normally have occurred to Flaxley to treat ordinary folk in such a manner but these were Guevina folk. He had a special place in his heart for them, the same place he kept things like leprosy. His deep feelings of revulsion left him with no reservations about being as rough with them as he wanted and he was carving through them in no time at all. Just behind, Derek and Kritz were taking full advantage of the clearing he was creating and were hot on his heels leaving a trail of injured people in their wake. Most were injured by Flaxley's actions but several were screaming from the pain in their broken fingers having wronged Kritz.)

KRITZ: What's wrong with these people? Hands off!!!

(Enjoying himself immensely, it was only a short matter of time before Flaxley charged right through the royalist ranks and started to plough his way through the Guevina soldiers.)

GUARD 1: Halt!

(Failing miserably in his bid to stop him, the guard flew 10 feet to the right.)

GUARD 2: He said halt!!!

(This guard flew 10 feet to the other side.)

GUARD 3: Desist!!!

(Flaxley just ran through this one.)

GUARD 4: Please don't hurt me!

(He did. Moments later, Flaxley, Kritz and Derek found themselves racing into the castle with a large group of guards hot on their heels.)

FLAXLEY: I thoroughly bloody enjoyed that.

DEREK: We noticed!

FLAXLEY: It's actually tempting to go back out there and do it again!

KRITZ: Later, my love. And I'll be only too happy to help. Guevina folk are a bunch of cun...

FLAXLEY: Never mind that, we have to find Mandika.

DEREK: You used to be her knight; you tell *us* where she'll be!

(Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: Let's try her chamber!

DEREK: Good idea.

(With that, both he and Derek took a swift left down a spacious corridor and almost left Kritz behind.)

FLAXLEY: This way, darling!!!

(Flaxley's guess proved to be spot on. With the group of guards still hot on their heels, they charged to the bottom of the corridor and barged into Mandika chamber at the end. Upon sighting Mandika, however, they then stopped dead and turned around to face the door wearing horrified expressions.)

FLAXLEY: Good god, Mandika!

DEREK: Indeed!

KRITZ: Yeah, good on you babe, but damn!

(Looking absolutely horrified, Mandika sat up screaming and reached down the bed for her robe while the two men she'd been in bed with made a swift dash for the side exit.)

FLAXLEY: Good on her, Kritz?

(Kritz shrugged.)

KRITZ: Well yeah, looked like fun. Kinda reminded me of my time in Azagotse, actually.

FLAXLEY: I don't wanna know!

(As Kritz hid her chuckle from Flaxley, Mandika tied up her robe, leapt from her bed then started to approach them. Her face bore a look of utter relief.)

MANDIKA: Guys...

(Before she could utter another word, however, the pack of guards who'd been chasing them rushed into the room.)

FLAXLEY: A-ha!!!

(Flaxley immediately yanked out his sword and charged at them only for Mandika to spoil it all by yelling at him.)

MANDIKA: No, Flaxley, no!!! I need my guards alive!

(As Flaxley came to an abrupt halt, she then waved to the guards.)

MANDIKA: Piss off you lot!

(Flaxley hung his head.)

FLAXLEY: But... I wanted to kill them.

(He watched them leave with a saddened look on his face and sighed to himself.)

FLAXLEY: Maybe later then.

(As he turned he saw Mandika crying her eyes out in Kritz's arms. Mandika was often a drama queen but this time there was nothing fake about her sadness. The tears were genuine. Kritz squeezed her tight and tried to reassure her the best she could by stroking her hair. Watching on, Flaxley sighed. He too, hated to see Mandika down like this. Feeling it was the right thing to do, he then stepped up behind Mandika and joined in the hug, sandwiching her between himself and Kritz. Squashed her half to death, Mandika's eyes bulged and she whimpered for breath. Luckily for her, Kritz managed to wriggled

free and chastise him.)

KRITZ: What you trying to do, Flaxley? Stop it!

(Flaxley let go and shrugged innocently.)

FLAXLEY: Sorry, thought I was helping!

KRITZ: By squeezing the piss out of the poor girl?

FLAXLEY: I was being reassuring.

KRITZ: Yeah, suffocation is *very* reassuring!

FLAXLEY: Excuse me?

KRITZ: You hug like a bear, Flaxley. And you wonder why the kids cry when you hug them.

(As they stood there scowling at one another, Derek's angry voice filled the room. At once, they turned to see Mandika holding him over her shoulder like a baby to hug him.)

DEREK: I told you before, kneel if you want to hug me! Put me down, this is humiliating.

(She set him down then looked across the faces of her three friends.)

MANDIKA: I love you guys. You don't know what it means to me to have you here. It's been hell.

FLAXLEY: It didn't look like hell from where we were standing. In fact, you looked delirious with joy.

(Mandika hung her head.)

MANDIKA: I was taking my mind off of things!

(Kritz nodded.)

KRITZ: Yeah, we can relate to that. We did exactly the same thing all the way here! Well... not exactly that... just two at a time. And by two at a time I mean just Flaxley and me... not Derek. Derek was driving... and besides, he's an alien, how sick do you think I am? I'll shut up now I think.

(Having given his wife a sufficient disapproving glance, Flaxley stood tall, eager to get down to business. His dedication as a knight, unbending as ever.)

FLAXLEY: Anyway... it's chaos out there. What gives, Mandika?

(Mandika bit her lip.)

MANDIKA: Um... I think you'd better sit down.

(Having all taken a seat around the little table in Mandika's chamber, Flaxley, Derek and Kritz all sat forward, eager to hear what had happened to cause such chaos and civil unrest. Mandika, however, wasn't finding words easy to come by. Looking unsure of herself she stared at her feet, hoping someone else could start her off. Naturally Kritz, ever in search of gossip, was quick to try.)

KRITZ: You can tell us Mandika. Have the riots got something to do with Lefiat? Did you sack him and everyone went ape?

(Mandika shrugged.)

KRITZ: So you didn't sack him yet then?

(Mandika raised her head.)

KRITZ: I thought you'd have sacked him by now to be honest.

(As Mandika eventually tried to speak, Kritz continued.)

KRITZ: He didn't accidentally summon that evil cloud, did he? Only nothing would

surprise me.

MANDIKA: Well...

(Kritz then looked to the ceiling and mused out loud.)

KRITZ: I wonder if Bonson knows what that cloud is!

(Flaxley rolled his eyes.)

FLAXLEY: Maybe Mandika does but I guess we'll never know, will we?

KRITZ: No? Why not?

FLAXLEY: Because you won't shut up and let her tell us!

(Kritz snarled at him coldly.)

FLAXLEY: Put the dagger looks away, this about Mandika, not you!

KRITZ: We'll see!

DEREK: Mandika, well?

(Mandika sighed.)

MANDIKA: I sacked Lefiat but it's not about that. I just showed the people some muscle bound guy in a suit of armour and told them *he* was Lefiat.

KRITZ: Sly one.

MANDIKA: Yeah.

FLAXLEY: So what on earth's going on? That storm is insane!

MANDIKA: It's been hanging around for months but that's not the problem either.

FLAXLEY: Then?

(Looking like she was about to cry again, Mandika hung her head.)

MANDIKA: It's Bonson!

DEREK: Bonson?

FLAXLEY: That old git?

KRITZ: What did he do?

MANDIKA: Um... he told me his secret.

(Kritz's eyes bulged; this was like all her birthday's coming at once.)

KRITZ: I want details, not just details, I want dates, times, everything. Oh my god, you're so lucky, I've been dying know his secret for like... forever!

(Mandika gave her a disapproving look.)

MANDIKA: Lucky? Lucky am I?

KRITZ: Damn right!

MANDIKA: Yeah? How does finding out Bonson's my biological father make me lucky?

(Suddenly, there was silence. A silence filled with abject horror. There was no way in the world Kritz would be able to answer *that* question well. And yet she had a go anyway.)

KRITZ: Um... I suppose you're lucky in a way... at least it's someone you know!

(She hung her head as Flaxley swung himself around to face her.)

FLAXLEY: Kritz, you know there comes a time when...

KRITZ: I know, I know! I'll be quiet!

(Mandika sighed and gave her a reassuring smile.)

MANDIKA: I know you meant well, Kritz.

KRITZ: I did! Thanks, babe!

MANDIKA: See, I threw him out for belittling and disrespecting me so he told me the secret just in the hope I'd let him stay.

FLAXLEY: That's awful; even by *his* standards!

MANDIKA: It gets worse. Who do you think instigated all those riots out there?
(They all looked stunned, not to mention horrified.)

KRITZ: Bonson did that?

DEREK: Well, that's not on!

FLAXLEY: Wait! He told you he's your father, you threw him out anyway, so he raised a mob to dethrone you?

MANDIKA: Yeah! That's it in a nutshell!

DEREK: You mean he's doing all this out of spite despite being your father?
(Mandika sighed.)

MANDIKA: I never thought he'd stoop this low but people have been acting really strange since the storms started.
(Derek nodded.)

DEREK: I sensed that actually. There's an anger out there that doesn't feel real to me. We Leramites can sense magic in the air, you see; and there's definitely something amiss.

FLAXLEY: So you think Bonson is being influenced by some kind of magical energy?

DEREK: To take it this far? Yes I do. I've been inside his head, Flaxley and this is terrible even by his low standards.

(For the first time since her friends had arrived, Mandika looked full of hope.)

MANDIKA: So you think there's a spell? So there's a chance we can break it and things will return to normal?

DEREK: That remains to be seen.

FLAXLEY: Okay, well in the meantime, Mandika, there's chaos out there. Just tell me what you want me to do.

KRITZ: Obviously she wants us to try to stop it!

MANDIKA: Yeah!

(She gave him a cheesy grin.)

MANDIKA: And protect *me* of course!

FLAXLEY: Consider it done! Just lend me an army unit and I'll crush the rebels in no time.

MANDIKA: Done.

(Kritz looked Mandika in the eye.)

KRITZ: See? It'll all work out brilliantly.

MANDIKA: Thanks, Kritz...

(She gave her a wide smile.)

MANDIKA: Babe!

(As Kritz and Mandika shared a warm smile, Derek shook an angry head.)

DEREK: I can't believe Bonson told you something as big as that just to save his own arse. That's just wrong. And then to start a public revolt against you... so wrong.

(At this point something dawned on Mandika and her nostrils started to flare.)

MANDIKA: Hold on one god damned minute here, Derek.

(Knowing full well what her beef was, Derek shied away.)

DEREK: Uh-oh!

MANDIKA: You can read minds! If Bonson thinks it, you hear it. That means you've known his secret for what... six years!!! And you kept it to yourself!!!

DEREK: Um... about that...

MANDIKA: You dirty, low down, slimy alien bag of shit!
DEREK: Steady on!
FLAXLEY: Be fair, Mandika, it wasn't Derek's place to tell and he probably figured you were best left not knowing.
MANDIKA: If you had a prick like Bonson for a father wouldn't *you* want to know???
(Flaxley and Kritz looked at one another and shuddered.)
FLAXLEY: Good god, no!
KRITZ: Definitely not.
DEREK: Which makes Bonson in the wrong for telling you, and me in the right for not doing so!
(Mandika sighed.)
MANDIKA: I made such a fuss about having royal blood from both parents that time, remember? Turns out I was wrong; I'm only of royal blood on my mother's side. My father's side...
(She started to cry.)
MANDIKA: I'm half peasant!!!
(Kritz leant away from her.)
KRITZ: I'm not consoling you about that one.
MANDIKA: But... I need a hug for so *many* reasons. Bonson's my father, for fuck sake.
(Kritz sucked her teeth.)
KRITZ: Ouch. Come here, babe. That one definitely demands a hug.
FLAXLEY: Indeed.
KRITZ: Not from you!!!
FLAXLEY: Oh, will you just... fine. Just point me to my army unit and I'll get organising them. You two can paint each other's nails or something. Bloody women.
(With Derek, Flaxley and Kritz onside, Mandika's spirit returned. She'd been half expecting the castle to be breached at some point and her life to be in danger. With Flaxley to protect her, however, that fear had been eradicated. The major problem that remained for Mandika now was that her kingdom currently consisted of wrecked buildings and thousands of angry, lawless people with no homes to go back to. Not to mention the mysterious, havoc-wreaking rain cloud overhead.)

(Apart from the heavily fortified castle, there was only one other building in Guevina that remained wholly intact. In a testament to the priorities of the Guevina public, that building was the inn. "They may take our lives, but they'll never take our ale supply" would be a fitting motto for this city. If the royalists had known that the inn was the current headquarters of the dissidents and their leader, Bonson, they would have undoubtedly attacked it. As things stood, however, Bonson had found the perfect sanctuary from which to make his speeches. The royalists were too busy protecting the castle to stop in for an ale, so his audience was one hundred percent on his side. And so, with Lefiat by his side, he'd spent the last two days passionately rallying the revolutionaries every time they came back in for a crafty ale.

The whole thing had lost Lefiat some time ago. All he knew was that Guevina was in chaos, people were a lot dumber than he thought and that he didn't like what was

happening. Having been well versed in the knights code, despite understanding very little of it, he also knew the current situation was morally and ethically wrong. He just didn't know what to do about it. As a result he sat quietly while Bonson kept up his animated propaganda mongering. With the inn doors wedged open, angry anti-royalists were toing and froing and the bar was constantly full. Taking full advantage of this, Bonson had adopted a tall, proud stance and was shaking his fist a lot in an attempt to make himself look every inch the great thinker and leader he was pretending to be.)

BONSON: This city, this great city... this is the people's city!

(He looked across at those listening to his every word, nodding like mindless drones.)

BONSON: This city does not belong to one woman. We are not here to serve her greed while we starve and struggle in the lawless streets.

(He nodded determinedly.)

BONSON: She sleeps in a vast chamber under silk sheets while we, the ones she bleeds dry with her merciless taxes, we sleep coldly beneath torn and tattered sheets praying that tomorrow we can find a way to afford to eat.

(He shook a sorrowful head.)

BONSON: And all the while she's eating prime beef and laughing at us!

(He nodded.)

BONSON: She always said the peasants are revolting, well we are now! And we will have no sympathy for that tyrant when we take back what is ours!

(He then scratched behind his ear.)

BONSON: Don't harm her though... um...

(He stood akimbo and thrust back his head.)

BONSON: Go!!! Storm the castle, take down anyone who gets in the way and join me in laughing as we watch our queen leave the city in rags.

(A huge cheer erupted.)

BONSON: Let her know how it feels to be poor!!!

(Another huge cheer followed. Surprisingly, so did an angry, disagreeing voice.)

LEFIAT: Stop this madness!!!

(At once, the noise in the bar came to an abrupt halt and silence filled the air. All you could hear was the sounds of the fighting that raged on outside. All eyes were on Lefiat.)

BONSON: You favour the queen, Le...

(He folded his arms.)

BONSON: Some bloke I don't know?

(Lefiat shook his head angrily. Having listened to Bonson talk rubbish for hours on end the gangly halfwit had finally snapped.)

LEFIAT: I hate Mandika. She's nothing but a cold, selfish bitch. She's never thought about anyone but herself but that's not the point!

(Many of the watching revolutionaries gave him cold sneers and put down their drinks.)

DRINKER 1: What is your point then?

LANDLORD: Yeah, what are you moaning about if you hate her as much as we do?

(Lefiat sighed heavily.)

LEFIAT: Look, you talk about not hurting Mandika like it makes you the good guys!

(Bonson frowned.)

BONSON: Well it does. We hold the moral high ground, we always have.

LEFIAT: No we don't. We're just rioting and starting fights. There's nothing moral

about it at all. Where's the honour?

DRINKER 1: Anyone mind if I stab this idiot? He's getting on my nerves!

DRINKER 2: Fine by me, I'll even lend you my knife!

LEFIAT: No, hear me out. If we want to oust Mandika we need to do it properly.

BONSON: Le... bloke who I've never seen before, you're talking nonsense.

LEFIAT: No I'm not. If we want to do this, let's do it right. Let's do battle. Fight them properly and do it with honour. No more of this mindless, random violence.

LANDLORD: Idiot. Come here and be killed!

(As a devilish glint appeared in Bonson's eyes, he stepped in front of Lefiat to address the crowd.)

BONSON: People. The odd looking bloke who I don't know or have ever met before has made an excellent point. We must fight with honour!

LEFIAT: I just bloody said that!

BONSON: Let us arrange a battle. A battle for the very future of Guevina. Let the violence be ended and tomorrow on the morn we should return for one final melee.

When the battle is done, let the wounded be healed and the winners, us, claim the spoils of our victory.

(The assembly before him looked to one another.)

DRINKER 1: I could use a break from all this fighting I suppose!

LANDLORD: Bonson, I like your way of thinking. If we continue as we are now, there'll be no-one left alive.

DRINKER 2: Except the queen. She's sitting pretty up in the castle.

BONSON: Exactly. And if she's the last one standing then it kind of defeats the object of our revolution, doesn't it?

(The landlord stood tall.)

LANDLORD: Leave it to me. I know exactly who's organising the queen's supporters. I'll talk to him right away!.

(He clambered over the bar and leapt down the other side.)

LANDLORD: Watch the bar, wenches. And some of you come with me; I need cover if I'm going out there!

(And with that, he raced out of the bar to a deafening cheer.)

BONSON: Excellent!

(Moments later, the landlord re-emerged looking peeved.)

LANDLORD: I said "some of you come with me; I need cover if I'm going out there".

DRINKER 1: I'm with you, Landlord!

(Six drinkers in all volunteered and they raced out of the inn looking determined. As he watched them go, Bonson was singing inside. He loved having power over people's minds and he knew that should they be successful in what they were trying to achieve, they'd undoubtedly elect him as their new leader. He was already beginning to fantasise about the castle becoming his presidential palace. Most of all he was looking forward to sitting back with a smile on his face while his maid, Mandika washed his feet.)

BONSON: Bloody marvellous.

(Up in the sanctum of light at this time, as ever, the elders were watching everything.)

DAMAN: So there it is. The morrow. Dawn.

(Liege nodded.)

LIEGE: I can't guarantee split second timing here, Daman, but that looks about right.

DAMAN: Everkei is definitely moving. He's almost ready.

LIEGE: I know.

(He shook his head.)

LIEGE: I can't believe the day we've been dreading is almost upon us.

DAMAN: I know. Thankfully everything is as scheduled; the pieces are falling into place.

LIEGE: Even then nothing is guaranteed, Daman. Everkei is a formidable foe. I just hope we've done enough to outsmart him!

(Daman looked him in the eye.)

DAMAN: Well, come the morrow we'll find out.

(Liege nodded nervously then looked to the viewing sphere.)

LIEGE: Don't be a fool!!!

(Daman swiftly spun his head and looked into the sphere. They both watched in horror as a desperate looking royal guard sneaked up to a secluded section of the city wall, behind the inn and yanked his trousers down.)

GUARD: Thank the heavens!

(As he started to urinate up the city wall, however, he was then sucked through it with a phenomenal force, disintegrating him instantly. He didn't even have time to scream before his blood splattered everywhere and fragments of his shattered skeleton and armour shot into the air. Liege and Daman winced.)

LIEGE: He didn't stand a chance.

(Daman gritted his teeth angrily.)

DAMAN: Everkei is definitely breaking through, I'm not sure we can wait until dawn.

LIEGE: Can we do anything about it?

(Daman shook a frustrated head.)

DAMAN: I don't think so. Everything is in place for the battle at dawn, if he comes early... everyone is as good as dead!

One Hour Later...

(Sure enough, the elders plan for a battle, a plan that Bonson was under the mistaken illusion was his, had been agreed upon. The royalists had agreed to the dawn rendezvous without hesitation. At sun up on the following morning they would meet up and bring the bloody dispute to an end. Those who were partaking in the violence for the sake of violence itself cared little about this arrangement, however; they'd be out fighting until there was no-one left to fight with. Those passionately concerned about the monarchy issue, on the other hand, returned to the shells of their homes to try and get some rest before fighting for what they genuinely believed was right come daybreak. There was no middle ground. The citizens with a point of view about the queen only saw things in black and white. There was right and there was wrong. They'd either battle with everything they had in her honour or they'd battle with everything they had to end her reign. Neutrality was non-existent. The elders had made sure of this.

With the battle agreement now in place, the chaos soon died down in the main square but tensions remained at fever pitch. Tomorrow would be a turning point in the future of every single man, woman and child in the entire city.

It would be safe to say that if Bonson had known Sir Flaxley was in the castle, he'd have abandoned his delusion about becoming president and fled the city. He knew all about Flaxley's stunning battle tactics and phenomenal strength and wouldn't have even considered being involved in a fight where *he* was on the opposing side. Safe in the delusion that Flaxley was miles away in Tifaeris, however, Bonson was convinced that the morning would bring forth his ascent to the role of president. He had absolutely no idea that over in the castle at this time, Flaxley was equally as convinced that he wasn't.)

Guevina Castle – Long Room

(Leading the Guevina army wasn't going to be an easy undertaking for Sir Flaxley. It had been quite a while since he was Guevina's royal knight and the troops he'd been asked to lead didn't know him as the mighty warrior that Bonson knew. They only knew the lies and mistruths that he was a useless idiot with the IQ of a tree and the sword skills of a walrus. As a result, he was finding the job of training the unit he'd been assigned quite infuriating.)

As the soldiers stood in a line against the wall in the long room, Flaxley paced before them with a snarl on his face. He could tell they had no respect for him from the mere look on their faces, not to mention their sarcastic retorts to everything he said. Feeling no love for Guevina folk in the first place, Flaxley wasn't about to tolerate this for long. Pacing purposefully before them, sick of their disrespectful attitude, he first issued a warning.)

FLAXLEY: What I'm trying to teach you fools, might just save your lives. So, if you won't respect me enough to listen, I'll just have to beat some respect into you. Anyone got a smart arse comment to make about that?

(Most of the guards opted for giving him a doubting glance, one however, laughed out loud.)

FLAXLEY: Something amuses you?

(The guard scoffed.)

GUARD 1: Actually it does. Everybody knows you couldn't beat an unarmed blind man even if he laid down and begged you to kill him.

(All the guards chuckled heartily.)

GUARD 2: Nice one.

(Flaxley nodded and looked the guard in the eye.)

FLAXLEY: You got a name, son?

GUARD 1: Nah, my parents didn't give me one. They were very busy people you see.

FLAXLEY: Then I'll refer to you as I see fit.

(He gestured to the floor beside him.)

FLAXLEY: Come here, shit face.

(The guard glared coldly his way.)

FLAXLEY: What, you scared?

(The guard scoffed and paced over to him.)

GUARD 1: Scared of you? That's a laugh.

FLAXLEY: Right.

(He raised his voice.)

FLAXLEY: This goes for all of you. I'm going to give this prick 10 seconds to attack me with all he's got. If he wins, then I'll be dead and you can all go about your business. If I win, you'll...

(He gave a knowing smile.)

FLAXLEY: Be next if you give me any lip!

(The guard gave him a disbelieving look.)

GUARD 1: You're giving me ten seconds to attack you?

(Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: Yup, and to make it even I'll put my sword away.

(As he slipped his sword in its sheath, the guard scoffed.)

GUARD 1: Even? Full of yourself, aren't you?

(The guards all stood tall and watched on merrily expecting Flaxley to be savaged and killed.)

FLAXLEY: Ready when you are!

GUARD 1: You just want me to attack you?

FLAXLEY: I do.

(The guard beamed and held his sword before him, flexing his wrist as he looked at the blade.)

GUARD 1: I get to kill Flaxley, pathetic loser Flaxley. I heard about how you ran away and abandoned the queen once. I always wanted to make you pay for that cowardice.

(He gave Flaxley an evil look.)

GUARD 1: Brace yourself; this is going to hurt a little!

(Anxious to kill the man that Guevina perceived as a coward and become an instant folk hero, the guard then pulled a venomous sneer and lashed his sword with all his might at Flaxley's head.)

GUARD 1: Traitor!!!

(Much to the shock of everyone in the room, in one swift movement, Flaxley snatched the sword out of the guard's hand and grabbed him by the throat. Immediately the rest of the guards stood to attention.)

GUARD 1: Ouch!!!

FLAXLEY: Now...

(As everyone watched wide-mouthed, Flaxley threw the sword through the open window behind him and lifted the guard high above his head by the neck.)

FLAXLEY: I know there's this silly story you Guevina folk like to tell where I'm the coward and Lefiat saved the princess' life... I'm here to tell you it's a myth. I am in fact the greatest swordsman alive and what's more, I'm tough and I'm fucking ruthless.

(He then threw the guard out of the same window he'd thrown the sword out of.)

FLAXLEY: Any questions?

(Understandably there were none.)

FLAXLEY: I didn't think so! Now, who's with me...

(He gestured to the open window.)

FLAXLEY: And who's with him?

(There then followed the desperate sound of several scared men declaring their allegiance and undying loyalty to him. Only one refused to comply.)

GUARD 3: Side with you? Never!!!

(With that, he charged away and dived head first out of the window. As everyone watched his boots disappear from sight, Flaxley raised an eyebrow.)

FLAXLEY: You have to admire his unwavering loyalty to his friend I suppose.

(With a shrug, he then faced his men.)

FLAXLEY: Right! I'm going to teach you the difference between being a guard and being a sentry. I say this because, let's face it, you lot are no more than sentries. You see things and report them. You're not soldiers.

(Taking Flaxley very seriously all of a sudden, they all listened extremely attentively.)

FLAXLEY: Come dawn, the battle will begin and you must do more than stand on ceremony. The queen is relying on you to protect her. As am I. Should you fail to protect her with your lives, if I see any sign of cowardice... well, put it this way, there's higher windows than that one. So, unless you want to find out how high the tall tower is...

(He nodded to himself, content they'd got the message.)

FLAXLEY: I demand bravery. I demand you to put the life of the queen before that of your own and your comrades lined up here with you. Your duty is not to survive, you have but one duty and that's to keep Queen Mandika safe and unharmed.

(He stood tall.)

FLAXLEY: Anyone who's not up to this task, feel free to jump out of the window now!

(The soldiers looked along the line briefly then back at Flaxley.)

FLAXLEY: Right. Basic sword skills!

(He pulled his sword from its sheath.)

FLAXLEY: I need two volunteers!

(Everyone looked sheepishly from side to side.)

FLAXLEY: You won't be harmed. I just need to show you something then you can practice it.

(There were still no takers.)

FLAXLEY: Then I'll volunteer two of you. Poor show so far, men. This isn't good at all!

(He rubbed his chin.)

FLAXLEY: I think I'll take...

(Before he could choose the two guards he needed for his demonstration, however, the guard he'd earlier thrown from the window charged through the doors with his sword aloft, screaming like a banshee. He had murder in his eyes and screwed up his face as he made his way towards Flaxley, intent on slaying him horribly.)

FLAXLEY: Ah, shit face! Excellent timing!

(Much to everyone's horror, Flaxley stepped into the incoming crazed guard and plunged his sword deep into his chest.)

FLAXLEY: Now, it's important to pull the sword back out immediately. Don't twist it like this.

(He twisted the sword causing chilling screams from the dying guard.)

FLAXLEY: See, you need to yank the sword straight out and move onto the next assailant. The last thing you need to do is get your sword stuck. Watch!

(The guards found it quite difficult to watch as Flaxley yanked his sword out and then plunged it back into the dying guard several times. He was so quick and precise in his movements, the guard's body didn't even get a chance to fall to the ground.)

FLAXLEY: Sword in, sword out. Sword in, sword out.

(As some of the men tried not to vomit, Flaxley continued his bloody demonstration.)

FLAXLEY: And of course, for the stronger among you, this is always a good way to kill an assailant!

(He then yanked his sword from the body and sliced the guard's head clean off. Several of his trainees vomited where they stood as the head flew out of the window and the body thudded to the floor.)

FLAXLEY: Now before anyone says that was harsh, may I remind you that he was about to make an attempt on my life. Don't be soft in times like this, never show mercy to anyone if you're sure they're going to kill you given half a chance, okay?

(As the guards tried to clear their heads and steady themselves, Flaxley threw the body back out of the window and turned to face his men again.)

FLAXLEY: Now, where was I? That's right, I need two volunteers!

(Flaxley had never seen such an exodus. Mass panic erupted as all but one of the guards dived through the nearest window in a desperate attempt to get away from the psychotic man before them. As he watched their terrified escape, Flaxley wondered if perhaps he'd gone a little too far. Within seconds the evacuation was complete and there wasn't a single unbroken window in the room. The one guard who remained gave Flaxley a cheesy grin.)

FLAXLEY: Don't stay on my account!

(The guard held out his palm.)

GUARD 4: Are you kidding? I want to learn to do what you just did.

(Flaxley nodded to him knowingly.)

FLAXLEY: You'll go far!

(He mused to himself.)

FLAXLEY: But it'd be a waste of time teaching you on your own. Where else can I find some guards?

GUARD 4: Well, guards are everywhere really. We normally leave the fighting to the elite guys though. I want to join them someday.

(Flaxley then stared into a space wearing a happy smile. In his day, Elite guards were mostly veterans, the bulk of whom had been in service over seven years. This meant he'd probably trained many of them himself.)

FLAXLEY: Is my old Protégé, Kurik still among their number?

(The guard nodded.)

GUARD: Yeah, he's the leader!

(Flaxley beamed.)

FLAXLEY: Finally, something to work with. Show me where they're located.

GUARD: Okay...

(He gestured to the door.)

GUARD: This way.

FLAXLEY: Excellent.

(With that, the two of them headed for the exit.)

FLAXLEY: Oh and by the way, welcome to someday. Congratulations, you're now an

elite guard.

GUARD: You can do that?

FLAXLEY: I can. Mandika put me in charge, so if Kurik doesn't want you then he'll just have to kill you.

(The guard looked uncertain.)

FLAXLEY: It was a joke!

(He rolled his eyes.)

FLAXLEY: I hate Guevina, I really, really do!

GUARD: Then that makes you just the man we need to lead us!

(Flaxley gave him a cold stare.)

GUARD: That was a joke too.

FLAXLEY: Yes... touché, let's leave the jokes to the comedians in future and stick to doing what we do best.

(Upon arriving at the headquarters of the elite guard, Flaxley was greeted like a hero. Most of them had fought alongside him only two years ago when Guevina was under threat from the evil spirit of Queen Aurora. These were the older, experienced guards. They were battle hardened and many were indeed moulded by Flaxley himself into the fighting machines they were today. Kurik was especially delighted to see his old mentor back in charge, even if it meant stepping aside temporarily. He knew from experience that there was always more to learn and seeing Flaxley in action one more time would be a joy to behold.

All throughout the riot, the elite guards had adopted the tactic of watching from strategic points all over the castle with a view to protecting Mandika should the dissidents manage to breach the castle defences. Some, however, had disguised themselves as normal guards and had been beaten up by Flaxley as he made his way into the castle. Upon being informed of this, as he joined Kurik in his office, Flaxley apologised for his indiscretion then complimented Kurik on his idea to keep a stealthy vigil on proceedings; a move which impressed him greatly.)

FLAXLEY: It was an inspired move.

KURIK: I'm glad you agree, Flaxley. I was worried we were being over-cautious.

FLAXLEY: Far from it. When people are out there calling for her to be overthrown for being a tyrant, the last thing Mandika needs is for her elite guard to go out there and beat the crap out of people.

KURIK: That's what I figured. We did send some out in plain clothes though, just to stop the more violent ones.

FLAXLEY: Again, inspired. And again, I apologise.

KURIK: It's fine.

(He nodded.)

KURIK: We'll be in the front line of the battle tomorrow though.

(Flaxley looked uncertain.)

FLAXLEY: Really? All of you?

KURIK: Well, I figure we should be able to bring a swift end to the battle. It wouldn't be right to let civilians do what we're essentially paid to do.

(Curious as to the reason for Flaxley's doubt, Kurik turned his head to one side.)

KURIK: You disagree?

FLAXLEY: Well... sort of, yes. I was just thinking, let *me* lead them tomorrow. You should stay back with a few men and guard the queen's chamber. Her safety is paramount after all. I don't think I'd trust the regular guards with the job.

(Kurik looked at him emptily for a few moments.)

KURIK: If you want to lead us, please do. And I'll be happy to leave a group here to protect the queen too, but I want to be out there, Flaxley. I want to be doing what you taught me.

(Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: I knew you'd say that.

KURIK: Hey, I learnt everything from you.

FLAXLEY: We should do that then. Leave ten or so with Mandika and you and I... we can go and do our thing.

KURIK: It's settled then.

(He nodded sternly.)

KURIK: In the meantime, I've got some newbie's to train. Want to help?

(Flaxley rubbed his hands together.)

FLAXLEY: Try and stop me.

(At last, Flaxley was in his element. He'd been trying his damndest to train an army in Tifaeris but without much luck. His troops there were all his drinking buddies and had no interest in being real soldiers. Tifaeris couldn't quite afford to pay a real army just yet. It was something Flaxley would have to keep working towards in the long term. Here, however, he had real soldiers to work with. These were men who'd stood out among the other guards and rightly been promoted for it. They were all the genuine article and would stand tall and true in the fight. The same could not be said for those they'd be facing in battle at daybreak.)

(Over at the inn that evening, the large group of drunken, wannabe revolutionaries who'd gathered there looked anything but a competent fighting force. Under the illusion that they'd only be facing other citizens in the morning, however, they weren't even remotely worried. Had they realised the queen's elite guard would be involved, they'd have surrendered hours ago, but as things stood they felt somewhat confident of victory. They were, of course, deluding themselves. While Flaxley and Kurik were discussing sword techniques and battle formations, Bonson's rag tag militia were discussing whether a pitch fork was a more effective weapon than a sharpened pole. Although every blacksmith in town had been looted in the riots and swords were common place, many would still be going into battle armed only with whatever everyday items they could lay their hands on. There simply weren't enough real weapons to go round.

It seemed the only thing in the rebel's favour was self-belief. They genuinely believed they could oust Mandika with little hardship or difficulty. Their overconfidence, of course, owed a lot to the profound depth of Bonson's constant impassioned speeches. Barely tiring, despite orating for sixteen hours straight in the corner of the bar, Bonson was still going strong when midnight came and went.)

BONSON: Glory comes to he who wants it most!!! There's no room at the top table for those without the heart of a lion, my friends. There are those who follow and there are those who set out to change the world. You must ask yourselves...

(Much to his annoyance, his thunder was well and truly stolen by a yawning Lefiat.)

LEFIAT: For pity's sake, Bonson, don't you ever shut up?

(Bonson glared at him ferociously.)

BONSON: How dare you interrupt me while I'm in full flow???

LEFIAT: You've been in full flow since I woke up this morning. We get the message, okay?

BONSON: Well I...

(Much to his further annoyance, the landlord chipped in on Lefiat's side.)

LANDLORD: He's got a point, Bonson. You've kind of been repeating yourself for the last twelve hours and you've pretty much exhausted every cliché every written.

(Bonson folded his arms and snarled.)

BONSON: Well excuse me for trying to rally the troops!

(The landlord gave him an apologetic smile.)

LANDLORD: Actually Bonson, everyone here is trying to sleep, you're kind of keeping them awake.

(Bonson had been so engrossed in his words, he hadn't even noticed the snoozing patrons that were strewn all about the place.)

BONSON: Oh... I see.

LANDLORD: Hey, don't feel bad. You've inspired them all day; have an ale on the house!

(Bonson beamed excitedly. If you were to save his life you'd get no more than a miserly, begrudging suggestion of gratitude. Give him free ale however, and he'd be your friend for life. Looking delighted, he strolled up to the bar.)

BONSON: Make it the good stuff, Landlord, I've earned it.

(The landlord looked unimpressed as he slipped a tankard on the counter.)

LANDLORD: All my ale is good stuff.

(Bonson nodded.)

BONSON: I suppose it is, but then I've drunk ale in Tifaeris and compared to that muck... well... what isn't?

(Lefiat stepped up behind him, chuckling.)

LEFIAT: He doesn't like Tifaeris' ale one bit.

BONSON: Who are you, the narrator?

LEFIAT: No, I just...

BONSON: In that case, be quiet. I can make myself perfectly clear without *you* elaborating, thank you.

(The landlord smiled.)

LANDLORD: I know where you're coming from, Bonson. My wife and I went to Tifaeris three years ago for a holiday. Lovely town, but the ale... fuck me!!!

(He shuddered.)

BONSON: I know, it's like they found the recipe but couldn't afford *all* the ingredients or something.

LANDLORD: Exactly. They should rename it Tifaeris' infamous ale substitute.

BONSON: Either that or just admit that it's really fermented cuddlyfinkle piss!

(Lefiat shrugged.)

LEFIAT: Tastes perfectly fine to me!

(The landlord shook his head at him.)

LANDLORD: There speaks a layman, Bonson.

BONSON: Indeed, the concept of fine ale is lost on his generation.

LANDLORD: I think you're right, actually. Young people today have absolutely no class.

(Lefiat frowned.)

LEFIAT: That's crap!

LANDLORD: See? Spoken like a true uneducated oaf!

(Bonson nodded.)

BONSON: Though in his defence, he's really quite the halfwit so he's bound to come over as an uneducated really.

(Lefiat was far from amused.)

LEFIAT: Hey!!!

BONSON: Don't stress, I was defending you, remember?

(Lefiat looked enlightened.)

LEFIAT: Right, yeah. Sorry, Bonson.

BONSON: See? Thick as two short planks.

LEFIAT: Eh?

LANDLORD: I see your point.

(With that, the landlord stood up straight and stretched.)

BONSON: Tired, Landlord?

LANDLORD: Exhausted. We should all try to get some shut eye, it's a big day tomorrow.

BONSON: The biggest. Our finest hour!

LANDLORD: Please, no more speeches thank you, Bonson.

(Bonson rolled his eyes.)

BONSON: Sorry about that, it's like I'm stuck in a loop.

LANDLORD: Not a problem, old boy. Anyway, before I hit the hay, what's the plan tomorrow?

(Bonson looked unsure.)

BONSON: What do you mean?

LANDLORD: I mean, what are our tactics going to be?

(Not wanting to look like he didn't know the answer to a question, even for a second, Bonson nodded positively.)

BONSON: Our tactic will be to fight them and win!

(The landlord just stared straight through him.)

LANDLORD: That's your battle plan, is it?

BONSON: Um...

(He thought hard for a quick answer then said the first thing that came to him.)

BONSON: Yes it is. Hit them head on and hit them hard, no frills, just good old fashioned clashing.

(The landlord looked enlightened.)

LANDLORD: I get you.

(He smiled.)

LANDLORD: Nice. They won't be expecting that. You're a great leader of men, Bonson. You'll be an excellent president.

(Bonson looked to the ceiling wearing a conceited grin.)

BONSON: I'll be bloody brilliant, won't I?

(He then looked to the landlord with a knowing glint in his eye.)

BONSON: I'm looking forward to bad mouthing their leader before the battle tomorrow, you know?

(The landlord gave a stunted laugh.)

LANDLORD: I bet you are.

BONSON: Nobody beats me in a smart mouth contest, of that I can assure you.

(He nodded.)

BONSON: Then I'll come back in here. I'm too old to fight. I cause the trouble, I don't take part in it. When it's all done and dusted they can come and get me and point me to my throne.

(Lefiat nodded.)

LEFIAT: Or if we lose they can come and get you and point you to the gallows.

(Landlord and Bonson both gave him icy stares.)

LANDLORD: Lose? Who is this fool? Why's he been hanging around saying stupid things?

BONSON: Ignore him; he's just some lunatic that's been following me. Lose indeed.

LEFIAT: I'm not a lunatic!

(Bonson raised an inquisitive eyebrow.)

BONSON: No? What did you tell me your name was? Full name and title?

(Lefiat ruffled his neck.)

LEFIAT: You know my name!

LANDLORD: I don't.

(Lefiat gave him a cocky glance.)

LEFIAT: If you must know, I'm the real Sir Lefiat of Guevina!

(The landlord looked Lefiat's skinny body up and down then burst out laughing.)

LEFIAT: What's so funny?

LANDLORD: You!

LEFIAT: I *am* Sir Lefiat; the other guy's a fake. It's true!!!

LANDLORD: Yes mate, okay then, you're a knight.

(He then grimaced at Bonson as if to say "we've got a right one here". Bonson nodded and placed his finger to his head, twiddling it in circles to signify the lad was mad.)

BONSON: Told you. A complete fruitcake.

(Lefiat was furious and raised his voice accordingly.)

LEFIAT: Bonson!!!

BONSON: Shush man, people are trying to sleep.

(Lefiat replied in almost a whisper.)

LEFIAT: I hate you, Bonson.

LANDLORD: Anyway, I'm off to bed. Goodnight, Bonson. Night, Sir Lefiat of cuckoo town. I'll see you on the morrow.

BONSON: Sleep well, Landlord.

(As the landlord disappeared out of sight, Lefiat glared at Bonson.)

LEFIAT: That was downright nasty, Bonson. He thinks I'm a nutcase now.

(Bonson shrugged.)

BONSON: Embrace it, I say. Most people think you're a twat!

LEFIAT: Oi!!!

BONSON: Now be quiet. We've got a coup d'état to pull off in a few hours, we'd better get some kip.

LEFIAT: Fine but I hope we lose and they hang you!

BONSON: What?

LEFIAT: Nothing. Let's go to sleep.

BONSON: *You* can, I'm going to bed first *then* I'm going to go to sleep.

LEFIAT: Always got to have the last word haven't you?

(As they headed from the bar to the stairwell, Bonson grinned.)

BONSON: Yes, yes I have.

(As the small hours arrived, Guevina practically fell silent. Having been alive to the sounds of rioting, fighting and looting for days on end, the quiet seemed somewhat eerie. Naturally, a few straggling fighters remained in the square, either too injured or too drunk to find their way anywhere else but apart from those few, the only other noises in the city were the perpetual rainfall and a bizarre distant humming sound that had been hanging around for days.

For the citizens of this once proud city, having been hyperactive for many days now, the decision to take a rest before doing battle at dawn had been greeted with much enthusiasm. People all over Guevina had been extraordinarily tired and despite not knowing what carnage the following day might bring, the vast majority managed to slip into a sleep with ease. When you consider that most of the citizen's homes had either been burnt out or vandalised beyond repair in some way, it was a miracle that many of them slept at all. Such was the extent of their exhaustion.)

(In the corridors of the castle, two hours after midnight had passed, all was unusually quiet. The guards were very often a boisterous lot, but on this most important of nights, they were under orders to remain perfectly silent and be on the alert for the sound of intruders. As a result, the entire castle was almost in total silence. Almost. Had it not been for the groans of ecstasy that emanated through the door of Flaxley and Kritz's room, silence *would* have reigned throughout the entire building.

When the two of them had met up earlier in the night, Flaxley had just come from a prolonged session of sword training with the elite guards and he was thoroughly exhilarated. There was nothing in the world he enjoyed more. Kritz for her part, had spent a girly night with Mandika, being pampered like a princess. She'd bathed in luxurious oils, enjoyed a massage and even got her nails done. She too, couldn't have been happier. And a result, as soon as their eyes met they both knew there was only one way to round off what had been a truly perfect evening.

Having just enjoyed an extremely athletic, one hour long sex session, Flaxley and Kritz

lay stark naked in the glow of a single candle, staring at the ceiling with looks of sheer delight on their faces. As always, when they made love, the bed, the headboard and the very foundations of the building got a thorough workout. Needless to say, they were both thoroughly exhausted.)

FLAXLEY: My love... once again, you've proved what I've always maintained.
(Kritz looked completely baffled.)

KRITZ: I have?

FLAXLEY: Yes. Beside every smug looking man there's a fit wife gasping for breath.
(Kritz exhaled joyfully.)

KRITZ: You have every right to be smug, darling, that was some of your best work.

FLAXLEY: I couldn't have done it without *you*, my love, you're a tigress.

(Kritz turned her head to face him then lifted it onto his upper arm lovingly.)

KRITZ: And you're my big powerful gorilla.

(Flaxley turned his head towards her and chuckled.)

FLAXLEY: Gorilla?

KRITZ: Yeah. Not in a bad way, obviously. I mean, it's not like you just throw me on the bed then bounce up and down on me like a brainless primate.

(She allowed herself a sly grin.)

KRITZ: You let me get into position first.

(Flaxley chuckled then stared back at the ceiling.)

FLAXLEY: Fair enough. Though it has to be said, you can be quite the savage animal when you're on top too.

KRITZ: Yeah, a tigress, remember?

FLAXLEY: Maybe I'd better be a tiger then, only I can't really imagine a gorilla and a tigress going at it.

KRITZ: True, but I don't really want a picture two tigers going for it either.

(Flaxley nodded then gave a stifled laugh.)

FLAXLEY: Did we really just have that conversation?

(Kritz chuckled.)

KRITZ: You know, I think we actually did.

FLAXLEY: Good grief. Could you imagine what Bonson would say if he was here?

(Kritz furrowed her brow.)

KRITZ: He wouldn't say a word. He'd be sitting there with that perverted look on his face, drooling like an imbecile with his eyes fixed firmly on my lady cave.

FLAXLEY: Oh yes... *that* look.

(She sighed emptily then lifted herself to look Flaxley in the eye.)

KRITZ: Darling?

FLAXLEY: My love?

KRITZ: Why is Bonson doing what he's doing?

FLAXLEY: He's a complete git. Hadn't you noticed?

KRITZ: Yeah, but... he told Mandika his secret just to save his own skin, a secret he swore he'd take to the grave. Like that wasn't bad enough, to then start a revolution against her...

FLAXLEY: Extreme, isn't it?

KRITZ: It's horrendous.

(She sighed.)

KRITZ: He's always been a horrible arse of a man, but underneath it all I thought there was a reasonable human being struggling to get out, you know? How could I have read him so wrong? There's nothing decent about him at all. I thought I was a better judge of character than that.

(Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: And maybe you are, my love. We've only heard Mandika's side so far and the gods only know how one-sided that probably is. You never know, he may have had his reasons... and it's possible that one of them might even be understandable. Let's not condemn him entirely just yet. Not until we've heard both sides.

KRITZ: Well, yeah... good point.

(She smiled.)

KRITZ: We'll see what he has to say first then we'll condemn him.

FLAXLEY: Absolutely.

(They shared a loving glance for a moment then Kritz pushed her head forward to meet his and their lips entwined.)

KRITZ: I love you so much.

FLAXLEY: It's mutual, my love.

(With that, they began sharing a passionate kiss when there was a gentle hammering on the door.)

KRITZ: Who the hell could that be?

(Flaxley gave her a sideways glance.)

FLAXLEY: How the hell should I know?

(He then looked to the door and raised his voice.)

FLAXLEY: Who's there?

(A small, nervous voice rose up from behind the door.)

MANDIKA: It's me, Mandika. The queen. Of all Guevina.

(Just then, the door crept open and Mandika popped her head around it.)

MANDIKA: Not disturbing you, am I?

(As Flaxley swiftly battled to throw the covers over himself, he scowled back at her disdainfully.)

FLAXLEY: Yes, actually!!!

(Mandika, clad only in a knee-length, black night dress, sighed emptily then stepped inside the room, pushing the door closed behind her.)

MANDIKA: I apologise. Still, it's done now so I might as well come in.

(Having made no attempt to get under the covers whatsoever, Kritz pulled herself up the bed and rested her back on the headboard, before lifting her knees to her chest.)

KRITZ: You alright, babe? You sound a bit down.

MANDIKA: I am. I'm scared and I can't sleep.

(She sighed sorrowfully.)

MANDIKA: I wish my dad was here.

KRITZ: Bonson?

MANDIKA: No, you silly cow. My dad, the king... former king, I should say. I wish *he* was here.

(Safely stashed beneath the covers, Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: Indeed. He was a great monarch. The people wouldn't have even considered revolting against *him*.

(Mandika looked most put out.)

MANDIKA: I meant, I wish he was here so he could hug me!!!

(She then pouted and looked to the floor.)

MANDIKA: Half my kingdom hates me, my husband is a turncoat and I've got nobody to hug. I'm scared. I don't want to get brutally murdered in a bloody revolution.

(As she burst into tears, Flaxley and Kritz shared an uneasy glance then looked back to her sympathetically.)

KRITZ: Babe, don't worry. You're not on your own.

FLAXLEY: Exactly. *We're* here for you, Mandika.

(Mandika smiled back at them warmly as she wiped her tears.)

MANDIKA: I know, that's why I've decided to sleep with you, in *your* bed tonight.

(Flaxley and Kritz rapidly lost their sympathetic air at this point, and furrowed their brows at her.)

FLAXLEY: You're my former charge, there's no way we're having a threesome with *you*.

KRITZ: I don't think that's what she meant, Flaxley.

FLAXLEY: I should hope not! As my former charge, the knight's code forbids such a thing.

(Kritz looked uncertain.)

KRITZ: That's not what you meant, right, Mandika?

MANDIKA: Of course it isn't! I like my threesomes with two men! I just want to sleep where I feel safe, with you two.

(As she proceeded to pace towards the bed, Flaxley folded his arms indignantly.)

FLAXLEY: Stop right there, Mandika! The answer is no.

(Ignoring him, Mandika climbed onto the bottom of the bed and started to crawl in between them.)

FLAXLEY: Mandika, are you even listening to me?

(Holding the covers down firm to the bed, so she couldn't climb in, Flaxley scowled at her and raised his voice.)

FLAXLEY: No, Mandika! I'm stark naked under here and there's certain things only my wife should be allowed to see.

(As Mandika pouted at him from the middle of the bed, a somewhat angry voice rose up from the sofa in the corner of the room in front of them.)

DEREK: Oh, so *now* you're worried about decency are you???

(Staring in horror at Derek's darkened silhouette in the corner, Flaxley and Kritz's hair almost stood on end.)

FLAXLEY: Derek???

KRITZ: How long have you been sitting there???

DEREK: Since long before you two came in, licking each other's faces and running your hands all over one another like a pair of loved up octopi!!!

(He snarled.)

DEREK: I've never *seen* so many wandering, randy hands and my wife and I have four each!!!

KRITZ: Why didn't you say something???

DEREK: Say something??? I told you eighteen fucking times that I was sitting here!!!

(He shuddered with rage.)

DEREK: At one point I even came over and tapped you on the bloody shoulder, Kritz!!!

KRITZ: You did???

DEREK: Yes! Repeatedly!!! I asked you to stop and all you could bloody say was, “Yes, oh my god, harder, give me every last inch.” I was half tempted to pummel you with *every last inch* of my H2O magic!!! I was trying to sleep.

(Burning red, Kritz slipped under the covers, while Flaxley continued to stare at him in horror.)

MANDIKA: Saw everything did you, Derek?

DEREK: No! I averted my gaze and tried to get back to sleep, but it didn’t do any bloody good, not with her screaming on about orgasms and taking it all!!!

(Mandika looked impressed.)

MANDIKA: All? All fourteen inches, Kritz? Not bad.

(Kritz whimpered from beneath the covers.)

KRITZ: Shut up. But, thanks.

MANDIKA: I’m not surprised she didn’t notice you, Derek. Take it from me, with fourteen inches inside her, it’s no wonder she couldn’t focus on anything else.

(She shrugged.)

MANDIKA: Not that I’ve ever had fourteen inches in me... unless you count two sevens.

(Feeling horribly uncomfortable, Flaxley glared at her sternly.)

FLAXLEY: Will you shut up, Mandika?

MANDIKA: What? I’m standing up for Kritz. It weren’t *her* fault she didn’t notice Derek. When you’ve got a giant ding dong up your Fufu, you tend to be focussed on that! If anything it’s *your* fault, Flaxley.

FLAXLEY: No it isn’t! I had no bloody clue he was there either, how could I?

DEREK: How could you??? Flaxley, before you even got down to the really noisy bit, I even climbed on the bottom of the bed and bounced up and down, waving at you!!!

FLAXLEY: I didn’t see you!.

DEREK: No, you were too busy staring down at your doodah. You must have bloody heard me though!

FLAXLEY: I didn’t, I swear. I probably couldn’t hear you over Kritz!

DEREK: She wasn’t saying anything! She couldn’t... she had her mouth full!

(Flaxley looked enlightened.)

FLAXLEY: Oh... she was doing... I see.

(Mandika was gobsmacked.)

MANDIKA: Wait? What? Full? Full??? She swallowed the whole thing???

(Kritz peered at her over the covers wearing a sorrowful pout. Her pout then turned into an arrogant smirk and she sunk back down again.)

MANDIKA: Wow!!!

FLAXLEY: Mandika! Will you stop that?

MANDIKA: Stop what? Is it wrong to take an interest in what my friends do?

FLAXLEY: When it’s personal, yes!!!

DEREK: And yet it’s alright to put on a theatrical performance for *me*, is it???

FLAXLEY: We didn’t know you were there!!!

DEREK: The hell you didn’t! You knew I was here but being an alien I don’t count, I suppose! You don’t mind what *I* see. I’m like the family pet. Let the little green bugger watch, he doesn’t understand what we’re doing anyway.

(He snarled.)

DEREK: Well I do understand. Only too well. Zanne and I do it too, only *we* do it in private. We don't make an exhibition of it for the world and his wife to see. Yes, Flaxley you can dangle her upside down and pull her up and down onto your chap, bravo! Yes, fantastic, Kritz, you can lift your legs and spin in circles on it, well done. Good for you. The fact still remains however; I didn't want to see it!!!

MANDIKA: Wait! Are you saying they did it on purpose because they *wanted* you to see? Or are you saying they did it front of you because they didn't *care* if you saw? I'm getting mixed signals.

DEREK: Does it matter??? Either way, I didn't want to see it!!!

MANDIKA: Why didn't you tell them that then?

DEREK: I tried to!!!

MANDIKA: Not very hard, obviously. If you wanted them to stop that badly, you'd have spoken directly into their minds, they can't *help* but hear you then!

(Derek went to respond to her but could only hold a protesting finger aloft.)

DEREK: You know... that never even occurred to me.

MANDIKA: Liar! Seems to me you're only moaning for *my* benefit. I bet you enjoyed every second of it.

(At once, Flaxley's nostrils started to twitch.)

FLAXLEY: Is this true, Derek???

DEREK: Of course it fucking isn't. Speaking into your minds never even occurred to me, I'd just woken up!

(Looking extremely peeved, Kritz pulled the covers from over herself and shook her head.)

KRITZ: You're a disgrace, Derek. I don't mind people seeing me naked, in fact I actively encourage it, but not when I'm in the sacred throes of making love to my husband. That's just despicable.

DEREK: Then why did you do it in front of me???

KRITZ: We've been down this road once already, Derek. I didn't know you were there.

FLAXLEY: And nor did I. *You* knew *we* were here though!

DEREK: And that's your argument is it???

FLAXLEY: Yes! The only one who *could* have stopped it is you!!!

(As they continued to argue, Mandika rolled her eyes then looked to the door.)

MANDIKA: If you're all gonna shout and be mean to each other, I might as well go back to bed.

(With that, she upped and exited the room, leaving behind the argument she'd stirred up to sleep quietly in her peaceful chamber.)

FLAXLEY: Bloody pervert. And I thought Bonson was bad.

KRITZ: He is!

FLAXLEY: Yes, and so is Derek.

DEREK: I'm not a pervert!!! You two are perverts!!! Bloody exhibitionists!!!

KRITZ: Filthy... watching person!

FLAXLEY: Voyeur!!!

KRITZ: Yeah!!!

DEREK: I'm not a voyeur!!!

(Utterly infuriated with one another they then felt silent and opted to snarl bitterly in each

other's direction for several moments.)

KRITZ: Bloody weirdo.

DEREK: Hey, *I'm* not the...

(Rapidly losing all the fire in his belly, he shook his head then looked at his feet solemnly.)

DEREK: This is silly. I've read your minds and I know for a fact you didn't know I was there. In my defence though, I'd just woken up and speaking into your minds didn't even occur to me. I did *try* to stop you!

(Flaxley gave him a distrusting glance.)

FLAXLEY: So, what are you saying?

KRITZ: It was all an innocent mistake?

DEREK: Yes! God only knows there's nothing more disgusting than watching an alien female slide up and down her alien lover's thingy. Why would I want to look at that?

KRITZ: What alien female?

FLAXLEY: He's talking about you.

KRITZ: He is?

(She growled.)

KRITZ: Hey!!! The only alien here is you!!!

DEREK: No. To me, you're all aliens.

KRITZ: You're an idiot then. Aliens are green!

DEREK: No... some are greenish blue... apparently.

(He rolled his eyes.)

DEREK: Look... I'm going back to sleep. We should just pretend this never happened.

FLAXLEY: Sounds good to me.

KRITZ: Fine, but less of the alien in future. That's almost as annoying as being called a tart.

DEREK: Fine.

KRITZ: Fine.

DEREK: Goodnight then.

KRITZ: Same to you.

FLAXLEY: Right. Good. We've got to be up for battle at dawn, so let's get as much sleep as we can, and in the morning, if we can all pretend we dreamt this, that'd be excellent.

DEREK: Works for me.

KRITZ: I'm not gonna pretend I dreamt the sex. That was good sex.

FLAXLEY: Just the aftermath then.

KRITZ: Fine. We cuddled then we fell asleep and I *dreamt* Derek was a pervert.

DEREK: I'm not a... oh, think what you like.

(With that, Derek nestled down on the sofa again and curled up. Eyeing him suspiciously, Flaxley and Kritz then sunk down beneath the covers. Both slowly turning to face the right wall, Flaxley then spooned her and copped hold of her breast.)

FLAXLEY: Like that?

KRITZ: Perfect.

(And within minutes, they all dropped off to sleep. Finally the castle was silent.)

(While Guevina found itself in a much overdue slumber, the elders were very much awake. There'd be no sleep in the sanctum of light tonight. They knew all too well about the source of the bizarre humming sound that had been emanating around Guevina and they wouldn't be taking their eyes off the situation even for a minute. The hum was reverberating from the city walls, which were by now pulsating just enough for the eye to see. As they were well aware, this was the work of Everkei. Everything they'd worked towards for hundreds of years was now in the balance. If they'd timed everything right then there was a chance. Should they have been mistaken then the whole of Guevina would be slaughtered in their sleep and all hope would be gone. Suffice to say, they'd spend this tensest of nights on tenterhooks. Failure would mean a catastrophe beyond imagination. The only certainty was that Everkei was coming; it was just a question of when. Thankfully, as the cock crowed to signify the approaching dawn, his emergence was yet to materialise.)

(As the Guevina people awoke on this extraordinary morning from under whichever shelter their homes could still provide, they knew their lives would be changed forever. Neighbours and former friends were set to battle one other to the death for what they truly believed was right. At this moment in time it looked like Guevina would never again be the harmonious settlement it had always been under King Falbury. Up until a few days ago, there'd only ever been one recorded event of civil disorder in the entire history of the city, a skirmish between over-excited spectators at a battle tournament two years earlier. Other than that, Guevina had always been known as a lawful, peaceful place. Those days seemed long gone right now.

For many, as they prepared themselves for battle, every little task was accompanied by the same morbid thought. Will this be the last time I eat breakfast? Will I die in these boots? Will I never hold my child again? The vast majority of them were stunned that they were even going into battle in the first place. After all, these were civilians and doing battle was something that most had never envisaged. No matter which side they were on, however, they all shared one common thought. The battle had to be done. There could be no turning back. Walking away now would be deserting a cause that was too important to abandon or leave to chance. This was not about glory. This was about doing what was right. Men, women and even their children were preparing to fight to determine the very future of Guevina. They may have been inexperienced in battle and they may have been scared but they were ready.)

(Over at the inn that morning, Bonson was woken in the most disturbing way imaginable. Lefiat was standing over him waving his manhood in his face! Naturally he was horrified.)

LEFIAT: Bonson, my cock!!! My cock!!!

(He then awoke for real and found Lefiat standing beside his bed shaking him awake.)

LEFIAT: Bonson, the cock, the cock crowed, get up!

(Looking relieved, he wiped sweat from his brow and gave Lefiat a dagger look.)

BONSON: Get away from me you weirdo!

LEFIAT: Fine. You asked me wake you when they cock crowed and I have.
(Pausing for a moment, Bonson scratched his head then grinned the widest grin.)
BONSON: Ah... today I become president and get my revenge on Mandika for throwing me out.
(Lefiat gave him a belittling glance.)
LEFIAT: I just hope you're proud.
(Swinging his feet over the side of the bed to sit up, Bonson gave him a doubting glance.)
BONSON: Second thoughts, Lefiat?
LEFIAT: Yes! This has gone way too far and I want nothing to do with it.
BONSON: Is that so?
(Lefiat sighed.)
LEFIAT: As much as I hate Mandika, overthrowing her just seems wrong.
BONSON: Well, you can't back out now!
(He mused for a moment.)
BONSON: On second thoughts do! Last thing we need is *you* on our side.
LEFIAT: Piss off, Bonson!
BONSON: Don't be like that, you've seen yourself. Would *you* want you on your team?
(Lefiat shrugged.)
LEFIAT: I guess not!
BONSON: Well then.
LEFIAT: Thing is, Bonson, I'm sworn to protect Mandika. I was knighted to do exactly that and here I am siding with her enemy.
BONSON: So?
(Lefiat rubbed his neck.)
LEFIAT: That's a hanging offence. I'll be a national traitor if I go along with this.
(Bonson shrugged.)
BONSON: We *are* traitors... for now. But the winners get to write the history and that'll be me.
LEFIAT: Eh?
BONSON: I'll see to it that history refers to us as national heroes. Mandika will be the one going down in history as a traitor.
(Lefiat scratched his head.)
LEFIAT: That hardly seems fair!
BONSON: I never said it was fair. History has never been about what really happened, Lefiat. All history is, is an account of events from the perspective of the winner. The truth has naff all to do with it.
LEFIAT: I see.
(Bonson looked into his eyes and shook his head.)
BONSON: No you don't! I lost you ages ago, didn't I?
(Lefiat hung his head and looked away.)
LEFIAT: Never mind that. Just get dressed and leave me alone.
BONSON: I figured as much.

(With the dawn now imminent, men, women and children started to descend upon the rain soaked main square. Armed with everything from rocks and broken sticks to swords

and maces they split to opposing ends of the square. The royalists gathered before the heavily fortified castle and the rebels gathered just outside the inn, further down the square. Psyching themselves up for the fight, the two sides immediately started to bait each other and reaffirm their comrades around them. Anger was in the air and they were eager to get stuck into each other.

Having spent the night in turmoil, the elders were feeling much relief. It wouldn't be long before the square was heaving, exactly as they'd planned for it to be all along. The disastrous prospect of Everkei coming early hadn't materialised.

By the time daylight started to filter its way through the dark cloud above their heads, over four thousand people had turned up to fight through the rain for what they believed in. Numbers on either side were roughly even but the royalist army featured real soldiers, something the rebels couldn't claim. Undeterred however, they, like their counterparts, were confident of a swift, easy victory.

Upon sighting the rising sun, Bonson started to get nervous. From the sanctuary of the bar he could hear the impassioned cries and shouts of the angry crowd and he knew his time had come. Despite his nervousness, however, he was relishing giving the royalist leader a good old fashioned talking down to before the battle.

Having psyched himself up, as soon as he felt ready, he nodded to himself and turned to Lefiat with a smile on his face.)

BONSON: Right then, it's time. Let's make Mandika feel foolish!

(Lefiat shook his head.)

LEFIAT: I already told you, I want nothing to do with it. I've retired.

(Bonson frowned.)

BONSON: Sod you then. And in future try to remember that's *my* excuse for not doing things, get your own!

(With that, he strolled from the inn and receiving rapturous applause and cheers from the gathered revolutionaries. They'd taken Bonson to their hearts and patted him on the back as he strolled among them to head to the front line.)

BONSON: Thank you.

(He beamed.)

BONSON: Yes, thank you. Yes, I know I'm a hero. Thank you.

(Geed by the adulation he was receiving, when Bonson finally emerged at the front of the rebel line, he genuinely believed his own publicity.

Convinced he was the ultimate man of the people, he then strode to the middle of no man's land and scoffed at the enemy before him.)

BONSON: Well?

(He threw his arms out to the side.)

BONSON: I'm here!

(He turned to face his comrades and gave them a conceited grin.)

BONSON: I think their leader's a little nervous.

(He turned to face the enemy.)

BONSON: Well? Where are you, you chicken?

(He folded his arms.)

BONSON: Bloody pansy, show yourself! Come on...

(As he was talking he noticed a familiar looking helmet slowly heading to the front of the gathered royalists, towering above everyone's head. Immediately his heart sunk and his speech slowed.)

BONSON: Don't... be... such... a...

(As Flaxley emerged from the royalist front line to confront him, Bonson seemed to shrink and his voice got higher and higher.)

BONSON: Big... girly... help!

(Flaxley gave him a knowing smirk.)

FLAXLEY: Hello, Bonson.

(Bonson turned and looked to his followers. Knowing they were relying on him, he cringed. He knew all too well that his untrained group of angry civilians would be doomed if they started to fight against Flaxley. Having been the one who'd wound them up and brought them to this point, he couldn't help but feel a little trapped. If he ordered them to attack, Flaxley would kill him. And after all he'd told them, if he surrendered, his own rebels would kill him. Looking tortured he gave Flaxley a cheesy grin.)

BONSON: Um...

(Raising a nervous finger, he hunched his shoulders and spoke in a hopeful voice.)

BONSON: April fool?

(As Flaxley gave him his infamous "I'm going to kill you" smile, Bonson's shoulders immediately dropped.)

BONSON: I guess this is what they call Karma!

(He sighed solemnly and looked into Flaxley's eyes.)

BONSON: Make it quick, old chap, for old times...

(Before he could utter another word, however, there was a blinding flash of light that lit up the sky for miles around. In their thousands, everybody gathered bent double and shielded their eyes. The world literally turned a dazzling white. Blinded and confused, a cacophony of panicked voices filled the air.)

FLAXLEY: I'm fucking blind!!!

(Bonson was peeved.)

BONSON: Great! You can't see me but I'm too blind to run away!!!

MAN: My eyes, my eyes!

FLAXLEY: Like I was actually going to kill you, Bonson!

WOMAN: What the hell's going on???

(As the dazzling glow started to fade, the gathered masses started to rub their eyes and squint in a desperate attempt to regain their vision. As their sight started to return, however, the first thing they saw very much made them wish it hadn't. A part of the city walls had transformed into what look like a watery portal and a vast hoard of barbaric looking warriors, were marching out of it, into the square.

Streaming from the portal in their droves, armed to the teeth with colossal blades and hefty shields, they were quite the intimidating sight. Every one of the well-built warriors wore a sneer or a snarl and nobody was under any illusions that they didn't mean business. Whereas Flaxley looked almost like a giant among the men and women of

Guevina, among this swelling hoard of barbarians he would just be another average sized man. Needless to say, the gathered Guevina folk started to retreat backwards into the town as the hoard continued to march from the wall, their number increasing rapidly by the second. Watching on in bewilderment with everyone else, Flaxley clenched his fist and looked towards the trembling Bonson.)

FLAXLEY: I hate to state the obvious here, Bonson, but this isn't good.

BONSON: I know! I'm just glad you're here, Flaxley. You can hold them off while I run away like a...

(He looked extremely angry and slapped his forehead.)

BONSON: Of course, you're here. I bet Kritz and Derek are here too, right?

(As he watched the hoard continue to stream from out of the city walls, Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: They're in the crowd over there...

(Before he could enquire as to why he'd asked, he had the same revelation Bonson had.)

FLAXLEY: Fuck sake. Six of us together, deep pile of steamy shit, why didn't I see this coming?

(Bonson snarled.)

BONSON: You weren't supposed to I'd wager. Those bastard elders didn't remove the thrall at all. They've played us like a freshly tuned piano!

(Flaxley snarled.)

FLAXLEY: Fucking Daman Siria's fucked us again!

(Trying to calm himself, he looked to the amassing enemy hoard and took a deep breath.)

FLAXLEY: Well, we're here now. Though fuck knows what they expect us to do against that lot!

(Flaxley's fears were well founded. The citizens of Guevina were backing away further and further in terror as over 1000 well-armed barbarians poured into the city as if from nowhere. Of all the battles Flaxley had ever taken part in, witnessed or even read about, he'd never known such an overwhelming looking army. Even the hundreds that Dim Lee had brought to Trepe Village were dwarfed by this mammoth assembly. The Guevina folk may have outnumbered them but as Flaxley was all too aware of, they were not soldiers and would be slain in their droves.)

(For Flaxley, his allies and all of Guevina, there was but one hope. That hope lay with the elders. As soon as they'd seen the blinding flash they'd leapt into action.

Unfortunately, they needed time. In the sanctum of light, looking extremely urgent, Liege was giving specific instructions to an equally determined looking Daman Siria.)

LIEGE: Go to where our brethren are doing the transportation spell. As soon as they've sent the sphere to the Leramite, bring everybody back here. And I mean everybody.

(Daman looked peeved.)

DAMAN: The Leramite? But I thought we agreed to send the sphere to Flaxley?

(Liege was extremely angry by Daman's retort.)

LIEGE: I told you!!! We can't manipulate a human brain with enough precision; it has to be the Leramite, he's the only one susceptible to one hundred percent control.

(Daman was equally angry with Liege.)

DAMAN: And I told you. We can control a human to eighty five percent and that should be enough! That sphere might carry a kick and the Leramite is three feet tall and weighs

next to nothing. If he should get knocked down or drop the sphere...

(He snarled.)

DAMAN: Only Flaxley is strong enough to wield it properly.

LIEGE: And what use would that be if we failed to manipulate him?

DAMAN: And what use...

(Looking furious, Liege yelled over him.)

LIEGE: The decision is made and they're already casting the spell!!! It's too late to change now anyway!!! Stop arguing with me!!! For every second you waste, untold numbers of innocent people are going to die!!! Now run!!!

(Realising he was right, Daman raced for the door.)

LIEGE: Remember; get *everyone* straight back here as soon as the sphere is sent!!! It'll take the collective concentration and powers of every one combined to control the Leramite. Now hurry!!!

(As Daman rushed away, Liege looked back into his crystal sphere and cringed.)

LIEGE: You poor bastards!

(In Guevina, those who weren't frozen by fear were whimpering in terror to one another. The bravado and determination to fight that they'd started the day with had withered and died. They were quickly becoming surrounded by some of the most intimidating, deadly warriors the world had even seen. Instinctively they knew to be scared.

As of yet, not one of the barbarians had spoken. It was as if they were fanning out to pen them in while they waited for someone. This just added to the intimidation. In the square, Kritz and Derek had joined Flaxley and Bonson in watching on with the rest of the terrified citizens. Oblivious to it all, Lefiat was enjoying a quiet ale in the bar, finally making the most of a moment's peace without Bonson ranting in his ear about the power of the people.

In the castle in the meantime, Mandika was watching proceedings from her chamber window with 10 elite guards standing over her shoulder. None of them knew quite what to say about what they were witnessing. All Mandika knew was that she wanted to be out there. She had no idea why and her head told her it would be a stupid thing to do, but her heart told her she had to be with her friends. She didn't deliberate on it for long.

Knowing that should the barbarians attack they'd kill her horribly just for being the queen, she nodded to herself, her mind made up. She wanted to join her friends and be with them at the end rather than suffer a horrible death on her own, being held up as an example to any leader who resisted this evil army. Naturally, the guards tried to convince her not to go, but once Mandika had become resolved there'd be no turning back. The only concession she gave was to take their advice and dress down, after all she wasn't the most popular person with Guevina folk at this time. And so, wearing her hair in a simple ponytail, she too made her way outside of the castle sporting the only peasant clothes she owned, an ensemble she'd borrowed from Kritz for a fancy dress party when she'd decided to go as a cheap tart.

Flanked by her personal guards, she headed down the castle's main hall then paced out

into the square, determined to find her friends before it was too late. All around her people were looking to the amassed, sniggering, snarling barbarians with fear etched on their faces. There was little in the way of voices, just the sounds of snarling and individuals crying. There was a feeling of despair in the air as if everyone was silently awaiting an unavoidable fate. Mandika felt that same despair as she stepped into the square looking specifically for Kritz. She was confident that a time like this, Kritz would know just the right things to say to her.

Whether Kritz would be able to say anything comforting to Mandika remained to be seen, but she certainly knew the right things to say to Flaxley. As he stood among the desperate pack of doomed onlookers, the great knight seemed to be in something of a trance. Like those around him, he looked lost. Kritz too had felt the weight of hopelessness for a while but had been shaken free of it by remembering something Flaxley had said to her once. Knowing exactly how doomed he felt, she looked up into his eyes and spoke with a calm sincerity.)

KRITZ: Darling?

(Flaxley looked to her solemnly.)

FLAXLEY: My love?

KRITZ: Failure to succeed is unfortunate; failure to even try is unforgivable.

(As soon as he heard her words, he swiftly turned to face her.)

FLAXLEY: Kritz?

KRITZ: Remember? You said exactly the same words to me when I felt I couldn't go on once. Those words got me through it.

FLAXLEY: I remember. Labour was so painful you were flatly refusing to deliver the second twin.

(She nodded.)

KRITZ: Yes. And then you told me those words.

FLAXLEY: I remember it well. You called me a patronising bastard and punched me.

(She shrugged.)

KRITZ: Well... it was highly inappropriate at the time, but nevertheless those words got me through.

FLAXLEY: Only because you wanted to get the delivery out of the way and come after me.

(She scowled.)

KRITZ: You shouldn't have been so condescending, you insensitive sod!

(Calming herself, she waved her hands in front of herself and shook her head.)

KRITZ: That's not the point. Look... these people need you. It might seem futile but this is what you do best!

(He glared at her.)

FLAXLEY: Futility?

KRITZ: No! Lifting the people! Say something, do something. Anything.

(Flaxley mused to himself then nodded. Kritz was right. The odds may have looked overwhelming but that was no excuse to give up. As a knight, he would have to go down fighting and die like a man. Lifted by those thoughts, he nodded to Kritz.)

FLAXLEY: You know what, my love?

KRITZ: I'm right?

FLAXLEY: Exactly. Thank you, Kritzeveltia. I'd be nothing without you...

(He sighed.)

FLAXLEY: I'd just be a devilishly handsome, sword wielding legend with...

(Kritz scowled and butted in.)

KRITZ: Whatever! Are you going to do something or aren't you? Have you seen those guys? If we don't do anything they might destroy the whole of Guevina!

(Flaxley nodded thoughtfully.)

FLAXLEY: Yes, but on the downside, I doubt they'll stop with Guevina. The whole world might be in danger. You're right, my love, we have to fight.

(Just then, a loud gasp arose from the terrified gathering. With a thud, a man built like two Flaxley's in one obscenely muscular body, leapt upon what remained of the roof of one of the lower buildings. Looking maniacally through evil eyes at the assembly below, he snarled before laughing out loud. His mere presence and demeanour struck further fear into the already petrified Guevina folk. Wearing a merciless snarl, he then addressed the crowd in a deep, booming voice.)

EVERKEI: I... am... Everkei!!!

(He thrust his fists in the air and received a huge cheer from his barbarian warriors. The amassed public could only watch on wide-mouthed through horror filled eyes.)

EVERKEI: Four hundred years entrapped in that bizarre, stone prison dimension and Guevina hasn't changed one bit.

(He scoffed.)

EVERKEI: Same broken down dump it was when last I tried to destroy it.

(With all around him unable to unfix their terrified gaze from the giant of a man before them, Flaxley knew he'd have to be the one to engage him. Looking fearless, he stepped towards him bravely.)

FLAXLEY: Everkei? What do you plan to do?

(Everkei raised an eyebrow.)

EVERKEI: I'm impressed, you feeble mortals rarely have the audacity to speak my name, let alone speak unto me!

(Flaxley shrugged.)

EVERKEI: As a reward for your endeavour, I shall endow you with the gift of an answer.

FLAXLEY: Yes, that's normally how conversations work.

EVERKEI: I, my feeble friend, so long shut away from this word, have been longing for a good slaughter for hundreds of years. My enemy is long since dead and nobody will defeat me!!!

(He raised his arms aloft and received further cheers from his warriors.)

EVERKEI: We will continue where we left off. We will kill every feeble mortal that infects this world with its presence.

(Flaxley stood tall.)

FLAXLEY: Kill everyone? What's the point in that?

(Everkei sneered coldly his way.)

EVERKEI: Then the word will be ours for eternity. We, the master warrior race will no longer be tainted by the weak and feeble of this world. Mankind will be strong.

(Flaxley looked thoughtful for a moment as everyone around him continued to gape and tremble.)

FLAXLEY: This is about ethnic cleansing?

(Everkei snarled.)

EVERKEI: This... is about purity.

(Flaxley rolled his eyes.)

FLAXLEY: Then I guess you and I have to fight!

(Everkei and his entire hoard of warriors laughed.)

FLAXLEY: What's so funny?

EVERKEI: Fool! We do not fight! We kill! I wield the absolute power! My men do not die.

FLAXLEY: And you do?

(Everkei snarled.)

EVERKEI: I will never die! I am eternal youth. My powers of life and death are beyond anything you could even comprehend. I lived four hundred years ago and I have not aged a day.

(His face bore a horrid smile.)

EVERKEI: Just as every one of you fools will never age another day.

(Much to everyone's amazement, Bonson then stepped alongside Flaxley.)

BONSON: Sorry Flaxley, but let's be honest here, you're getting nowhere.

(With that, he looked to Everkei.)

BONSON: I say, Everkei, this is silly. We're a peaceful people. You've obviously had a difficult few centuries stuck in limbo, why don't you come for an ale at the inn or something. Put your feet up, you know? I'm sure we'll all be glad to serve you.

(Like faithful puppies, thousands of Guevina's terrified citizens nodded with much enthusiasm. They'd much rather be his slave than his next victim.)

BONSON: What do you say?

(Everkei gave a mocking laugh.)

EVERKEI: I say you're a fool. For one, you claim to come in peace when every one of you is armed.

(Immediately everyone hid their weapons and offered him apologetic grins. Flaxley spanned his forehead.)

FLAXLEY: Fucking Guevina!

EVERKEI: And for two... I'd rather bathe in my own piss than drink ale made by impure subhuman filth.

(It was at this point that many of the citizens realised they were without hope and started to panic profusely. Terrified, some tried to escape only to be slaughtered where they stood by the barbarians.

Knowing negotiations were futile, Flaxley looked to Kritz and shrugged. Wearing a rueful smile, she nodded back to him.)

FLAXLEY: Oh well.

(As Everkei stood tall to resume his speech, Flaxley reached for his sword.)

EVERKEI: Soon, I shall be...

(Much to Everkei's annoyance, Flaxley then took off like a rocket and laid into some barbarians with his sword. The giant master of evil didn't even have to say the word. The battle had begun and chaos erupted all over the square.

Right from the very first swing of his faithful blade, Flaxley knew this battle would have

to be approached in a way he simply wasn't used to fighting. This enemy was so large both in number and physical stature, many around him stood very little chance of even landing a blow, let alone killing anyone. As a result he found himself selecting his opponents carefully before laying into them with the power and gusto he was renowned for. This was as much about protecting the weak and innocent as it was about culling the enemy. With his eyes on extreme alert for barbarians preparing to strike, Flaxley laid into one soldier as he prepared to thrust his sword into a man on his knees begging for his life. Wearing a look of undiluted hatred, Flaxley thrust out his shield to protect himself from the barbarians behind and sliced his sword through the sneering warrior's throat. Gargling, the barbarian grabbed his neck and collapsed to the ground. Without hesitating to check if the begging man was okay, Flaxley then leapt into the fray once more to help an old man on the verge of being cut down.)

FLAXLEY: Savages!!!

(Unfortunately for Flaxley, his tactic was the battle equivalent of saving the odd plankton from being fed upon by a basking shark. For the barbarians it was like shooting fish in a barrel. Hemmed in by this dark enemy, the terrified city folk were being mowed down in their droves. Heads, limbs and extremities were being severed all over the square in a display of the barbarian's ruthless determination to slaughter every last one of them indiscriminately.

Alarmed by their heartless savagery, Kritz immediately turned her focus on the children. The Barbarians were making no concessions for age or gender. As far as they cared, everyone not of their own race must die and destroying the men first was not a priority. There was no way on earth she could stand by and watch a mother see her child torn apart before her very eyes. And so, her battle to this point was to find groups of children and do everything she could to shield them from harm. With her swift fists working overtime she'd beaten back several attacks but for some reason her enemies simply wouldn't stay down. She'd done enough on several occasions to have killed her opponent but the only successes she'd had at this point were when the barbarian would get up and start on someone else.

Derek had a similar problem to Kritz. The barbarians simply would stay down. Despite Guevina having gained notoriety for the fact that magic didn't work within its city walls, he didn't seem to be having any difficulty firing one powerful spell after another. Knowing he'd have to risk making mistakes every time he fired a magic, so far he'd only hit his intended targets, and yet, not one had stayed down when he was absolutely certainly they ought to be dead. Just to add to Derek's frustrations, the barbarians were immune to his sleep magic. His one casting had resulted in a fleeing civilian being mowed down where he slept. To be able to use the magic of all of sudden only for it to be ineffective was infuriating to say the least.

As a result of the barbarian's refusal to stay dead, within sixty seconds of the battle commencing, not one of them had died and yet, already corpses were becoming obstacles with hundreds of dead citizens strewn across the square.

As Flaxley struck down the same barbarian for the third time, he too was starting to get

more than a little frustrated.)

FLAXLEY: Die will you???

(The barbarian laughed and leapt to his feet.)

BARBARIAN: Death is not in my vocabulary!

FLAXLEY: And clearly nor is toothpaste!!!

(With that, he struck him down again.)

FLAXLEY: Let that be...

(As the barbarian sat up and winked up at him, Flaxley frowned.)

FLAXLEY: Well that's just rude!

(Finally realising his efforts were futile, he rushed into the crowd to assist from the other side of the square. Looking determined, he raced forth, slicing at any barbarian got in his way. Much to his amazement as he bounded through the battle, he came across Bonson punching the living daylights out of a barbarian.)

FLAXLEY: Nice work, Bonson!

(Bonson looked across at him with a sneer on his face.)

BONSON: He said ale is for sissies!

(As Bonson continued to take out his frustrations on the barbarian's face, Flaxley soldiered onwards. Stepping over the dead, all too aware that preserving the living was far more important than the dignity of those he couldn't save, he was horrified by the ease at which the civilians were being mown down. Even those who were well-armed seemed to be showing very little resistance. It was at this point that the most terrified citizen of all, raced into his path.)

MANDIKA: There you are! Save me, Flaxley!!!

(Flaxley was shocked to see her.)

FLAXLEY: Mandika? Why aren't you in the castle?

(She looked alarmed and lowered her voice.)

MANDIKA: Don't say my name!!! I'm incognito!

(Having hardly heard her over the screams and clashing of steel, Flaxley rolled his eyes. He knew he was too busy for her silly quirks but instinctively played along.)

FLAXLEY: Fine! What are you doing out here, Miss Cognito?

MANDIKA: I said "Incognito"!

(Flaxley frowned at her vehemently.)

FLAXLEY: I thought you said Lynne Cog... never mind that, what are you doing here? And why are you dressed like a tart?

MANDIKA: See? She *does* dress like a tart. I knew you thought so too! These are Kritz's clothes.

(Relieved Kritz hadn't heard him, Flaxley scowled.)

FLAXLEY: I'm not asking again. Mandika, I'm trying to save people's lives, now if you don't mind...

MANDIKA: Me, me... save me! Flaxley, I'm scared!

(Having been sworn to protect her, Flaxley frowned.)

FLAXLEY: I guess I have no...

(His face then filled with a rage. Behind Mandika stood the ten elite guards he'd sent to protect her that morning.)

FLAXLEY: You already have ten guards!

(She beamed.)

MANDIKA: Now I have eleven!

(Flaxley snarled.)

FLAXLEY: No, you fucking don't. For the love of the gods, Mandika, how selfish can you be?

(With that, he shot away in search of citizens to protect. His efforts and those of Kritz and Derek, however, were proving futile. The Guevina folk were being slaughtered at an alarming rate and the enemy were still completely unharmed. Since the battle had begun, Everkei had done nothing but laugh and cheer on his men as he brought them back to life as soon as they died. His power of necromancy was so strong, he could even project it with his thoughts. All he had to do was see his warrior dead and he could simply think him alive again. It was a power even the gods would be envious of. As Everkei had hinted it would be, this was not a battle, this was a merciless cull.)

(Inside the inn at this time, Lefiat too had become embroiled in a battle. With a face like thunder he told the barmaid in no uncertain terms how he felt.)

LEFIAT: Green ones are hard and make your gums bleed!

(Lifting his ale as he leant casually on the bar, he rolled his eyes.)

LEFIAT: Green apples indeed.

(The barmaid wagged a finger at him.)

BARMAID: You're wrong. Okay, they can be a little hard at times but they taste better. It's all about the taste.

LEFIAT: They don't taste better though, unless you like the taste of your own blood.

(Just then, one of Guevina's unfortunate men folk was cast through the window with a dagger in his back. With a smash and a thud, glass shattered everywhere and his body wrecked the table he'd crashed face down upon. Barmaid and Lefiat looked horrified.)

LEFIAT: What the?

BARMAID: I know. The landlord is going to be pissed off when he comes back, those windows are expensive!

(Lefiat nodded.)

LEFIAT: I know!

BARMAID: Anyway, where were we? That's right... apples. Red ones just don't do it for me...

(While Lefiat continued to have a quiet ale at the inn, Kurik and his band of elite soldiers were busy doing battle in the passageway next to it. They too had noticed the futility in trying to kill the barbarians and had instead adopted the tactic of rushing warriors as a group. Their plan was to clear a path for some of the citizens to escape to the suburbs. Knowing they'd be all end up dead if things continued the way they were, it was all they could think of to prolong the lives of at least a small group of citizens. With excellent swords skills such as theirs, forcing barbarians back or drawing them out wasn't a problem and they'd had a degree of success. Unfortunately, they had the same handicap as everyone else; no matter how hard they killed them, the barbarians didn't remain dead. With the situation as it was, even if the barbarians didn't kill them then fatigue just might. Things were looking bleak to say the least.

Having made his way across the square to help, Flaxley noticed Kurik doing his fine work and nodded to himself. Satisfied that that side of the square was covered, he then about turned and started to head back. Looking all around for people in trouble as he surged through the battle, his eyes bulged. Kritz was desperately trying to fend off three warriors at once as she stood in front of a group of young children. When it came to hand to hand combat Kritz was indeed highly skilled and she was having to use every ounce of that skill just to hold the mighty foes at bay. Needless to say, she wasn't sad to see one of their heads fly off into the crowd on the end of Flaxley's blade.)

FLAXLEY: I'd like to see that bastard come back to life!!!

(As he garrotted another, Kritz pummelled the third with her fists, causing him to flee and pick on someone else half his size.)

KRITZ: Thanks, Flaxley!

(Flaxley remonstrated with her passionately.)

FLAXLEY: They keep coming back to life, Kritz! What the fuck are we meant to do???

KRITZ: I don't...

(Just then, one of the children behind her cried out in agony. Immediately she spun around to see a warrior yank his sword out of the back of a seven year old girl. Seeing red, she leapt into action before he could attack another one. Before she even reached him, however, the warrior burst into flames, courtesy of Derek. As the warrior fled screaming, Derek then raced up to the little girl as she cried out in pain on the cobbles.)

DEREK: Hang in there, kid!

(Looking extremely determined he placed his hands on her wound as a mortified Kritz looked on.)

DEREK: Heal.

(As a light emanated from his hands, the little girl was freed from her pain and climbed to her feet looking terrified. Protecting this small group of young children had become something of a mission for Kritz, so naturally, she was extremely grateful, not to mention curious.)

KRITZ: Derek, I can't thank you enough!

(Derek nodded.)

DEREK: No need, it's about all I can do at the moment, people are dropping like flies!

KRITZ: What was that? What did you do?

DEREK: Pure white magic, healing. I can heal most flesh wounds.

KRITZ: I didn't know you had that!

DEREK: I only learnt it four months ago!

(Flaxley, was not impressed to hear this.)

FLAXLEY: Then why didn't you heal me on the mountain that time??? I didn't sit down for four weeks!!!

(Derek look horrified that he'd even ask.)

DEREK: There's no way I was going to heal that. If you think I'm gonna be touching your arse, Flaxley, and I mean ever, you can think again!

KRITZ: Well whatever, Derek, that's an awesome power!

(Looking at the death and chaos around him, Derek shook his head.)

DEREK: This is nothing. So long as Everkei is using necromancy we're all as good as dead!

(With a raised eyebrow, Flaxley turned to face Everkei as he stood upon the roof liberally handing out life to his men and snarled.)

FLAXLEY: Then it's time he stopped!

(With that, he puffed out his chest and marched towards Everkei purposefully. As Derek and Kritz went about their battles, Flaxley cast aside anyone who got in his way until he reached the bottom of the building upon which Everkei was standing. With a ferocious glint in his eye, he then clambered up onto the roof and growled at the offending evil.)

FLAXLEY: Everkei, you bustier wearing, buttock fondler, what say you fight me like a man?

(Much to Flaxley's annoyance, Everkei ignored him completely and continued to watch the battle with a cold smirk as he resurrected his warriors with his mind.)

FLAXLEY: I'm talking to you, you overgrown sheep worrier with silly shoes!

(Again as the battle raged on, Flaxley received no change from Everkei. Determined to find a way to rattle the giant fiend, Flaxley mused to himself. There had to be something he could say to distract Everkei. As the cold hearted killer, continued to resurrect his men like a maestro conducting an orchestra, Flaxley thought long and hard to himself. All he knew about Everkei was that he wanted to rid the world of those he considered weak and create a single race of perfect warriors. With nothing else to go on, he decided to try something along those lines. Giving Everkei a belittling scowl, he folded his arms and spoke in a condescending tone.)

FLAXLEY: Bloody poofta, sending them into battle while you stand up here in safety? Call yourself a warrior? You're not mighty; you're nothing but a coward!

(Much to Flaxley's joy, Everkei flinched slightly, offering half a glance his way. Buoyed by this, Flaxley continued.)

FLAXLEY: And what's more, some of those women warriors of yours are far from perfect themselves. I've never seen so much cellulite!

(Everkei gave half a snarl, encouraging Flaxley further.)

FLAXLEY: And please don't get me started on those flabby arms of yours! Haven't you ever heard of exercise, tubby?

(With a face like thunder, Everkei spun around to face him.)

FLAXLEY: So, I finally have your attention. About time too, fatso!

(Growling at he spoke through gritted teeth, Everkei shook a sizeable fist.)

EVERKEI: My women, like myself, are the very epitome of bodily perfection. These arms are pure, toned muscle...

(He gave Flaxley a knowing smirk.)

EVERKEI: And these pure, toned fists are going to be the last thing you ever see!

(Flaxley shrugged. He knew all too well that an angry opponent was more likely to make mistakes. Also knowing that with an opponent Everkei's size, he'd be *relying* on some kind of error, he continued in the same vein.)

FLAXLEY: Nonsense. Tell me, do you like some meat with your lard or do you prefer it on its own?

(Everkei growled.)

FLAXLEY: Don't growl, your face fat wobbles. It's unsightly!

(As Everkei flipped into a rage and charged towards him, burning red with anger, Flaxley had mixed feelings. On one hand he'd achieved what he wanted and riled the giant man into attacking him, on the other hand he'd riled the giant man into attacking him.)

FLAXLEY: Uh-oh!!!

(As Everkei's enormous frame charged towards him, Flaxley instinctively took up a defensive stance with his sword.)

FLAXLEY: What am I doing?

EVERKEI: You will pay for your insolence!!!

(As Everkei snatched his sword out his hand and snapped it in two over his knee, Flaxley couldn't help but think he might be somewhat out of his depth. Normally had anyone touched his sword he'd have flown into a rage, right now however, he was too frozen by fear to do that. He was soon snapped out of his trance however, when Everkei punched him on the chin, sending him flying back over 10 feet. As he crashed onto the roof, he sat up looking stunned.)

FLAXLEY: Maybe this wasn't such a good idea!

(Having seen red, Everkei bounded after him adding fuel to his theory.)

FLAXLEY: Yup, definitely not a good idea!

(As he scrambled to his feet, the marauding Everkei leapt before him and grabbed him by his collar. Wearing a vile smirk, he stared into Flaxley's eyes.)

EVERKEI: Let's see who's the weak coward, shall we?

(Flaxley stared back with wide eyes.)

FLAXLEY: Can't we just pretend I never said that?

(Not about to entertain another word he said, Everkei then lifted him by the neck before throwing him back down on the roof with a tremendous force. Looking terrified, Flaxley yelled out as he crashed straight through the roof and landed with an almighty thud on the floor of the empty storeroom below. Dizzy and weak from the impact, he slowly clambered to his feet just in time for Everkei to jump into the room with him.)

EVERKEI: Well... this is cosy. Just the two of us!

(As his eyes focussed, Flaxley looked through the barred windows at the battle outside and did a double take.)

FLAXLEY: Great cliffs of Mount Tulmia, we're winning!

(Without even looking, Everkei snarled.)

EVERKEI: First you insult my physique then you insult my intelligence?

(Flaxley sighed.)

FLAXLEY: It was worth a try!

EVERKEI: It really wasn't!

(He gave a devilish grin.)

EVERKEI: I'm going to enjoy this!

(And with that, he proceeded to throw Flaxley across the room, thudding him into one wall then casting him into another, time and time again. It may have been scant consolation to Flaxley but to a degree, his plan had worked. Out in the square, without their necromancer on hand, the barbarians that Derek and the elite guards were striking down were finally staying down. This was allowing the chance for some of the citizens to escape to the suburbs. With the help of Derek's magic, others were managing to flee the city through the large hole in the city gates. Although vile creatures were known to lurk outside the city, anything beat staying there and getting slaughtered where they stood. Those who escaped this way, however, needn't have worried. Desperate to save as many citizens as possible, as soon as he noticed people fleeing through the gate, Kurik sent two of his elite guards out there to protect them. It may have seemed like a token

gesture but every life saved at this moment would be a bonus. Sadly, however, they were only scraping the tip of the iceberg. The barbarians were still chopping people down all over the square with consummate ease. There was only so much Derek and the elite guards could do.

Feeling that evacuating as many citizens as possible was their only chance, Derek knew they had to keep Everkei busy and wanted to help Flaxley desperately. Unfortunately, he was extremely busy being the last line of defence for the many potential fleeing civilians. Going about his business with urgency and determination, he knew he wouldn't be able to leave his post any time soon. Thankfully, for him, help came from an unlikely source. Defying his age, Bonson rushed from the battle and raced to his side.)

BONSON: How come magic suddenly works now? It never used to work inside the city walls?

DEREK: That's not important right now, Bonson. We can figure that out later if we live.

BONSON: Fair comment. I've come to help you. I'm quite adept with my fire magic these days.

(Derek turned to him urgently.)

DEREK: You want to help?

(Bonson shrugged.)

BONSON: Well, I'd rather be in the inn having a quite ale and a game of cards but that isn't happening.

DEREK: If you want to help, give Flaxley a hand!

(Bonson nodded.)

BONSON: Okay... where is he?

(Derek pointed to the buildings at the side of the square.)

DEREK: He's been keeping Everkei busy. They both fell through that roof. They must be in that room with the bars on the windows!

(Bonson nodded determinedly. It wasn't like him to be a hero but he felt he had to do his best at such a desperate time. Not because he felt responsible for anything but if they lost he'd be killed and he wasn't about to see the one he loved, himself, slain. Clenching his fist, he nodded to Derek positively.)

BONSON: Righto. Leave it to me!

(With that, he raced towards the building where Everkei was taking delight in beating Flaxley senseless. Psyched up ready for a fight, he approached the bars on the windows and peeked inside to see if he had the right room. Immediately his eyes bulged.)

BONSON: Good grief!!!

(Much to his horror he saw Everkei tossing a barely conscious Flaxley about the room. He winced as he watched the good knight, barely able to stand, flop about like a rag doll as the giant Everkei took much pleasure in bouncing him from wall to wall. Knowing he'd have to do something, Bonson frowned to himself and thought long and hard.)

BONSON: Hmm... think damn it... Everkei is immensely strong...

(He nodded to himself.)

BONSON: Immensely...

(He then looked enlightened.)

BONSON: I've got it!!!

(Wearing a determined expression he then lifted his head to shout through the bars.)

BONSON: Excellent job, Flaxley. Keep up the good work; we're all counting on you! (Satisfied he'd done everything he could reasonably do, he then straightened his bowtie and raced away to see who else he could help. As he watched him go, Derek rolled his eyes. There were simply too many enemies and the people needed all the help they could get. Bonson's feeble attempt wasn't doing anyone any favours and things were looking increasingly bleak. The body count in the square was getting out of hand.

With the situation worsening by the second, Kritz was becoming desperate. She knew the children in her care were relying on her but their number was swelling and the barbarians were getting closer and closer to breaching her defences. It was abundantly clear to her that if things continued as they were it would only be a matter of time before she lost them.

Mandika was also looking increasingly desperate. The way back into the castle was blocked and she was regretting ever setting foot on the square. She couldn't help thinking she'd have been better off staying put and had made that point to her personal guards several times over. Terrified to her very core by the slaughter and carnage all around, she'd arranged her ten guards into a circle around her and given them strict instructions to keep her hidden. It was a tactic the guards weren't happy about.)

GUARD: Are you sure this is wise, ma'am?

(Mandika looked furious.)

MANDIKA: Don't call me, ma'am! I'm incognito, remember?

GUARD: But if we guard you like this then it's going to be pretty obvious you're important!

MANDIKA: No it isn't! They won't even see me!

GUARD: But...

MANDIKA: Now shut up and stop acting suspicious!!!

GUARD: Ma'am?

MANDIKA: What did I just tell you? Now act normal and stop drawing attention to us!

GUARD: It's this circle that's drawing the attention!

MANDIKA: No it isn't, it's the fact you keep talking to me! Now shut up and protect me or I'll dock your wages!

(The guard scowled.)

GUARD: Try that and we'll step aside and let the barbarians dock you some limbs!

(Mandika's eyes bulged.)

MANDIKA: I'll pay you double!

(The guard sighed.)

GUARD: Damn right you will!

(Inside the small storeroom at this time, Flaxley was still being tossed from wall to wall by Everkei. It had been a good few minutes of solid punishment and he didn't know how much more he could take. Thankfully as he hit the next wall, Everkei laughed and for once didn't instantly grab him again.)

EVERKEI: And to think you had the audacity to mock me.

(He gave an evil grin.)

EVERKEI: Pretty soon you'll beg me to kill you...

(Flaxley could barely raise his head to look at him.)

EVERKEI: And the more you beg, the more I'll continue to torture you!

(Flaxley took a deep breath. His body was one giant bruise and every bone inside it ached horribly. Not about to let Everkei know how close he was to defeat, however, he somehow managed to stand tall.)

FLAXLEY: Do you really think I'll go down that easily?

(Everkei shrugged.)

EVERKEI: I admit, you *have* impressed me. You are no ordinary man; you are indeed strong.

(Flaxley said nothing, opting for a cold stare instead.)

EVERKEI: Don't get me wrong, this isn't a good thing for you by any means. It just means you'll suffer longer.

(Flaxley shook a contemptuous head.)

FLAXLEY: You think this is torture? You think this is suffering? You've obviously never tried to explain a simple task to Lefiat.

(Everkei gave him a sideways glance.)

EVERKEI: I know of no Lefiat! All I know is...

(He flexed his fists.)

EVERKEI: I'm going to destroy you!

(And with that he grabbed Flaxley again.)

FLAXLEY: Aw... crap!!!

(With a venomous look on his face he then threw Flaxley at the wall once more.

Instinctively, he closed his eyes and tried to shield his face with his hands as he thrust towards the brickwork with extreme force.)

FLAXLEY: Shit!!!

(Much to Everkei's horror, he'd thrown Flaxley so hard, he went straight through the wall. As Bricks and mortar spat out into the square, Flaxley rolled across the cobbles before leaping to his feet and beating a hasty retreat into the crowd. Looking furious, Everkei stepped from the building and punched the nearest barbarian out of pure frustration.)

EVERKEI: I *will* find you, and when I do...

(As he clenched his angry fists and looked about the square, he noticed several of his men lying dead and sneered.)

EVERKEI: You weak fools!

(Much to everyone's horror, Everkei then climbed back to the roof where he'd originally been working his magic from and resumed resurrecting his men.)

(With Everkei resuming his necromancy, to say it was back to square one for the terrified city folk of Guevina would be horribly optimistic. Square one wasn't half as dire as their current situation. Countless citizens had been slain while the only thing that remained as it was at the beginning of the battle was the number of barbarians. Stuck in such a desperate no win situation, there was little hope left in the eyes of those citizens who'd so far avoided slaughter.

There was no favourable philosophy in this battle. Bravery and cowardice were both being punished with equal ferocity. Many of the dead had bravely leapt into battle to save their family or protect their friends using whatever weapon was at their disposal but for every one of those brave citizens, just as many had been slain trying to flee. This was the damning reality for those left alive. Whichever way they chose to go about their battle made no difference whatsoever. Fearless or terrified, as their number continued to dwindle, the likelihood of being slain, rapidly increased for every single one of them.

The battle had by now reached the point where the chance of someone not knowing at least one fallen citizen was highly unlikely. Obliteration seemed inevitable. To make matters worse, as the situation became more and more desperate, more and more citizens gave up, making the battle even harder for those determined to fight on.

Not about to be giving up the fight any time soon, despite being in tremendous pain from his beating at the hands of Everkei, Flaxley had returned to the castle. Having had to battle and fight his way past several barbarians just to get in there, he was determined to fetch his second sword and at least teach some of the barbarians the meaning of pain. With a look of undiluted hatred upon his brow, he rushed into the guest quarters and immediately headed for his weapon case. Ripping the lid open, he thrust his hand inside and growled to himself.)

FLAXLEY: Come, Leanne, we have work to do!

(He snarled.)

FLAXLEY: Louise, you will not have died in vain!

(He then spun around and headed back out of the door, determined to set his blade into action as soon as possible.

Down in the main square at this time, the slaughter continued unabated. The elite guards were doing the best they could as were Kritz and Derek but their efforts seemed to be merely delaying the inevitable. The necromancy was rendering this enemy unbeatable and it was getting increasingly difficult to retain any sense of morale or confidence. Hope was vanishing fast. Derek, however, just like Flaxley would never to stop trying. He owed a great debt to his friends, Flaxley, Kritz, Mandika, Lefiat and Bonson and he wasn't about to let them down in any way, shape or form. Even with such determination however, it was becoming increasingly difficult to continue in the face of such overwhelming odds.

The only thing that kept Derek going at this point was his insistence that as long as there were people to save then it was his duty to save them, or at least try to. Kritz shared his attitude. She didn't see half the citizens as being slaughtered; she saw that half of them were still alive and needed help.

As he returned to the square, Flaxley also saw the more positive outlook and immediately joined Kurik and his men in their attempts to help people flee. The hopelessness of it all, however, remained plain for all to see. Everkei didn't take prisoners, he wiped his enemies from the face of the planet entirely and his warriors were showing no sign of slowing in their determination to achieve that task as soon as possible.

As the battle wore on, inevitably Derek's magic supplies started to wear extremely thin. He had a finite supply of the organic materials required to create his spells and had started to cast them sparingly and with extra caution. No more firing at moving targets unless they were at an unmissable angle. All his deadly elemental magic, such as fire and lightning were on the verge of expiring and he was becoming increasingly desperate. Spotting his tortured expression from across the square, Flaxley rushed to his aid.)

FLAXLEY: You're looking increasingly desperate!

DEREK: I am! Thanks, for rushing to my aid!

FLAXLEY: You're welcome.

(With that, Flaxley leapt forth and struck down a barbarian as he bore down on a screaming young lady.)

FLAXLEY: Not on my watch!

LADY: Thank you!!!

FLAXLEY: Never mind that, run for it!

(Heeding Flaxley's demand, she swiftly raced towards the gate and was immediately charged at by another barbarian. As she screamed, Derek released a powerful blast of lightning into the barbarian, sending him thudding into the wall. Looking terrified the young lady then made good her exit.)

FLAXLEY: Nice work, Derek.

(Derek looked to him desperately.)

DEREK: Flaxley, I can't afford to go through magic like this. If I run out...

(Just then, Derek froze to the spot and his eyes glazed over, almost as if he was in a hypnotic trance. Oblivious to Derek's odd behaviour, Flaxley glanced at the carnage and puffed out in frustration.)

FLAXLEY: I know, you'll be screwed pretty much!

(He hung his head.)

FLAXLEY: Damn that Everkei!

(He stood tall.)

FLAXLEY: Derek, there has to be a way...

(As he turned to face Derek his eyes bulged and his mouth fell open.)

FLAXLEY: What the?

(Stunned to see his little green friend in a catatonic state, Flaxley bit his lip uneasily.)

FLAXLEY: Derek? You okay there?

(Just then, a screeching barbarian rushed in from his left to cut Derek down. Reacting swiftly, Flaxley leapt forwards and lopped the assailant's head clean off his shoulders. As the severed head hit the ground, he then turned to face Derek urgently.)

FLAXLEY: Derek! Snap out of it! He could have...

(Derek then started to glow as if his skin was illuminated by a yellow field of light.

Utterly flummoxed by what he was seeing, Flaxley nervously stepped back, being careful to keep an eye out for incoming barbarians.)

FLAXLEY: This isn't normal... clearly!

(A loud whipping noise then echoed across the sky and the soul sphere they'd retrieved for the elders appeared in Derek's hands. Flaxley's jaw dropped.)

FLAXLEY: Great firebirds of the southern plains!!! What's going on?

(Knowing all too well that it had to be the elders doing, he then chastised himself

accordingly.)

FLAXLEY: Stupid question, Flaxley.

(He then watched on open-mouthed as Derek slowly stepped forth with the soul sphere, very much in a trance still. Immediately, two barbarians rushed at him only for Derek leap up and spin around, his tiny green legs kicking out into the faces of the incoming evil warriors. As the two of them crashed to the ground, Derek simply continued on his way.)

FLAXLEY: What the? Since when could he... I didn't know he could do that!

(Just then, a familiar voice popped up from his left.)

BONSON: I bet *he* didn't either!

FLAXLEY: Bonson?

BONSON: You know, being wise, I'm guessing... an *educated* guess of course, but I have a feeling we're watching the elders thrall in its purest form here, Flaxley! Forget thought control, they're controlling his every action.

(Flaxley replied in a stunned voice.)

FLAXLEY: I think you're right.

(As his two comrades continued to watch on agape, momentarily forgetting all about the battle that was raging on around them, Derek headed onwards through the crowd, performing spectacular fighting moves on anyone who came near. They couldn't believe what they were seeing. All around him the barbarians were still culling citizens with extreme ease but nobody could get near the diminutive alien. In no time at all, he reached the building upon which Everkei was standing and looked up at him with a cold look on his face.)

FLAXLEY: This is astounding!

(As they watched Derek perform another powerful high kick on an incoming enemy, they couldn't even begin to guess what the little green man would do next. Through the barbarity before them they could only stare in amazement as Derek held up the sphere and pointed it at Everkei.)

DEREK: In the name of the elders and life itself...

(He paused before uttering a final, cold word.)

DEREK: Boom!

(Immediately the sound of a deafening explosion filled the air, like three cannons going off simultaneously. At once, barbarian and citizen alike, swung their heads in the direction of the noise. As they did so, they saw a thick pillar of white mist rocket at Everkei and sweep him over the roof and away. At the same time, Derek rocketed backwards under the weight of the powerful kick from the sphere. Like a bright green beach ball, he bounced and thudded back over fifty feet. He landed with such a thud even Bonson didn't have it in him to laugh at him. Flaxley hadn't even noticed Derek; he was too busy staring agape at where Everkei had been swept away as if he'd been hit by a meteor.)

FLAXLEY: Holy...

(Having controlled Derek to perfection, the elders also found themselves shocked at the goings on down in the square. Daman looked particularly put out as Liege glared at him bitterly.)

LIEGE: Boom? Boom, Daman? Four hundred years to think of something and that's what you came up with? Boom???

(Daman flapped at him angrily and pointed into their crystal viewing sphere.)

DAMAN: Never mind that, I told you the Leramite was too small. Look at the soul sphere!!!

(Much to their horror, Derek had dropped the sphere during the kickback and it was being kicked and trampled into the cobbles by the hordes in the square. Dented and bent out of shape the elders knew it'd be useless.)

LIEGE: Shit! Get down there, Daman. We've got no contingency for this, let Flaxley know what's happening. Hurry!!!

DAMAN: I'm on my way!

(In the square in the meantime, the barbarian assault raged on. They were certain Everkei would leap back into position any minute now and weren't even remotely bothered by his disappearance. Had they known what was happening to Everkei, however, they might have thought differently.

The mist that had taken him was, in fact, a summoning. The summoning was made up of what the elders referred to as the seven souls of sin. Cast under their thrall it had been instructed to attack and destroy Everkei. Driven by the raw power of Dim Lee and Sandark, this non-corporeal force consisted of sheer hatred and right now it was focussed solely on Everkei. Creating a din reminiscent of a pack of wild banshees it cackled and screeched as it dragged him with devilish ghost-like hands at phenomenal speed through the backstreets of Guevina. Everkei was powerless to resist. His desperate attempts to free himself with punches and kicks had resulted in him punching or kicking at mist. The seven souls were untouchable. Their misty hands could touch and tear at him but he could do nothing in return. It had taken the elders four hundred years to perfect this summoning and they'd created something simply unstoppable. Walls offered no obstacle to the souls as they dragged Everkei backwards with ferocity through building after building. As their dark eerie cackles echoed down the alleys, bricks and mortar exploded about the place time and time again; courtesy of the souls dragging their prey through the stone. Hitting the walls at speeds well in excess of one hundred miles per hour, they were shattering Everkei's bones as if they were made of china. Bone china, no less. As if that wasn't painful enough, the powers of hatred within the summon, Kajice, Jacquit, Suzbit, Aurora and Heiner were tearing off chunks of Everkei's flesh along the way. His screams of excruciating agony almost drowned out the horrific cacophony of evil drones that emanated from the souls themselves. Ironically, this master of necromancy could do nothing right now except pray for his death to come as soon as possible. Being torn apart piece by piece and smashed through walls at break neck speed his wrecked body went into spasms and yet still he didn't die.)

(Oblivious to Everkei's torment, the battle in the square continued. With the necromancer nowhere to be seen, Flaxley had forgotten all about his pains from the beating he'd received and had set about chopping and slashing into the barbarians like a

man possessed. He'd decided that if he was going to die, he was going to die fighting. Kritz had taken full advantage of his determination and used his cover to help the children she was protecting escape from the city. As they raced to the relative safety of the meadow, she'd called for them to hide in the nearest woodland and returned to help out her battling husband. Derek, despite being punch drunk had also decided to throw caution to the wind and had set about using his remaining magic to slaughter as many barbarians as possible. Mandika continued to cower behind her guards and Bonson was taking refuge behind Flaxley. Lefiat however, remained oblivious at the inn. Looking thoroughly fed up, he continued to chat with the barmaid.)

LEFIAT: I guess you're right.

BARMAID: See?

LEFIAT: Fine, yes, we're agreed; cider is a waste of apples!

(The barmaid smiled victoriously and Lefiat rolled his eyes.)

LEFIAT: Bonson's taking his time! He said he was going to say a few words then come back.

(The barmaid shrugged.)

BARMAID: Well, as you can hear, they've been fighting for a while now! Why don't you go out and check on him?

(Lefiat shrugged.)

LEFIAT: Nah, maybe in a minute. I want no part of this revolution. Mandika might be a bad person but so is Bonson. I'll have nothing to do with his lies.

(He placed his empty tankard on the counter.)

LEFIAT: I'll just have another one *then* I'll check he's alright. It's the least I can do, I suppose. Not that he'll be grateful.

BARMAID: Okay. One ale coming right up.

LEFIAT: Thanks... um, you.

BARMAID: It's Sally. And you're welcome.

LEFIAT: So, just out of interest, how come you're not out there fighting, Sally?

(The barmaid shrugged as she poured Lefiat his ale.)

BARMAID: It's nothing to do with me. I live in Port Shehi. I'm only here visiting my uncle, the landlord.

LEFIAT: I see.

BARMAID: As far as I'm concerned, this dispute is for the people of Guevina to sort out, why should I get involved?

LEFIAT: Fair enough.

(He nodded.)

LEFIAT: I suppose as a person of Guevina, I ought to do *something*... it's just that I don't like *either* side very much. Bonson's a horrible git and Mandika can kiss my arse.

BARMAID: I see.

(As the barmaid handed him his ale, Lefiat glanced to the window briefly then looked back at her.)

LEFIAT: Thanks.

BARMAID: My pleasure.

LEFIAT: Hark at that racket out there. Sounds like chaos. I bet that's why Bonson hasn't come back yet. He's probably having a whale of a time.

(He then rolled his eyes.)

LEFIAT: Wanker.

(Not for the first time, Lefiat couldn't have been more wrong. Bonson was far from having a whale of a time. Despite the head way being made by Flaxley, Kritz and Derek, the barbarians were still chopping down civilians all over the square. All Bonson could do was protect himself with his inferno magic and hope he didn't get attacked by two at a time.)

(As the alarming rate at which the citizens were being slaughtered continued unabated, the only victory the allies could claim at this point was that there might at least be some survivors. Things indeed looked bleak. For every barbarian they took out of action, at least five civilians were being cut down. To make matters worse, they were all convinced that Everkei would return soon and revive his fallen warriors, thus putting an end to any slim hopes they had.

Little did they know, however, Everkei would not be coming back. Being skinned alive as he was dragged through the city walls and out onto the beach, what little energy he had left was merely serving to fuel his screams of agony.

As strips of his torn flesh literally fell off him, the souls screeched with delight and dragged his blood-soaked body across the beach and into the salty sea water. In twice as much pain, his eyes bulged and his scream echoed along the nearby cliffs. Howling with evil laughter, the souls then about turned and dragged him back through the city walls once more. Parts of his ears, one of his eyeballs and snapped pieces of his rib cage flew from his body as a trail of blood flooded down to the ground. And still he didn't die. All he had left was screaming as he endured a death beyond all deaths. Pretty soon, he didn't even have that as his tongue was ripped from his mouth. Some of the citizens who'd managed to flee to the suburbs were left feeling physically sick as they witnessed the screeching white mist whistle past them. The sight of a trail of blood, snapped bones and human flesh being deposited in every direction, too much for them to bear.

All Everkei wanted now was the release of death. He'd literally been skinned and ripped apart. Every bone in his body had been shattered by the walls or ripped out by the souls and yet, he'd remained alive to feel every immense sensation of pain imaginable. After several minutes of enduring unimaginable torture, however, his release finally came when his weak and tattered body was dragged at the wall of a suburban home and disintegrated, not enough of him left to make any impact on the bricks. The souls then tore what was left of him into pieces. All that remained of Everkei was a pile of shattered bones, diced flesh and a pool of blood.

Out in Guevina's main square at this time, nobody was aware of the terrible fate that had befallen Everkei out in the suburbs. They were, however, about to reap the benefits. When a permanent spell is worked, it requires a source to keep the magic alive and ongoing. Without that source, the spell is broken. This very much applied to the fountain of youth spell that Everkei had worked on his entire army to keep them young during their four hundred years in exile. Being the source of that spell, as soon as he'd

drawn his last breath, the spell was broken. All over the square, much to everyone's shock, horror and delight, all the barbarians dropped their weapons and started to shrivel like prunes.)

FLAXLEY: What the fuck?

BONSON: I don't know!

(He forced a smile.)

BONSON: But I can't say I disapprove!

(These were sentiments shared by one and all as they watched the barbarians shrink, shrivel and turn to rotted corpses before their very eyes. They literally became over four hundred years older in the blinking of an eye. The battle was over.)

(Despite the sudden, unexpected and bizarre victory, there was no celebration. The main square was awash with slaughtered men, women and children. Half of the population of Guevina had been slain. Although there was a strong sense of relief that it wasn't much worse, that feeling was outweighed by the grief. All over the square, the survivors were pale and crestfallen. The sound of terror in the air had been replaced by the sound of screaming and despair. It wasn't easy for Bonson, Kritz, Flaxley or Derek to see.

As she emerged from the grieving crowd, Mandika was particularly devastated. Fighting back tears, she raced into Kritz's arms and cried her heart out. These were her people. Despite her selfishness and vanity, she knew she'd be nothing without her subjects and she loved them dearly. She was utterly distraught and simply didn't know how Guevina could ever recover from such devastation. As he watched Mandika sob upon Kritz's shoulder, Flaxley shook his head solemnly.)

FLAXLEY: I know I've said this before but why does a victory like this always feel like such a defeat?

(Bonson shook his head.)

BONSON: Devastating.

FLAXLEY: Nobody really wins these wars.

(He then placed a hand on Mandika's shoulder.)

FLAXLEY: Mandika?

(Looking like her world had fallen apart, she turned her neck to look over her shoulder at him. As he looked into her saddened eyes, he tried to offer her a smile.)

FLAXLEY: It's down to you now, Mandika. You couldn't do anything against that enemy but it's down to you to do everything you can for the survivors.

(Bonson nodded.)

BONSON: Yes... and we'll give you all the help you need.

FLAXLEY: And Mandika... you can't give me that look without letting me give you a hug!

MANDIKA: Okay.

KRITZ: Try not to crush her this time.

(As Mandika turned from Kritz and fell into Flaxley's arms, Flaxley nodded to Kritz.)

FLAXLEY: We should stay and help rebuild or something.

(Kritz nodded.)

KRITZ: Yeah, I think so too.

(Just then, an unwelcome voice rose up from six feet behind them.)

DAMAN: I wouldn't make any plans just yet. This isn't over!

(Upon hearing Daman's voice, Flaxley immediately turned red with rage. Practically foaming at mouth, he threw Mandika at Kritz then charged at him with his sword.)

MANDIKA: Hey!!!

KRITZ: Careful!!!

(Daman just rolled his eyes.)

DAMAN: Come on, Flaxley, you *know* that won't work!

(Undeterred by Daman's reminder, the raging knight proceeded to lay into Daman with his blade like a man possessed. The sword went straight through him every time and yet he continued with a red mist in his eyes.)

FLAXLEY: I'll give *you* "this isn't over!" Die, damn it!!!

(Looking extremely urgent, Daman ignored him and stood tall.)

DAMAN: Chaps, we can discuss my lie about the thrall later, right now we've a far bigger problem.

(As Bonson, Mandika, Derek and Kritz glared hatefully in his direction, Daman sighed sorrowfully.)

DAMAN: The sphere worked like a charm. The souls you helped us gather tore Everkei asunder. Now he's dead and so is his army. Unfortunately, the souls were supposed to be returned to the sphere after they'd done it.

DEREK: The sphere? What happened to it? I don't even remember.

DAMAN: You dropped it and it got trampled on and broken. Now the souls are free and we've no way of recapturing them!

BONSON: Just capture them like you did before.

(Daman shook his head.)

DAMAN: We can't. When we caught them originally, they'd just left their bodies...

BONSON: How's that different? They're *still* not in their bodies!

DAMAN: Bonson, I don't have time to explain the complete ins and outs of how the afterlife works, we've got a serious problem here!

(As Flaxley continued to vainly swing his sword through him, Daman continued to ignore him.)

FLAXLEY: I'll bloody give you thrall!!!

DAMAN: Right now there's an unfathomable source of evil out there and we've no idea how to stop it. It's in the form of a white mist, so it can't be affected by weapons or even touched in any way. It can however, touch you and rip you apart.

(Kritz looked furious.)

KRITZ: And what do you expect *us* to do about it if we can't touch it or hit it with anything?

(Daman shook his head despondently.)

DAMAN: I don't know... I just needed to tell you. You see, they're the souls of Jacquit, Suzbit, Kajice, Aurora, Heiner, Dim Lee and Sandark...

(He grimaced.)

DAMAN: They're out of control and we don't know how to stop them. And who do you think they're going to be angry at the most?

(Apart from the marauding Flaxley, everyone's mouth fell open.)

BONSON: Oh, great work, Daman!

DEREK: So they can't be stopped?

(Daman could only give a defeat shrug.)

DEREK: Yeah, great. Thanks. Essentially you just swapped one unstoppable evil for an even worse one.

DAMAN: Yes, but I prefer not to look at it like that!

(Kritz shook her fists at him.)

KRITZ: Nice work, Daman!

(Daman just hung his head.)

DAMAN: I just need you to know that it's out there in the suburbs somewhere. I don't know what it's capable of or what it intends to do but with those seven behind it...

(He took a deep breath.)

DAMAN: Look, just tell Flaxley what's going on for me would you? I'm sorry!

(And with that, he disappeared again, leaving a fuming Flaxley swinging at nothing.)

FLAXLEY: Come back here, you coward!!!

(Kritz stepped to him urgently.)

KRITZ: Forget that, Flaxley, we've got a problem!

FLAXLEY: I know! I heard every word, why do you think I kept trying to hit him?

BONSON: I only wish it'd worked, Flaxley!

FLAXLEY: It did in a way... the thought of scything that git down is extremely therapeutic!

BONSON: Well, if it helped then...

(Out of the blue Mandika then stamped on his foot.)

MANDIKA: You bastard!!!

BONSON: Hey!!!

MANDIKA: This is all *your* fault!!!

(Knowing there was work to be done, Flaxley stepped between them urgently.)

FLAXLEY: Never mind that, we've got work to do!

(Everyone looked extremely uneasy.)

FLAXLEY: What? What's with you lot?

KRITZ: What are we supposed to do against something you can't even touch?

(Flaxley nodded sternly and tightened his grip on his blade.)

FLAXLEY: We're supposed to try our best, that's what!

BONSON: Really? Have you seen my best?

MANDIKA: And mine!

(Flaxley shook his head.)

FLAXLEY: Well, it's been a tough morning and I understand if you're apprehensive. I can't stand by and do nothing though. I have to try.

(With that, he tipped his head back heroically and glanced towards the suburbs.)

FLAXLEY: I'm going to fight it! Tell the kids I loved them, Kritz!

(He mused.)

FLAXLEY: And tell *them* to tell *you* I loved you too. I must fight!

(As he went to head away, Kritz quickly grabbed his arm and pulled him back.)

KRITZ: You *can't* fight it! Daman said it can't be touched!

FLAXLEY: Even so, I have to try.

KRITZ: No you don't! I have a better idea.

FLAXLEY: You do?

KRITZ: Yeah. We might not be able to *physically* harm it, but maybe we *can* hurt it magically.

BONSON: It's a long shot, but it's possible. Daman never said we you couldn't, at least. (Flaxley furrowed his brow at Kritz.)

FLAXLEY: I don't have any magic though! Magic is for sissies.

DEREK: Hey!!!

MANDIKA: Mean!

FLAXLEY: And aliens! Sissies, aliens and women.

BONSON: Well, fuck you, Flaxley. (Flaxley glared at him coldly.)

FLAXLEY: Shut it, sissy.

BONSON: And fuck you again! (Flaxley snarled.)

FLAXLEY: Look, I don't have time to appease your ego; I have an evil to face.

KRITZ: *We*, Flaxley! I'm coming with you! We can lure the souls back here where these guys will be waiting with their magic.

BONSON: Unless we decide to run away. *We are* sissies after all.

DEREK: Actually, *I'm* an alien.

MANDIKA: And *I'm* a woman. The only sissy here is *you*.

BONSON: Well, fuck the lot of you! (A Bonson stood there scowling, Kritz nodded sternly and looked towards the suburbs.)

KRITZ: Let's go, Flaxley. (Although impressed by her willing to do the right thing, Flaxley shook his head.)

FLAXLEY: I can't let you do that!

KRITZ: It's not up to you.

FLAXLEY: But, Kritz, if anything happens to me...

KRITZ: It won't! But even if it did, that message you wanted me to give the kids was far too long and confusing and I've forgotten it already.

FLAXLEY: Then make something up. Sorry, Kritz, facing danger is *my* duty and I forbid you to go.

KRITZ: The hell you do. It's my legal right to come with you. (Flaxley looked dumbfounded.)

FLAXLEY: What?

KRITZ: We're married, Flaxley, therefore I'm entitled to fifty percent of your missions!

FLAXLEY: Eh?

KRITZ: Now come on! We'll lure the souls out here to the square and Derek, you be ready with your magic! (Derek nodded.)

DEREK: I'll be ready. I warn you though; I'm running low on it!

KRITZ: You'll do your best! (And with that, she headed for the suburbs, dragging Flaxley behind her.)

KRITZ: Come on; let's get this over and done with. (As she dragged him forth, Flaxley protested.)

FLAXLEY: Hey, look, this might be dangerous, I can't let you...

KRITZ: Fifty percent, Flaxley!

FLAXLEY: But, Kritz...

KRITZ: No buts. Now, come on!

(As they watched Kritz pulled him along, Bonson chuckled to himself.)

BONSON: Looks like she owns fifty percent of his testicles too!

(Derek and Mandika scowled at him. At first Bonson was a little put out by their disdain of him but upon remembering his part in the mornings events, he looked to his feet and grimaced.)

BONSON: Oh yes, this is about the revolution isn't it?

MANDIKA: Just don't bother, Bonson!

(She folded her arms.)

MANDIKA: I just hope for your sake that the gallows got destroyed in the battle.

BONSON: Well if they didn't I think I'll go and do it now!

MANDIKA: Just stay there, you old git.

BONSON: Right... best not argue under the circumstances!

(As Bonson stood silently trying to think of a way to trick Mandika into forgiving him, Flaxley and Kritz rushed from the disaster hit square and out into the suburbs. Leaving behind the devastation and the carnage they headed down the waterlogged paths between the wrecked homesteads. They'd only got a few feet however, when something much unexpected happened. The rain cloud that had blighted the city for months lifted and Guevina was flooded with sunlight. Flaxley and Kritz immediately pulled to a halt.)

FLAXLEY: The storm's stopped!

KRITZ: Yeah! You don't think... the elders?

(Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: Probably. Them or Everkei, anyway!

(And with a shared shrug, they hot footed it forth once more.

Unsure as to where to look first, they headed straight down the boggy path, carefully scrutinising every gap in the buildings. As they surged onwards discussing their tactics, however, it didn't take them long to notice a tiny flaw in their plan.)

KRITZ: With any luck, they'll get Kurik to clear the square. I mean if we're luring it back there... they will think of that won't they?

(Flaxley looked less than confident about that.)

FLAXLEY: Bonson might think of it but I'd be amazed if he isn't at the inn already.

KRITZ: Yeah... it might not be such a great idea to lure this thing back to the square then.

FLAXLEY: We don't have a choice really though, do we? We told Derek to wait there with his magic.

(Kritz bit her lip.)

KRITZ: True.

(She looked across at Flaxley and raised an eyebrow.)

KRITZ: You look worried.

(Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: I am. This thing killed that Everkei chap and he was phenomenally strong as the bruises all over my body will testify. I could never have defeated him and yet we're actively seeking out the one thing powerful enough to kill him.

KRITZ: Yeah, it does seem a little out there, doesn't it?

FLAXLEY: Out there? Kritz, it's positively suicidal.

(Kritz rolled her eyes.)

KRITZ: We'll be okay as long as you stay positive like that.

FLAXLEY: Sarcasm, Kritz?

KRITZ: Yeah, I thought I'd give it a go.

FLAXLEY: Fair enough.

(A nervous expression swept Kritz's brow.)

KRITZ: Um... Flaxley?

FLAXLEY: My love?

KRITZ: What are we looking for exactly?

(Flaxley shrugged.)

FLAXLEY: A white misty looking thing, I suppose!

KRITZ: I know that. I mean, what does it look like? I don't have the first idea. Like a ghost? Like steam? What? All Daman said was it's in the form of a white mist, that's a bit vague. We don't want to stand out here like idiots beating the crap out of the morning mist, while that thing runs amuck somewhere else.

FLAXLEY: Don't worry, I only got a brief look at it as it swept Everkei over the roof but it was pretty thick.

KRITZ: So we're no likely to confuse it for the mist rising out of these puddles then?

FLAXLEY: Not at all.

KRITZ: That's alright then.

FLAXLEY: Well, you say it's alright, but... Kritz, that mist literally swept Everkei off his feet and dragged him away with it. And he was huge!

(He grimaced.)

FLAXLEY: If it gets hold of one of us two, I don't rate our chances!

(He then ground to a halt, grabbing Kritz's arm and pulling her to a stop with him.)

FLAXLEY: Kritz, we have two children depending on us. We can't both be taking a stupid risk like this. You should return to the square.

(Kritz looked mightily unimpressed.)

KRITZ: *You* go back to the square!

FLAXLEY: Kritz, this isn't about pride. You're a far better parent than I am. For the sake of the children, you should go back.

(Kritz stood akimbo and pouted.)

KRITZ: You just want all the glory for yourself!

FLAXLEY: Glory?

KRITZ: Yes, glory!

(Flaxley said nothing and folded his arms to look at her coldly. Under the weight of his stare, Kritz hung her head.)

KRITZ: Fine, I'm sorry. I know you're not in it for the glory. I just don't want to wait in the square not knowing if you'll ever come back. That'd be a torture too far, Flaxley.

(Flaxley gave her a warm smile.)

FLAXLEY: Hey, you ought to know by now, with you to live for I don't intend to die any time soon.

(Wearing a loving smile, Kritz stepped into his arms and they shared a warm embrace. As she placed her head on his chest, she rolled her shoulders then took a deep breath.)

KRITZ: Flaxley?

(Flaxley stroked her hair and replied in a loving tone.)

FLAXLEY: Yes, my love?

KRITZ: That white mist we're looking for...

FLAXLEY: Forget that for now, darling.

KRITZ: Well, I'd love to... only it's floating over there by that house.

(Immediately, Flaxley stepped back from the embrace and followed Kritz's gaze. Sure enough, a white swirling mist was hovering by the rear wall of one of the condemned abodes.)

FLAXLEY: Crap!

KRITZ: I agree. Now what?

(With a sigh, Flaxley looked to her and nodded.)

FLAXLEY: You go back to the square. Run. When you're far enough away I'll try calling out to it.

(Kritz nodded nervously.)

KRITZ: Well, if you're sure!

(Flaxley gave her a reassuring nod and a smile.)

FLAXLEY: It'll be fine.

KRITZ: Okay... don't forget I...

(Before she could finish her sentence, however, the mist reared up into the air and wailed like a banshee being attacked by a pack of hyenas. At once, Flaxley and Kritz both reared back in terror.)

KRITZ: I'll be off then!!!

(As she turned and fled, Flaxley raced along at her side.)

FLAXLEY: Maybe we should both go!!! And I mean all the way back to Tifaeris, right now!!!

KRITZ: Works for me!!!

(It was safe to say that neither Kritz nor Flaxley had ever run so fast in all their lives. They were terrified and rightly so. The souls had spotted them and knew exactly who they were. When they'd attacked Everkei, the souls had been driven by the will of the elders, this time they were fuelled by their own thirst for revenge. This time it was personal. After what they'd done to Everkei, only the most twisted, sadistic, deviant could even imagine what they'd do to Flaxley and Kritz.

As they raced away with determined sneers etched on their faces, Flaxley checked back over his shoulder. The souls were gaining fast.)

FLAXLEY: Keep running, Kritz!!!

(Sprinting forth with everything she had, Kritz replied angrily.)

KRITZ: Cheers, I hadn't thought of that!

FLAXLEY: Enough with the sarcasm!!!

(He frowned as he bounded forth at her side.)

FLAXLEY: And don't do that annoying falling over thing that you women tend to do at the most inappropriate time!

KRITZ: I'm gonna belt you in a minute, Flaxley!

(Checking back over his shoulder, Flaxley's eyes bulged.)

FLAXLEY: Fuck me, it's well fast!!!

(Sure enough, the souls were gaining at phenomenal speed.)

FLAXLEY: I mean it, Kritz. Fall over now and you've had it!!!

(He then fell victim to the fate he'd so deliciously tempted.)

FLAXLEY: Argh!!!

(Indeed, *he* fell over. As he hit the ground having tripped on some debris from a burnt out dwelling, Kritz raced on. She was so focussed on her sprint she hadn't even noticed her husband's calamitous tumble.)

FLAXLEY: Shit!!!

(Convinced his end had come, he tensed up and screwed up his eyes to await the wrath of the souls.)

FLAXLEY: Let it be quick!

(Much to his amazement, he felt no more than a gust of wind as the souls raced over his head and left him in their wake. Wearing a bewildered expression he looked up and squinted ahead. To his absolute horror, the souls had gone after Kritz.)

FLAXLEY: No! I won't have it!!!

(Looking mortified, he leapt to his feet and raced after her. As she disappeared around a corner being pursued by the maniacal screeching mist, Flaxley started to panic and think a million irrational thoughts. Why didn't they take him? How could he live if anything happened to his beloved? How could the elders have messed things up so badly? He had no answers to his questions. All he knew was that he had to save her.

There was absolutely no chance that any human could ever outpace the souls, their near weightlessness made them unfeasibly quick. Kritz's only hope was thankfully the one thing she had in abundance. Agility. While messing about with her husband on the beach once in Tifaeris, he'd tried to tackle her in the sand. After several failed attempts to catch her, he described her as being "like a well-oiled bar of soap". He only managed to capture her after she stopped to enquire why anyone would oil their soap. Right now that nimbleness was indeed the only thing keeping her alive. As soon as she'd raced around the corner, the souls had rocketed towards her. With a scream, she'd veered left and literally run up a wall then somersaulted back off of it to avoid their grasp. As soon as she'd landed they'd then whooshed towards her once again. Mercifully, she'd managed to throw herself to the ground and the souls vainly snatched at her as they zoomed over her head. Without wasting a single second, she'd then leapt up and charged away.

By the time Flaxley turned the same corner, she'd already gone around another one with the souls in hot pursuit. He had no idea where to look.)

FLAXLEY: Shit! Now what?

(As Flaxley stood there pulling his hair out, Kritz raced around yet another corner with a terrified expression on her face. The mist was relentless in its attempts to grab her and she was having to utilise every skill at her disposal to dodge its snarling grasp. Her senses of sight and sound were heightened and she'd never been so focussed in all her life.

As she sprinted forth between two houses, with a desperate expression on her face, as ever, the souls were hot on her heels and gaining swiftly. Just when it looked like they'd

catch her up, however, she leapt at a lamppost and majestically swung around it before launching herself to safety from it. Despite her amazing display of cat-like agility, however, the souls kept on coming. Their bloodthirsty enthusiasm and the horrifying cackle that accompanied it didn't wane for a moment.

Fearing for her life as she sprinted onwards down a narrow passage between two more dwellings, Kritz listened hard to their cacophonous screeches to gauge their position. Once again, as the sound became too close for comfort, she took evasive action. Wearing a ferocious snarl, she veered to her right and leapt at the wall to kick off of it. With incredible strength in her thighs, she immediately thrust herself backwards using the wall as a springboard and leapt up to the roof of the dwelling the other side. Barely making it, she landed in an awkward roll on the thatch before instantly jumping to her feet and sprinting off across the worn and battered rooftops. Naturally, the souls weren't far behind.)

(Having been searching for Kritz in a blind panic, Flaxley eventually found himself returning to the main square in the desperate hope she'd made it back there safely. Upon arriving at the edge of the square, he looked frantically towards Bonson, Mandika and Derek then snarled to himself. Kritz was nowhere to be seen.)

FLAXLEY: Damn it!!!

(With that, he went to turn and race off into the suburbs again, when Kurik raced over to him, calling out his name. At once, Flaxley stopped and looked to him desperately.)

FLAXLEY: Kurik, have you seen Kritz?

(Kurik stopped before him and shook his head.)

KURIK: No, Flaxley. I just wanted to ask what you want us to do next. As you can see, I've cleared the square. It wasn't easy, people didn't want to leave their loves ones behind just yet.

(Wearing a determined expression, Flaxley looked into Kurik's eyes and snarled.)

FLAXLEY: We find Kritz! That's what we do next!

(Kurik looked lost.)

KURIK: Flaxley?

FLAXLEY: Look, great job clearing the square. Derek's idea?

(Kurik nodded.)

FLAXLEY: Now I need your help finding my wife. She's out there somewhere and that thing's on her tail.

(He gritted his teeth.)

FLAXLEY: If anything happens to her...

(Kurik nodded determinedly.)

KURIK: Leave it to us, Flaxley!

(With extreme urgency, Kurik turned and raced over to his elite guards.)

KURIK: Spread out men, travel in pairs. Search the city. We're looking for a large breasted brunette who's dressed like a tart. Now move!!!

(Very much dedicated to their duty, Kurik and his men immediately started to rush from the square. Determined not to waste a single second, Flaxley then started to head off with them when he caught sight of his three comrades staring back at him from the other end

of the square. Desperate for Derek's help, he gritting his teeth then raced over to them urgently. As he approached they could tell from his face that something was wrong. Fearing the worst, they said nothing and waited nervously for him to reach them. As soon as he was near, Flaxley slowed and called out to them with his arms thrown out in frustration.)

FLAXLEY: It went after Kritz. We have to do something, Derek. Sod the square, come with me. I can't let anything happen to her.

(Derek nodded and started to jog towards him.)

DEREK: Whatever you need, Flaxley!

(Mandika bit her lip.)

MANDIKA: Oh no, I hope she's okay.

BONSON: Go! I'll take care of Mandika.

(Mandika snarled.)

MANDIKA: You stay the hell away from me!

BONSON: But...

(Just then, the sound of Kritz screaming filled the air. Immediately Flaxley's heart sunk as images of her being slain poured into his mind. Also convinced she was in dire trouble Bonson, Mandika and Derek shared his horror.)

BONSON: Oh, please god no.

(Just then, she screamed again as she leapt from one of the rooftops and landed in the square.)

KRITZ: Help!!!

(Immediately, Flaxley's heart soared.)

FLAXLEY: Kritz!!!

(Flaxley's joy, however, was short lived. The relentless souls were bearing down on her with tremendous speed. How she'd evaded them for so long, he didn't know. He just knew he had to do something. Anything. Even if it meant sacrificing himself so she'd could get away. Without a clue what he was doing, he immediately raced after her. Reading Flaxley's irrational thoughts, Derek leapt into action.)

DEREK: Wait for me, Flaxley!!!

(With Kritz his only consideration, Flaxley ignored Derek and raced to where his beloved wife was cart-wheeling away sideways from the rampant souls having fooled them into charging at her head on.)

DEREK: Flaxley, don't do anything rash!!!

(It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that Kritz had performed absolute heroics to elude the souls up until this point. Her agility had been formidable. Unfortunately, all her hard work was about to be undone by some regrettable interference from a third party. That third party being her husband, Flaxley. Desperate to save her, he raced up to her and took up a fighting stance.)

FLAXLEY: I'm here my love!!!

(Focussing only on keeping the souls at a safe distance, she didn't hear her husband's words and raced straight into him, her forehead thudding hard into his chest plate. Barely conscious, her legs buckled and she fell to the ground. Flaxley looked highly alarmed.)

FLAXLEY: What did I tell you about falling over???

(With that, he scooped her up and threw her over his shoulder before running back across the square with the souls advancing at lightning speed behind him.)

FLAXLEY: Bad!!!

(Knowing it was now or never, Derek snarled wildly and steadied himself. Determined to somehow save them, he immediately fired one magic after another at the souls.)

DEREK: Inferno, Glacier, Sleep, Sober, Lightning...

(Infuriatingly for the little green mage, despite hitting the target every time, the magic fizzed through the misty evil and continued out the other side.)

DEREK: Bastard!!!

(Hanging over Flaxley's shoulder, Kritz let out a loud scream. The pursuing dark entity was right behind her face.)

KRITZ: Turn!!! Turn, you idiot!!!

(Looking terrified, she screamed in fear of her life.)

KRITZ: Turn!!!

(Convinced her time had come, she jammed her eyes tight and screamed for all she was worth as Derek continued his desperate attempts to save them with magic.)

DEREK: Fuck, fuck, fuck...tornado, lethargy, H2O, cure...

(Much to Derek's amazement, just as several misty hands stretched from the evil mist to grab Kritz, his cure magic struck the target and the souls reared up and screeched.

Taking full advantage of the distraction, Flaxley swerved and raced away, Kritz yelling at him all the way.)

KRITZ: Put me down, you twat! I was doing fine until you decided to help!!! Put me down, you overgrown Lefiat!!!

(As she thumped his back and struggled to get him to put her back down, Derek was pulsating with excitement. His desperate use of cure magic had given them something to work with. Not about to let the opportunity slip through his grasp, he proceeded to fire it with extreme gusto.

DEREK: Cure, cure, cure...

(With each shot, the souls screeched and slowed. Much to his annoyance however, they still wouldn't desist. Despite being slowed to a crawl by the magic, their determination was ceaseless. Knowing his supplies of the magic were finite, he could only hope Flaxley and Kritz escaped before he ran out.)

(Little did Derek know, his discovery had caused quite a commotion far away in the sanctum of light.)

LIEGE: Cure magic can hurt it!!! Did you see that?

(Daman nodded determinedly.)

DAMAN: I saw it.

(He looked to Liege with urgency.)

DAMAN: I can't explain it, Liege. I definitely didn't see this coming. All I know is that for the first time we're physically in the game.

LIEGE: I'm right with you, Daman. We've been powerless to interfere until now but cure magic is the one thing we *can* help with!

(Daman stood tall.)

DAMAN: And help we shall!

LIEGE: Go! Gather *all* the elders!

(As Daman rushed from the room, Liege looked into the crystal sphere once more.)

LIEGE: At last there's hope.

(In Guevina's main square at this time, Flaxley was racing about desperately with an angry Kritz over his shoulder whilst being pursued by a screeching mist that continually moved a few feet then reared up as Derek shot it. Bonson and Mandika could only watch on open-mouthed.)

Derek's cure magic was indeed having a dramatic effect on the vengeful souls and after much pummelling, they finally started to lose ground. Relieved to not have this most deadly of enemies screeching and snarling a few feet before her nose anymore, Kritz finally stopped thumping and chastising Flaxley for a moment to draw a sigh of relief.)

KRITZ: Thank fuck.

FLAXLEY: Kritz? You okay?

(Kritz just snarled and said nothing. Hearing no reply, Flaxley immediately panicked.)

FLAXLEY: Darling???

(Without breaking his stride, he pulled her from his shoulders and held her before himself at arm's length. Charging onwards, a look of consummate relief washed over him.)

FLAXLEY: You're alive!!!

KRITZ: Yeah, no thanks to you!!! Now put me down!

FLAXLEY: Okay, but hit the ground running and don't fall over again.

(With that, he spun her around one hundred and eighty degrees then set her down. As her feet met the cobbles, she tripped forwards and Flaxley swiftly pulled her back to help her balance.)

FLAXLEY: What did I just say?

(Much to his bewilderment, as she raced forth beside him, she contorted and slapped his face.)

KRITZ: You complete pillock!!!

FLAXLEY: Excuse me?

KRITZ: I was doing perfectly well until you...

(Before she could finish ripping into him for his errors, however, Derek cried out in a panic.)

DEREK: I've run out of magic!!! Run!!!

(Sure enough, the souls were rocketing straight for them. At once, their eyes bulged and they panicked profusely.)

FLAXLEY: Run!!!

(With terror etched on their faces, they grabbed each other's hands and tried to sprint away. Bonson, Derek and Mandika could only look on and whimper as the howling dark souls homed in on them with extreme ferocity. For all the will in the world, it didn't look like there was any way imaginable that they could escape this time. Creating a devilish din of snarls, howls and cackles as it flashed towards them, the evil was clearly revelling in its imminent victory. Looking mortified, Flaxley and Kritz both yelled out, the last glimmer of hope in their eyes fading to nothing. Their time had come.)

FLAXLEY: No!!!

KRITZ: Shit!!!

(Suddenly, like a blessing from the gods, a dazzling pillar of light thrust into the souls

from above, causing them to freeze to the spot. A split second later and Flaxley and Kritz would have been no more. Sensing purity in the air, they both came to a swift halt and spun around in bewilderment as the circular rain of light continued to cascade onto the dark entity, engulfing it completely. As the bizarre phenomenon continued, they looked to one another in astonishment then paced back to Bonson, Derek and Mandika and joined them in their stunned observations. The atmosphere in the square had gone from an empty feeling of hopelessness to a serene calm in a matter of seconds.)

FLAXLEY: What the fuck is that?

(Derek smiled.)

DEREK: It's cure magic! Undiluted purity, I can smell it.

BONSON: It doesn't smell of anything!

DEREK: Not to you it doesn't, you're merely a layman when it comes to magic.

(Bonson frowned.)

BONSON: I've said it before and I'll say it again, fuck you!

KRITZ: Never mind that, what's going on?

(Bonson very deliberately glared at Derek before replying.)

BONSON: Obviously, it's the elders. They must have seen the spell work and decided to help. You wouldn't know that though, what with you being a layman when it comes to thinking.

KRITZ: What did you call me?

BONSON: Nothing, I was insulting alien boy, here.

MANDIKA: Watch yourself, Bonson. You're going to need all the friends you can get if I decide to hang you!

(He gave her a condescending frown.)

BONSON: Yes, friends would help. I'd hate it if nobody came to my after-hanging party!

MANDIKA: Just have to push it, don't you?

(He gave her a bewildered look.)

BONSON: You know, I really do. Why is that?

FLAXLEY: Never mind that. This isn't over yet.

(They all looked to him.)

MANDIKA: Looks over to me!

BONSON: Quite! What are you saying, Flaxley?

(Flaxley nodded knowingly.)

FLAXLEY: If this is the elders doing, you know it's never that simple.

BONSON: Still, it's about time they contributed!

FLAXLEY: Even so, don't relax just yet!

(Flaxley was right to be wary. As the pillar of light slowly faded to nothing the allies were amazed by what they saw. The unprecedented levels of curative magic that had showered and soaked the souls had restored them to human form. As naked as the day they were born, Aurora, Dim Lee, Heiner, Jacquit, Kajice, Sandark and Suzbit stood before them in the flesh looking baffled and bewildered.

At once, the square fell completely silent; nobody quite believing what had happened. As the reality of it started to sink in, however, Mandika and Kritz exhaled happily and their heads tipped to the side as they checked out Dim Lee and Sandark's nakedness. Far from

showering themselves in glory either, the males in their party also exhaled as they feasted their eyes on Kajice's bare chest. It was quite the sorry display. First to snap out of it, Flaxley stepped forth and drew his sword.)

FLAXLEY: So, we meet again!

(Much to his annoyance, Aurora, Sandark and Heiner immediately tried to bolt.)

FLAXLEY: Hey!!!

(Without their magic or their army, Aurora and Heiner both knew they were powerless and weren't about to even consider fighting. Sandark for his part was merely trying to shield his queen, something he'd always lived to do. Not about to let them flee, however, Derek jumped forwards and blasted Heiner with his lightning magic, killing him instantly. He then contorted and blasted Sandark to oblivion with another 10,000 volts as he hurriedly led Aurora towards the edge of the square. Much to his annoyance, however, Aurora managed to flee into the suburbs before he could fire again.)

DEREK: No you bloody don't!!!

(As he took off after her, Jacquit, Suzbit and Kajice all had the same idea. Being former witches, they too were powerless without magic and unwilling to engage in battle. As they attempted to escape, however, Flaxley did nothing. His eyes were focussed solely on Dim Lee. Unlike Kritz's and Mandika's eyes, however, they were focussed on his face. Dim Lee had been a formidable foe and came extremely close to killing him once. Flaxley knew where his focus must lie.

Quick to note Flaxley's refusal to chase the powerless former witches, Bonson leapt into action. Wearing a devilish sneer he raced after Kajice like a man half his age.)

BONSON: Come here you!!! I killed you once and I'll do it again!!!

(With nobody pursuing them, Jacquit and Suzbit raced for the passageway aside the inn feeling confident of a clean get away. As they raced past the saloon doors, however, they received the shock of their lives. Sick of waiting for Bonson, Lefiat finally emerged from the inn and accidentally stepped in their path. Suzbit immediately freaked out and screamed.)

SUZBIT: No!!! It's him!!! It's the witch slayer of Wendigo!!!

(Lefiat looked completely bewildered.)

LEFIAT: Hey, why do people keep saying that? I'm not the witch slayer of anywhere!

(Jacquit paced backwards trembling.)

JACQUIT: He denies it!!!

(She fell to her knees.)

JACQUIT: It must be true!

(Suzbit also fell to her knees.)

SUZBIT: Spare us, we beg you.

(Lefiat scratched his head and mumbled to himself.)

LEFIAT: How many ales did I have?

(He rubbed his eyes.)

LEFIAT: I'm seeing...

(As he opened his eyes wide he flinched.)

LEFIAT: I'm seeing naked women!

(He mused to himself.)

LEFIAT: I need another ale!

(As he about turned to go back into the inn, he suddenly realised who they were and panicked.)

LEFIAT: Jacquit and Suzbit!!!

(Looking terrified, he spun around just in time to see several shards of ice fly rapidly into both their bodies, killing them where they knelt. As their bodies hit the floor, Lefiat looked up in a daze then froze. Before him, a naked Dim Lee was confronting Flaxley and Kritz while a sneering Mandika stared at the two dead witch's corpses.)

LEFIAT: Um... why do I get the feeling I missed something?

(Mandika just scoffed at him then paced back to Kritz's side.)

LEFIAT: Right...

(Baffled by it all, Lefiat then nervously edged his way to Flaxley's side. Oblivious to Lefiat's presence, the good knight continued to stare coldly into Dim Lee's hate filled eyes. The standoff between the two was quite the display of mutual disdain.)

KRITZ: We get the point, my love. You don't like each other. Now kill him.

(Flaxley gave her a sideways glance then nodded.)

FLAXLEY: First things first, my love. Now stand back, this is *my* fight.

(With that, he stood tall and puffed out his chest.)

FLAXLEY: So... Dim Dum, I get to kill you again, do I?

(He then glared at Kritz.)

FLAXLEY: I know that's not his name!!!

KRITZ: I didn't say a word!

(Also standing tall, Dim Lee nodded.)

DIM LEE: Wrong, Flaxley. Very wrong! You didn't kill me last time, lightning did. And you won't kill me this time either. This time, the bigger and better man will win!

FLAXLEY: I see!

(He scoffed.)

FLAXLEY: So we both think I'll win then!

DIM LEE: Foolish knight. How am I supposed to take you seriously? I warned you last time and yet you still have a stupid haircut.

FLAXLEY: And you still have a big nose.

(With that, Dim Lee winked at Kritz.)

DIM LEE: When I have disposed of you, Flaxley. I'll show your wife what else is big!

(Flaxley rolled his eyes.)

FLAXLEY: She's already well aware of that!

DIM LEE: Oh, really? What's the matter Flaxley...

(He stood akimbo and let his manhood dangle free.)

DIM LEE: Jealous?

FLAXLEY: Am I jealous?

(With that, he slipped his trousers down to his knees and gave him a conceited grin.

Kritz and Mandika didn't know what was more embarrassing, these two men comparing their penis sizes or the sight of Dim Lee crying.)

FLAXLEY: So once again I tell you, the bigger man... me... will indeed win this fight!

(As Flaxley pulled up his trousers, Dim Lee scowled coldly.)

DIM LEE: At least now I know what to aim for when I take your sword off of you.

(Fed up with their infantile fighting talk, Mandika rolled her eyes.)

MANDIKA: Oh, get on with it!

FLAXLEY: All in good time, Mandika.

(Looking peeved, Dim Lee snarled at her.)

DIM LEE: We'll fight when we're ready. First I need this fool to know what I intend to do to his wife after I kill him!

(Kritz rolled her eyes.)

KRITZ: Here we go!

MANDIKA: Don't complain, at least you get male attention. Nobody even notices *me*!

(Kritz gave her a sideways glance.)

KRITZ: Yeah, it's great having evil warlords tell you what they intend to do to you after they kill your husband. Makes you feel really special and sexy!

(Mandika sighed lovingly.)

MANDIKA: I know!

(As Kritz glared at her, Mandika looked away and grimaced to herself, wishing she'd remembered to keep her fantasies to herself. Once she was satisfied that Kritz had stopped judging her, she then looked up and an amused smile washed onto her face. She couldn't help but give a stifled chuckle at the sight of Bonson still pursuing the naked Kajice around the square.)

MANDIKA: What an idiot!

(It wasn't that Bonson was too slow to catch Kajice, he was simply enjoying it too much to allow it to end. Much to his disappointment however, Kajice wasn't enjoying it at all and slipped into a side building in a desperate hope to elude him.)

(As Flaxley and Dim Lee continued their war of words in the square, the devious looking Bonson followed Kajice into the small building and closed the door behind him.)

BONSON: So... gotcha!

(Sure enough, the building was a single room containing only a bed and a large cupboard. It was used as a first aid room for events in the square. There was nowhere left for Kajice to run.)

BONSON: Any last requests?

(Looking tearful, Kajice dropped her shoulders and pouted.)

KAJICE: I don't want to die... again!

BONSON: Well we all have to do things we don't want to do!

(She looked at him with imploring eyes.)

KAJICE: But... I'm not a witch now; I can't hurt anyone. And I wouldn't. I've changed!

BONSON: Changed?

KAJICE: Yes! I turned evil as a witch but I'm not one now. I'm just a weak, ordinary woman!

(Bonson rubbed his chin.)

BONSON: Hmm... that's true!

KAJICE: Please, please let me go.

(As an evil look crossed his brow, Bonson folded his arms.)

BONSON: Trouble is, you see, it's my duty. I have to kill you.

(Kajice started to cry.)

BONSON: Sorry, my hands are tied!

KAJICE: But...

BONSON: But nothing, you were part of that soul thing. You just tried to kill Kritz and Flaxley; that makes you wanted, punishable by death I'm afraid!

KAJICE: But...

BONSON: You also tried to kill the queen once, remember? Monarchies tend to frown on that kind of thing!

(Again she begged him desperately.)

KAJICE: Please... let me go. I won't tell anyone!

(Bonson looked horrified.)

BONSON: No chance. If they found out they'd kill *me* instead!

KAJICE: They needn't know!!!

BONSON: Sorry, there's nothing I can do!

(A devious expression then crossed his brow.)

BONSON: Unless...

(As hope returned to her eyes, Kajice implored him to continue.)

KAJICE: Unless?

(Bonson nodded.)

BONSON: There is a way but I think you'd probably rather die!

KAJICE: No... I'd do anything!

BONSON: Anything?

(She nodded sternly.)

KAJICE: Anything!

BONSON: Well... I could always claim you for my own!

(Kajice looked uncertain.)

KAJICE: Your own?

BONSON: Yes. If I do that then nobody will be allowed to harm you.

KAJICE: That's the law is it?

BONSON: That's what I'll *tell* everyone the law is, yes. I've invented several laws over the years and everyone's always been too lazy to check.

(He shrugged.)

BONSON: Of course you'd have to marry me. And keep me happy. I mean, I don't want to be in a...

(He made inverted commas with his fingers.)

BONSON: Loveless marriage.

(Kajice sighed.)

KAJICE: I'll take whatever I can get, just don't kill me.

(Bonson shrugged.)

BONSON: Well, okay. I'm a reasonable chap. Just remember, if you leave me you'll be hunted down again and killed. This will be a forever kind of deal. And I want plenty of the naughty stuff.

(Kajice shuddered.)

KAJICE: Gross, but I want to live.

BONSON: Is that a yes?

(She hung her head and nodded.)

KAJICE: I guess beggars can't be choosers!

BONSON: Damn right!

(He frowned.)

BONSON: And thanks for the ego boost!

KAJICE: Sorry!

(With that, he rubbed his hands together.)

BONSON: Right just to prove you mean business.

(He grinned and gestured downwards with his eyes.)

BONSON: Whenever you're ready!

(Shuddering in disgust, she shook her head and sunk to her knees to yank his trousers down.)

BONSON: Excellent!

(While Kajice made a dirty old man very happy, Flaxley and Dim Lee were still in the throes of their pre battle formalities. As the two of them traded their childish insults, Kritz, Mandika and Lefiat looked bored stiff. Mandika was struggling to stay awake and leaning on Kritz while Lefiat had sat himself upon the ground. Both men enjoyed their fighting talk and didn't look like quitting any time soon.)

DIM LEE: I don't need a sword to defeat you!!!

FLAXLEY: Good job too, your sword skills are less than adequate anyway.

DIM LEE: Oh, really? Lend me a sword so we can test that theory!

FLAXLEY: Not happening, Dim. My swords would never lower themselves to fight with you!

(Dim Lee shrugged.)

DIM LEE: Fine!

(He then picked up one of the many barbarian swords that were strewn upon the ground.)

DIM LEE: I'll just use this one then.

(As he flashed his sword rapidly from left to right in a bid to intimidate Flaxley, however, the blade flew off and shattered against the wall.)

DIM LEE: What the?

FLAXLEY: I guess now Everkei's gone, four hundreds year of rust have finally caught up with it.

(Dim Lee grimaced.)

DIM LEE: I'll have to take your word for that.

(He shrugged.)

DIM LEE: Fine, I don't need a sword anyway, like I said. And I wouldn't borrow one of your pathetic swords even if you offered me one. I prefer a manly blade whereas your swords are all quite clearly gay!

(Flaxley was livid.)

FLAXLEY: How dare you? That's too much, Dim... bloke. Don't make me kill you any harder than I already intend to!

DIM LEE: Too much? You called my daughter a whore and inferred that my sons were of below average intelligence!

FLAXLEY: Maybe so, but I never insulted your sword!

(Dim Lee nodded and offered him a courteous bow.)

DIM LEE: I apologise, I went too far!

(He mused for a moment.)

DIM LEE: How's this? Your wife looks like a troll and your children are diseased.

(Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: Much better!

(Watching on from behind, Kritz rolled her eyes.)

KRITZ: They'll be here all bloody day. If he hadn't claimed the fight for himself, I'd be tempted to leap in and start it myself.

(As Mandika started to snore, Kritz sighed.)

KRITZ: Couldn't have put it better myself!

(And still the fighting talk raged on.)

FLAXLEY: Twice actually!

DIM LEE: How can you kill me twice? Fool!

FLAXLEY: I fought an effigy of you in an ancient ice cavern. I killed *that* version of you too.

DIM LEE: Idiot Caucasian. That wasn't me!

FLAXLEY: Racism now, is it?

DIM LEE: Yes, I'm running out of good insults. Get over it.

FLAXLEY: You're not the only one who has a home in 'cheap shot country', you know!

DIM LEE: Do your worst, fatso!

(Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: Very well, your muscles are poorly defined and your cheek bones are shallow and less than flattering!

(Dim Lee looked uncertain.)

DIM LEE: My cheekbones are my best feature!

(He scowled.)

DIM LEE: That aside, you make a very effeminate critique of my features, Flaxley. I think you spend too much time with that wife of yours!

(Flaxley spun around and glared at Kritz. Utterly perplexed by his accusing eyes, Kritz thrust her hands out to the side.)

KRITZ: What did *I* do?

(Flaxley spun back to face Dim Lee.)

FLAXLEY: Never mind that, Dim Dum. The time to end this thing has come!

(Dim Lee bowed.)

DIM LEE: Very well. I'm glad you gave up when you did, before you embarrassed yourself further!

(Flaxley stood tall.)

FLAXLEY: Nonsense.

DIM LEE: It is the truth! I defeated you with ease!

FLAXLEY: You lie! You went for cheap shots first, that makes me the winner!

(Dim Lee mused to himself.)

DIM LEE: Hmm... I did do that. Call it a draw?

FLAXLEY: I'll take a draw!

DIM LEE: Then it is settled. Now it's time to kill you then go home.

(Kritz looked most put out.)

KRITZ: Hey! Us! Kill *us*!

(She looked completely baffled.)

KRITZ: What the hell am I saying?

FLAXLEY: Never mind that! No more talk. It's time to fight!

(Before he could even begin to raise his sword in anger, however, Derek came racing back to the square.)

DEREK: Wait! Some people here want in.

(Much to the amazement of Flaxley and his allies, Kurik and his entire legion of elite guards made their way into the square looking poised and ready for action. There were well over 100 of them and all were well armed. As Dim Lee watched them approach, he suddenly didn't look so confident. Racing up to Flaxley's side, Derek gave a knowing smile.)

DEREK: I think we might have this fight in the bag, don't you?

(Flaxley pouted at him bitterly.)

FLAXLEY: But this was my fight, Derek.

KRITZ: You had your chance and you talked all through it.

FLAXLEY: But... fine.

(Looking delighted, Mandika placed a hand on Derek's shoulder.)

MANDIKA: You gathered my elite guards?

(Derek shook his head.)

DEREK: Not just the elite guards, Mandika.

(Sure enough, behind the elite guards, hordes of Guevina's citizens were pouring onto the square. Having been crushed by the day's events, every single one had a bloodlust in their eyes. Dim Lee may not have been the one who'd slaughtered their families and friends but he was the enemy now and he was about to pay for all the atrocities of the day. The people of Guevina would be having the last word.)

MANDIKA: Wow!

(Flaxley stood tall.)

FLAXLEY: Actually, I'm kinda glad I missed my chance. This is as it should be. It's Guevina's fight and it's only right they get to strike the final blows.

(He then started to pace backwards.)

FLAXLEY: Come on chaps, our part in this is over.

(Derek nodded.)

DEREK: Aurora's dead by the way, you know, if you were wondering.

KRITZ: Then let's get right back and let these people have their moment!

FLAXLEY: Quite right.

MANDIKA: So glad we don't have to fight him. Nice stalling tactic, Flaxley!

(Flaxley looked rattled for a moment.)

FLAXLEY: What?

MANDIKA: You know, all that chat with Dim Lee. Nice stall!

FLAXLEY: Oh... yes, well, tactics are what we knights do best!

(Kritz rolled her eyes.)

KRITZ: Yes dear.

FLAXLEY: Anyway, never mind that. Let's all shut up and watch a defining moment in this nation's history unfold!

(Sure enough, history was well and truly in the making. The battle which would come to define Guevina for centuries to come was about to reach its climax. Dim Lee could only walk in empty circles as he was swiftly surrounded by a legion of furious guards and over 1000 city folk intent on making the final kill. A final kill that might just give them the

smallest of consolations. There was little doubt that a mighty warrior like Dim Lee would go down fighting but there'd be no reprieve for him. Mandika, Lefiat, Derek, Kritz and Flaxley stood proudly watching from a distance as the circle around the fated man slowly decreased. Knowing the end was imminent, Flaxley removed his helmet and placed it across his chest as a tribute to the fallen.)

FLAXLEY: Any second now!

(He looked uncertain.)

FLAXLEY: Um... I don't really have a stupid haircut, do I?

(Captivated by the sight before them, nobody replied. As the space around Dim Lee decreased to almost nothing, there was suddenly a loud cry and all hell broke loose. Dim Lee had leapt into action and sparked the elite guards into doing the same. The crowd shuffled and swarmed as a tremendous melee broke out in the middle. As expected, however, it wasn't long before a large cheer filled the sky and the head of the desperate warrior was thrust into the air. This fighting great, no match for the thousand strong mob. The very last enemy of Guevina had been defeated.)

(Like her comrades at her side, Mandika had little to say and hung her head. The cost of victory had been far too high to celebrate. Silently, they all looked down to the ground and reflected on the awful events with nothing but regret. The last thing they needed at this point was for Daman Siria to put in an appearance. Manifesting behind them, he strode to their side and sighed.)

DAMAN: Terrible!

(Immediately, five pairs of angry eyes glared his way.)

DAMAN: I'm sorry this had to happen!

FLAXLEY: You again? Let me guess, it still isn't over?

DAMAN: Actually, Flaxley...

FLAXLEY: What next? Are the dead going to rise again and form an army of zombies?

(Daman sighed.)

DAMAN: Damn it, Flaxley. It's like you read my mind!

(He shook an angry fist.)

DAMAN: That's exactly what's going to happen!

(A simultaneous groan filled the air.)

KRITZ: Does it never end?

(Much to their annoyance, Daman laughed.)

DAMAN: I'm joking. It's over! All threats have been neutralised one way or another.

(Hardly surprisingly, his alleged joke had an air of the proverbial lead balloon about it.)

FLAXLEY: A joke?

MANDIKA: You're making jokes about the bodies of thousands of innocent people?

Slaughtered in their prime and you think it's good comedy material?

(Daman looked shifty and grimaced.)

DAMAN: When you put it like that I suppose it was a tad insensitive!

LEFIAT: A tad? Even Bonson wouldn't stoop that low!

MANDIKA: Yes, he would!

LEFIAT: Yeah, he's an asshole!

FLAXLEY: Never mind that, what do you want, Daman?

(Daman nodded.)

DAMAN: Find Bonson and meet me in Mandika's chamber in ten minutes.

FLAXLEY: Fuck you, why should we?

DAMAN: Because I have something to tell you, something you need to know.

(And with that he disappeared again.)

LEFIAT: I hate that bloke!

FLAXLEY: Me too. I'm not going!

KRITZ: Yeah we are. I'm curious to know what he wants.

MANDIKA: Me too.

KRITZ: It's a woman thing!

(Derek nodded.)

DEREK: I never could read his mind, you know. I get the feeling it's important though.

Let's find Bonson and get going!

FLAXLEY: Fine!

KRITZ: Where is Bonson anyway?

(Mandika rolled her eyes.)

MANDIKA: He chased Kajice into a building. I bet he's been hiding in there in the hope we'll forget about him. He's probably planning to flee the city before I get the chance to hang him.

(She snarled.)

MANDIKA: Wait there. I'll get him!

(Looking determined she made the short dash across the square to the door Bonson had last been seen passing through. Wearing an angry snarl, she yanked open the door and received quite a horrifying start.)

MANDIKA: Bonson???

(Bonson was lying on the bed with his arms out to the side. His mouth and eyes were wide open and he wasn't moving. Immediately, terror struck her heart and she stood bolt upright in horror. Kajice, however, was nowhere to be seen. Realising that the former queen of all witches much have slipped from the room while nobody was looking, she shook her head then stepped forward gingerly, allowing the door to creep shut behind her.)

MANDIKA: Bonson?

(As she reached his side, she looked him up and down and her bottom lip started to quiver.)

MANDIKA: But... I wanted to punish you...

(Her face turned red with rage.)

MANDIKA: You started a bloody revolution against me and I don't even get to have you flogged!!!

(She stood there fuming for a few moments then her face turned pale and a pout formed on her lips. In that moment, she remembered the time Bonson stepped in front of Jacquit and Suzbit to protect her. She then recalled how he'd been there for her when the king had passed away, plus all the kind things he'd said about her when he thought she wasn't listening. Her heart-ached. Here lay a man whom, until a few day ago, had always been in her corner, albeit rarely without complaint. Here lay a man whom, despite everything, she still looked upon as family. Devastated, she stared down at where he lay and whimpered.)

MANDIKA: Kajice did this to you?

(As her tears gathered, she knelt and placed her head on the bed, closing her grieving eyes. Fighting back the tears, she adopted praying hands and craned her neck to look into his motionless face.)

MANDIKA: Oh, Bonson. Trust you to die before I could punish you.

(She sighed and climbed to her feet. Allowing herself a cry, she then crouched so she could hug his body.)

MANDIKA: I'm sorry, Bonson!

(She sighed.)

MANDIKA: Did I drive you to do what you did? Was I that bad a daughter?

(She shook her head.)

MANDIKA: It must have been hard to watch me grow up. Having your own daughter believe that someone else was her father must have been a living hell. Never being able to do what a father should. No wonder you were angry.

(She sighed once more.)

MANDIKA: You were such a cruel man sometimes, Bonson. I forgive you though, I wasn't perfect myself. I just wish you didn't have to die not knowing that I love you.

(Her tears started to flow and her words became erratic as a result.)

MANDIKA: I didn't know... forgive me... you were only cruel because life was so harsh on you...

(She looked to the heavens.)

MANDIKA: Cruel gods, why? Why let him die while I was angry at him?

(She sighed and hung her head.)

MANDIKA: I'm sorry, Bonson. I'll never get to tell you that though... or how proud I am... well, maybe not proud... I'm not that ashamed that you're my father... I love you.

(She forced back more tears and shook her head sorrowfully.)

MANDIKA: What I'm saying is, I forgive you, Bonson!

(Just then, an animated Bonson sat up and wagged an excited finger in her astonished face.)

BONSON: Excellent! You said you forgive me! You can't take it back! I knew you loved me really!

(Mandika was naturally furious.)

MANDIKA: You rotten bastard!!! How could you stoop that low???

(Bonson shrugged.)

BONSON: Consider the source, of course I sunk this low!

MANDIKA: You...

BONSON: No, no. You said you forgive me and I'm holding you to that!

MANDIKA: I hate you, Bonson!

(Bonson scoffed.)

BONSON: We both know that's not true. You love me, you said so!

MANDIKA: I was...

BONSON: Twice!!!

(Mandika raised her voice.)

MANDIKA: I was grieving!!!

BONSON: I know, and you only grieve over people you love!

(Looking disgusted, she started to head for the door.)

MANDIKA: That was low, even for you!

(Bonson leapt from the bed and stepped up to her.)

BONSON: Mandika, I'm a complete git. I know it, you know it and everyone knows it. Sure my life's been tough and everything but that's no excuse. I'm a git!

(He sighed.)

BONSON: Thing is, Mandika. Even though I act cold and uncaring to you sometimes, you have no idea how I really feel. I guess I'm not secure enough to let you get that close. I'll tell you this though...

(He smiled.)

BONSON: Those times you hugged me and I threw you off, well, I actually loved those few moments you were holding me. And you know, no matter how crappy or grouchy I feel, nothing and I mean nothing, warms my heart like seeing that glint in your eyes when you smile!

(Heartened by his words, Mandika forced a smile.)

BONSON: I can't believe I opened up!

(He shuddered.)

BONSON: God, it was horrible, but worth it to see you smile!

(Mandika shook her head and yanked open the door.)

MANDIKA: Whatever. Look, Daman needs us all in my chamber as soon as possible. Hurry up!

BONSON: Righto... and you forgive me? I mean really forgive me?

(She glared at him coldly.)

MANDIKA: Fine. You're still a git though!

(Bonson nodded as she started to go.)

BONSON: I know!

(As Mandika left the building and headed away across the square, Bonson rubbed his hands together and beamed.)

BONSON: You can come out now!

(Immediately, Kajice crawled out from under the bed holding a roll of bandages.)

KAJICE: What do these do?

(A wide smile crossed Bonson's brow.)

BONSON: Perfect!

(As the clean-up operation begun in the main square Flaxley, Kritz, Lefiat, Derek and Mandika returned to Mandika's chamber within the castle. They left behind them scenes of mass mourning and heavy public grief. Guevina was on its knees. It had very much been the kingdom's darkest day, one it might never recover from; and if ever the people truly needed a champion, it was now. Unfortunately, they didn't have a champion, they had Lefiat. The future looked bleak. Not that the future mattered to anyone at this current moment in time. Any thoughts of where they'd go from here would be put on hold as they allowed themselves time to grieve and bury their fallen loved ones.

Watching the square from Mandika's chamber window, the man the people would probably be calling upon to help them, Lefiat, felt every bit as hopeless as the rest of the population. He'd realised quite some time ago that he wasn't cut out to be a knight, but

he'd never expected that truth to be rammed home quite like it had been today. He was no hero; he didn't even know what had happened out there. He and the barmaid at the inn were the only two people in the entire kingdom not to have been involved. Half the population had been slain while he stood at the bar arguing about apples. Suffice to say, he was riddled with guilt.

Waiting patiently behind him for Daman Siria, Derek leant against a wall while Flaxley and Mandika sat solemnly on the bed. Kritz had plonked herself on her husband's lap where she lulled over him with her tired head on his shoulder. Like Lefiat, they were all too deep in thought to say anything.

As they all sat there in silent contemplation, the door creaked open and Bonson slipped inside accompanied by a slender built, young lady. Wearing a dress made of bandages, a matching head scarf and Bonson's handkerchief over her half of her face, she made quite the peculiar sight. As everyone looked over at them, Bonson nodded politely and his young companion turned to face the wall.)

BONSON: Never mind... um... Gladys, she's very shy.

(Mandika looked up at the curiously dressed maiden and offered a half-hearted wave.)

MANDIKA: Welcome, Gladys.

BONSON: Don't bother; she's... deaf and mute.

MANDIKA: Then turn her this way so she can see me wave!

BONSON: No point, she's blind too!

(Mandika looked more than slightly suspicious.)

MANDIKA: Bonson?

BONSON: Never mind her, where's that bloody Daman?

(As always, the mentioning of Daman's name would bring forth lots of complaints and cause everyone to forget their previous thoughts. Immediately everyone groaned and muttered obscenities under their breath, just as Bonson had hoped. Unfortunately for him, however, a slave to her curiosity, Kritz wasn't that easily distracted. Wearing a distrusting expression, she approached "Gladys" and attempted to talk to her face to face.)

KRITZ: Hi, I'm Kritz...

(Desperate not to be seen "Gladys" circled away from Kritz's attempts to look her in the eye. Typically, Kritz was so desperate to see her face, she ended up following her in a full three hundred and sixty degree turn.)

KRITZ: Hey! What gives?

(Sadly for Bonson, when her obscured face came into the view of Derek, he knew exactly who she was straight away without even having to read Bonson's mind.)

DEREK: That's Kajice!!!

(Immediately, he leapt to his feet and aimed his arm at her to blast her with magic. Much to his disbelief, however, Bonson leapt in the way and shook his fist.)

BONSON: No, it's Gladys!

(Determined to uncover the truth, Kritz ripped the handkerchief from her face.)

KRITZ: It *is* Kajice!!!

(Bonson stood firm and snarled.)

BONSON: Yes! It's Gladys Kajice, the other Kajice's non evil twin!

(As five angry, doubting stares came his way, he relented and sighed out loud.)

BONSON: Fine, it is Kajice! But you can't kill her!

FLAXLEY: And pray tell, why not?

BONSON: Because... she's mine! I claimed her! Kajice and I are to be married and from hereon in you'll all refer to her as Mrs Bonson!

(Mandika's mouth fell open and she looked to Kritz.)

MANDIKA: Wow, imagine being so desperate to live you'd actually marry Bonson!

(Kritz shook her head.)

KRITZ: I can't!

BONSON: Very funny, you lot. Now let there be no more of this nonsense. Kajice is mine, accept it! The law states that if a member of the royal household claims a prisoner or a wanted fugitive for their spouse, said outlaw can no longer be held or arrested for their crime. That law came into being two hundred years ago when the king's eldest daughter wanted to marry a convicted apple thief and it was never repealed. So there. It's all legal and above board, so deal with it.

(Flaxley gave him a condescending glance.)

FLAXLEY: You made that up! There's no law stating anything even remotely like that!

BONSON: Oh, what would *you* know about it?

FLAXLEY: When I was the royal knight, it was my duty as head of law and order to know these things.

(Bonson looked horribly uncomfortable.)

BONSON: Damn... I forgot about that.

MANDIKA: And even if there was a ridiculous law like that, it wouldn't apply to you anyway. You're not a member of the royal household anymore. I kicked you out.

(Bonson offered her a cheesy grin.)

BONSON: Actually, I was hoping we could discuss that...

MANDIKA: Yeah, I bet you were. Maybe we can discuss the revolt you instigated against me while we're at it!

BONSON: Right... not about to let that go any time soon, are you?

MANDIKA: Would you???

(As Bonson shuffled uneasily where he stood, Derek rolled his eyes.)

DEREK: So much for you being wise. Even if you *were* a member of this household, did you really think you could come in here and tell us a complete pack of lies about the law and expect us not to notice you were bullshitting? Never mind the fact that Flaxley knows the law back to front, *I'm* a bloody mind reader!

(Bonson glared at him coldly.)

BONSON: Fine, I admit it. I lied.

(He then shook his fist at Mandika.)

BONSON: Just remember, for some reason we can use magic in Guevina today and if anyone tries to harm her they'll get a burned arsehole!!!

(Mandika sat back and scoffed.)

MANDIKA: Yeah, that'd end well for you.

BONSON: No it wouldn't. It'd end horribly! Even so...

MANDIKA: Look, fine. Whatever. I don't care. There's been enough killing for one day. She can live but on one condition.

BONSON: I'm listening.

MANDIKA: She deserves to be severely punished. Therefore, not only does she have to marry you, she also has to live with you and have sex with you at least ten times a week. (Kritz looked horrified.)

KRITZ: Mandika, I know she tried to kill us all that time but that's too much! It's beyond cruel.

BONSON: Hey!!!

KRITZ: What?

BONSON: That just bloody insulting!

(He then shrugged.)

BONSON: That said, she *does* deserve to suffer and I'm just the man to make it so. Agreed! I'll marry her and move her in with me as soon as possible. As for the sex, consider her done.

(Kajice whimpered.)

KAJICE: Maybe I should just let them kill me.

BONSON: No, no, a deal is a deal. You're stuck with me.

(He then nodded firmly and glanced to the ceiling.)

BONSON: That's settled then.

(Lefiat looked flabbergasted.)

LEFIAT: Bonson? You're marrying her? Seriously?

BONSON: You heard me!

LEFIAT: But... you don't even love her surely!

(Bonson shrugged.)

LEFIAT: You're supposed to marry for love!

(Bonson frowned angrily.)

BONSON: I am!

MANDIKA: No you're not!

BONSON: I bloody am! There's nothing I love more than having sex with a beautiful young woman!

KRITZ: I don't believe you sometimes!

(Flaxley shook his head.)

FLAXLEY: Let's not get involved, he's old enough to make his own mistakes!

BONSON: Quite right!

(As everyone turned away and pretended not to be thinking about the situation, Flaxley stared at him and raised an eyebrow as he pondered the old man's decision. He couldn't quite figure out what Bonson was thinking. Was he mad? Or maybe he was thinking with his penis rather than his brain? Satisfied it must be the latter, Flaxley nodded and slipped his arm around Kritz. Derek on the other hand, knew exactly what Bonson was thinking. Quite simply, the old man didn't want to be alone anymore. He knew he'd never love anyone again like he loved Mandika's mother and he didn't want to die a lonely, isolated man. Accepting this, Derek nodded and spoke out loud.)

DEREK: If it's what you want Bonson, then that's okay by me!

(He gave Kajice a welcoming smile.)

DEREK: Just don't bring her to Tifaeris 'cause I doubt Zanne will see it like that.

BONSON: Thank you, Derek.

FLAXLEY: Well it's not okay by me. She was a witch and she tried to kill us all, remember?

BONSON: Yes, but then we've all done things we regret, haven't we?
FLAXLEY: Not on that scale we haven't!!!
BONSON: Well, I don't care what you think. Mandika and I have a deal, so there!
(Mandika glared at a trembling Kajice.)
MANDIKA: Yeah we do, but if she puts one foot wrong, she's getting burnt at the stake!
(Bonson snarled angrily.)
BONSON: Listen here, madam, that's no way to talk to your stepmother!!!
(All at once Lefiat, Derek, Flaxley and Kritz gasped and glared in his direction. Mandika's eye started to twitch and her nostrils flared. Shrinking backwards, Bonson offered her a cheesy grin.)
BONSON: So... too soon for levity then?
MANDIKA: You are walking one fine line, Bonson!
(Kritz shook her head and Flaxley nodded to agree with her headshake. From all over the room Bonson received different gestures of disapproval, the most obvious one being Mandika's one fingered salute.)
BONSON: Fine! I'll be quiet!
(With the atmosphere in the room reduced to resembling an arctic winter thanks to Bonson's choice of partner and unfeasibly ill-advised joke, not another word was spoken for a good few minutes. It was a silence that may well have persisted much longer had it not been for Daman Siria's overdue arrival. Looking extremely serious the unpopular elder appeared out of thin air in the centre of the room, causing everyone to snarl at him. Ignoring the unwelcoming greeting, he looked around at those assembled and smiled.)
DAMAN: So here we are!
(He looked at Bonson.)
DAMAN: Kajice, eh? You know it's bound to end in tears don't you, old chap?
BONSON: As long as they're tears of lust, I don't care!
MANDIKA: Tears of lust?
DAMAN: Forget that, people. I have something truly fantastic to tell you!
FLAXLEY: Fantastic or fanciful like most of your bullshit?
DAMAN: No bullshit, there's no need to lie anymore! Now gather round, this applies to everyone... except Kajice of course!
MANDIKA: Fine, she can wait in the lobby for Bonson.
BONSON: Can't she wait upstairs in my room?
MANDIKA: You don't *have* a room upstairs.
BONSON: Damn it.

(As a guard escorted Kajice out of the room to wait in the castle lobby, Flaxley, Kritz, Derek, Mandika, Lefiat and Bonson all pulled up seats and awaited a lecture from Daman. What with the elder's fondness for the sound of his own voice, they didn't have to wait long. As soon as they were all facing him, he began.)
DAMAN: Well, my friends, everything is complete!
BONSON: Everything?
DAMAN: Everything!
FLAXLEY: What do you mean by "everything"?
(Daman sighed.)

DAMAN: Just hear me out!

(Bonson grinned.)

BONSON: *All* the way out?

DAMAN: I'm going to ignore that. Now listen!

(He cleared his throat then continued.)

DAMAN: Everything was about Everkei. The very reason we elders preserved our lives and continued to exist in this time was Everkei. We trapped him hundreds of years ago but we knew he'd make it back sooner or later. So we had to do something, we had to be prepared. Today was the result of four hundred years of planning. And now it's over. (Although he had everyone's attention, he had little in the way of enthusiastic or excited looks coming his way. Confident he could raise spirits, he elaborated.)

DAMAN: The three keys, well, they were just something we created to help you defeat Jacquit, Suzbit, Dim Lee and Kajice. Aurora, Sandark and Heiner, well the events that led to *their* downfalls were also manipulated by us.

(He looked about their faces nervously.)

DAMAN: You don't look overly interested, if I'm honest!

FLAXLEY: Just tell us the whole truth, Daman, then we'll decide how we feel about it!

BONSON: Quite! And besides, you haven't told us anything we don't already know yet.

DAMAN: Fair comment. Anyway, right from the very beginning, centuries ago, we knew we'd have to create something to kill Everkei...

KRITZ: The sphere!

DAMAN: Indeed! But then we needed the right souls to power it. That was where you came in. We couldn't kill them ourselves as the only powers we really have is conjuring, illusions and curative magic. Our abilities on a physical level are so limited we needed to manipulate some humans, and of course a Leramite to do it for us. So, we combined our powers and spells to find a way to shape the personalities of six likely candidates. We choose you. And here's why...

(He looked to Bonson.)

DAMAN: Bonson, you were first. We knew from the minute you became a member of the royal Guevina household you were destined for great things...

(Bonson gave a conceited grin.)

DAMAN: Your wisdom was not only essential but your proximity to the royal Guevina household made you the ideal person to start with. Only you would be wily and devious enough to start the revolution we needed.

BONSON: Yes, I am indeed wise!

(He scowled to those around him.)

BONSON: You hear that? Wise!

DAMAN: Derek?

(Derek sat up.)

DEREK: Yes?

DAMAN: You already know why you were chosen. We needed a Leramite to collect the sphere and you were undoubtedly the most noble of all.

(Derek smiled.)

DEREK: You picked me for nobility?

DAMAN: Absolutely. And you, Flaxley... picking you was easy!

FLAXLEY: It was my charming personality, wasn't it?

(Daman wagged his finger.)

DAMAN: Far from it...

FLAXLEY: Far from it? What do you mean, "Far"???

DAMAN: Hear me out!

(While Flaxley glared at him, Daman explained carefully.)

DAMAN: Well, as royal knight of Guevina it made sense. After all, this is where Everkei was going to re-emerge from. Although you were always destined to return to Tifaeris, we knew you'd be honourable enough to come back if Guevina needed you. So we selected you for that honour of yours and of course your amazing strength and skill.

(Flaxley sat back and took a deep breath.)

FLAXLEY: I'm charming too, I don't give a toss what *you* think!

DAMAN: Fine. And Kritz...

(Kritz scowled at him, defying him to say anything less than complimentary.)

DAMAN: Kritz, I say this without any fear of correction. You are the very embodiment of passion and determination. That drive and desire proved invaluable. Not only that, but when you and Flaxley fell in love, he became an even better man than he already was.

(As Kritz blushed, Daman looked to Mandika.)

DAMAN: Mandika, your role was obvious. We knew you'd be queen when the time came and we needed you onside. Who else in Guevina has access to an army?

(Wearing an uncomfortable frown, she raised her hand nervously.)

MANDIKA: So... you picked me for my position? What about my personality?

DAMAN: Oh god no, that was just a huge hindrance!

MANDIKA: Hey! That's mean!

DAMAN: Sorry, Mandika. I promised the truth and that's what you'll get!

MANDIKA: Wanker!

DAMAN: As for you, Lefiat...

(Bonson grinned to himself.)

BONSON: Here we go!

DAMAN: I owe you a huge apology.

(Lefiat shrugged.)

LEFIAT: I accept!

DAMAN: Okay... I'm still going to tell you why though. You were supposed to represent innocence. Your timid personality was designed specifically to counter balance Flaxley's confidence!

KRITZ: Confidence? You mean arrogance.

(Flaxley glared at her coldly.)

FLAXLEY: I'm quickly going off you, Kritz.

KRITZ: With *these* boobs? I doubt it.

FLAXLEY: Now *that's* arrogance!

(Kritz grinned and tapped his hand lovingly)

KRITZ: Touché.

DAMAN: Anyway... unfortunately, Lefiat, the manipulation worked in such a way that to maintain your innocence you never actually grew up.

LEFIAT: Eh? I'm lost!

(Daman sighed.)

DAMAN: I'm not surprised. You're essentially a child in an underdeveloped man's

body. Thanks to a mistake in the manipulation, you've been left with the mental age of nine.

(Amazingly, Lefiat beamed.)

LEFIAT: That's far higher than I thought!

(Daman stood tall.)

DAMAN: Anyway, once you were chosen, the spell worked to manipulate and shape you into the people you are today. All we could do while you went on your missions was cure you if you got hurt. Thankfully you all made it out alive.

(He rubbed his hands together.)

DAMAN: Any questions?

(Flaxley stood up and folded his arms.)

FLAXLEY: The storm cloud over Guevina?

DAMAN: That was our doing. We needed the people to be angry, angry enough to want to fight. All part of a greater manipulation!

DEREK: And why did magic suddenly work inside these city walls?

(Daman nodded.)

DAMAN: The only reason magic never used to work in Guevina was because Everkei was trapped in the walls. I don't have a scientific reason as to why but once he escaped the walls, as you saw, magic worked again.

(Everyone looked enlightened. This was one of the greatest mysteries in the world and now they had the answer.)

DAMAN: Any other questions?

(With a face like thunder, Mandika rose to her feet and growled at him.)

MANDIKA: Yeah, I've got a question, arse face! You left Lefiat with a mental age of 9 then made me fall in love with him??? What the fuck???

(Daman looked uncertain and rubbed his chin.)

DAMAN: Actually... all we did was make you *like* him. The decision to sleep with him and marry him was all your own doing!

MANDIKA: Liar!!!

DAMAN: We did however manipulate you on the mountain to hate each other, that much *was* our doing! We needed to create tension in the castle, so you'd throw Bonson out.

BONSON: You complete arsehole!

DAMAN: We needed you to be angry enough to create the revolution, Bonson. Nothing personal.

BONSON: Yes, well, that's easy for you to say.

(Looking thoughtful, Flaxley sat back.)

FLAXLEY: So, basically... and correct me if I'm wrong. You elders got together and put these complex plans into place just to stop Everkei?

DAMAN: Correct!

FLAXLEY: And if you hadn't?

DAMAN: You saw how strong he was. If we hadn't then he'd have slaughtered everyone on the planet. Not just in Guevina.

(Nodding, Flaxley stood tall.)

FLAXLEY: Then if I could, I'd shake your hand!

(Everyone was amazed. Flaxley was the last person they'd expected to hear say anything complimentary to Daman Siria.)

BONSON: What are you on about, Flaxley?

(Flaxley looked to his comrades.)

FLAXLEY: Take a look in the square, chaps.

(They all looked at one another.)

FLAXLEY: Humour me if you must!

(Slowly they all rose and silently made their way to the window.)

BONSON: What? There's lots of bodies and grieving family members. Are we supposed to be grateful?

FLAXLEY: Look again, Bonson!

KRITZ: You've lost me, Flaxley!

LEFIAT: I'm nine apparently; I'm bound to be lost!

(Flaxley pointed out to the square.)

FLAXLEY: See that mother holding her baby down by the inn?

(After a few seconds, Mandika replied.)

MANDIKA: What about her?

FLAXLEY: Without the elders and their manipulation, she'd be dead.

(He pointed again.)

FLAXLEY: That couple by the horse trough, they'd be dead if it wasn't for Daman.

(As they turned to face him, Flaxley folded his arms.)

FLAXLEY: And in a few days from now, everyone in East Edea... dead. Everyone in Azagotse... Dead. And within the week, everyone in Tifaeris would be dead too, including our twins.

(Bonson nodded.)

BONSON: Oh my!

FLAXLEY: I know perhaps two thousand or more died out there today, but without Daman...

MANDIKA: I get it!

LEFIAT: Yeah, we're the lucky ones.

BONSON: I guess he had to sacrifice some to save the rest. What a burden.

(They all turned to face Daman.)

BONSON: Though if you'd given that sphere to Derek sooner...

DAMAN: I couldn't. The spell to send it takes time and we couldn't start until we were sure Everkei was coming. This is why we needed an army there to keep him busy until we were ready to send it down.

MANDIKA: Okay... so now what?

(Daman stood tall.)

DAMAN: Well, it's the end for us elders. We can now relax in the afterlife after all these years. I just have one final task to undertake.

(He paused and looked around at their waiting eyes.)

DAMAN: I need to remove the thrall.

LEFIAT: What, like you did last time?

DAMAN: No, no, Lefiat! This time it really is over. The thrall shall be removed and then you'll never hear of us or see us elders ever again. After four hundred years, we deserve a rest.

(Mandika looked sheepish.)

MANDIKA: It's not going to hurt is it?

(Daman gave her a warm smile.)

DAMAN: Not at all. In fact you won't even know it's been done!

FLAXLEY: We won't?

DAMAN: No. The source of the magical thrall is a series of crystals which my fellow elders will be smashing right about now.

(He received several doubting glances.)

BONSON: You're not going to do *anything* are you?

KRITZ: He's lying to us again!

(Daman chuckled.)

DAMAN: On the contrary, it's done!

(As the coldness in the hateful stares coming his way doubled, Daman held out his palms to the side.)

DAMAN: What? If you don't believe me, look at Lefiat!

(And with that, he was gone. Not trusting a word he said, they all turned to face Lefiat wearing doubting glances and immediately received quite a start. Mandika did a double take. They couldn't believe what they were seeing. Baffled as to their demeanour, Lefiat spoke up in a strong manly voice.)

LEFIAT: What?

(He looked baffled.)

LEFIAT: That's not my voice!

(Bewildered to his very core, he looked down himself.)

LEFIAT: This isn't my body either. No wonder these clothes are cutting off my circulation!

(As everyone looked on with equal bemusement, Lefiat scratched his head.)

LEFIAT: Circulation? That's not a word I ought to know!

FLAXLEY: Lefiat, you've become a...

(Before he could finish his sentence, he was barged aside by Kritz and Mandika.)

FLAXLEY: Hey!!!

LEFIAT: Steady on, ladies!!!

(With the thrall finally removed, Lefiat had immediately been blessed with all the things the thrall had deprived him off. His body had filled out and become muscular and his mind remembered things he'd heard. He'd become the man the elders had denied him being. Looking delighted as they felt him up, Kritz and Mandika couldn't believe it was the same person.)

KRITZ: Oh my, check out the definition of his chest, Mandika!

MANDIKA: Forget that...

(She made him flinch.)

MANDIKA: Check out these firm buttocks!

LEFIAT: Do you mind?

(He stepped back and gave them a knowing smile.)

LEFIAT: One at a time, ladies.

(At this point he noticed Flaxley's snarl.)

LEFIAT: Or should I say, unhand me, Kritz!

FLAXLEY: Yes, you should!

BONSON: Wait a minute, if he's changed that much... what about the rest of us?

(In a blind panic, Derek, Flaxley, Lefiat and Bonson all thrust their hands down their

trousers.)

DEREK: Phew!

BONSON: Damn, same old shrivelled...

(He clammed up.)

LEFIAT: It'll do!

(Flaxley wore a conceited smile.)

BONSON: Doesn't look like anyone else has changed physically.

KRITZ: Thank the stars!

(Mandika blushed and hung her head.)

MANDIKA: I've changed!

KRITZ: In what way, babe?

(Mandika looked at Lefiat and flashed her eyelashes.)

MANDIKA: Nothing.

(Lefiat looked to her and nodded knowingly.)

LEFIAT: I know what you're saying, Mandika, my love!

(Flaxley frowned.)

FLAXLEY: Is he mocking me? That's *my* term of endearment.

(Lefiat looked to him.)

LEFIAT: If loving my wife is mocking you, Flaxley, then yes. Yes, I bloody well am!

(Mandika stepped up close to him and exhaled.)

MANDIKA: Lefiat... I'm sorry...

(Lefiat stood tall.)

LEFIAT: Sorry for being manipulated into hating me? That was never your fault, my love!

(Flaxley shook his fist.)

FLAXLEY: He'd better find a new term of endearment or else!

(Ignoring him, Lefiat and Mandika stared into one another's eyes.)

MANDIKA: I'm sorry I was so bossy, so rude... I used you a lot. It's never been easy for us and that's mostly my fault.

LEFIAT: Mandika, thanks to those elders I was a certified idiot. I was the type of guy who couldn't normally buy a girlfriend and yet you were there for me.

MANDIKA: Yeah... makes me sound well desperate, doesn't it?

LEFIAT: No! It says to me that you saw the man inside of me all along. Even through the thrall, you saw the real me.

(Bonson scoffed.)

BONSON: No way, Mandika being desperate for a boyfriend, *any* boyfriend sounds far more plausible to me!

(As several icy stares came his way, Bonson mused out loud.)

BONSON: Hmm... seems I haven't changed a bit!

KRITZ: Shut up, Bonson. I want to hear Lefiat and Mandika. It's so romantic!

BONSON: Tragic, more like.

LEFIAT: Ignore him, Mandika, my love...

FLAXLEY: Once more and I swear...

LEFIAT: He doesn't know true love. Not like we do.

MANDIKA: I know. You were crap and I was mean and yet here we are. So in love.

(As they started to kiss, Flaxley slapped his forehead.)

FLAXLEY: Good grief! I'm going back to Tifaeris!

KRITZ: Have you no romance in your soul?

(Flaxley shrugged. Much to his annoyance, Lefiat then pulled away from Mandika and looked him in the eye.)

LEFIAT: She asks a fair question, Flaxley. Our love has survived through the thrall, has yours?

(Mandika beamed.)

MANDIKA: Ooh, good question!

(With all eyes on Flaxley and Kritz, Kritz bit her fingernails. Flaxley wasn't even looking at her to find out. Instead his unimpressed gaze was fixed on Lefiat. Hoping he'd turn and look into her eyes, Kritz offered him a nervous wave. Still he looked coldly at Lefiat. Fearing he might not see the love that she saw in him, Kritz sighed.)

LEFIAT: Can't even look at her, can you?

(Standing tall, Flaxley folded his arms and replied.)

FLAXLEY: Did our love survive the thrall? Lefiat, our love had bugger all to do with thrall in the first place.

(He reached out and pulled Kritz to his side.)

FLAXLEY: This woman here is an extension of me, Lefiat. There's more to us than feeble romance and starry-eyed bullshit.

MANDIKA: Meaning?

FLAXLEY: Meaning Kritz is my world. When she's down my very reason for being is to lift her up again. When she's happy, only then am I complete. She means more to me than words can ever measure.

(He looked into Kritz's eyes.)

FLAXLEY: And what's more, she's the most beautiful woman in the world, second to none!

(Bonson coughed.)

BONSON: Ahem, you forget Kajice!

(Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: You're right, Bonson!

(Kritz looked more than slightly peeved.)

FLAXLEY: You can forget Kajice. There's love in this woman's eyes and it's got my name on it.

(As Kritz swooned, Flaxley lifted her up into his arms.)

FLAXLEY: So don't ask me if our love survived, Lefiat. What Kritz and I have was never in danger.

MANDIKA: Aw, that's so sweet. You two are just awesome together. I'm so glad I did the right thing by letting her have you.

(Flaxley glared at her in bewilderment.)

FLAXLEY: You did what now?

KRITZ: Just let it go, my love.

FLAXLEY: Right...

(With that, he headed for the door with Kritz nestled in his forearms.)

FLAXLEY: Anyway, our work here is done. I'm going back to Tifaeris to make love to my woman!

(Kritz threw her arms around his neck.)

KRITZ: I can't wait that long!

MANDIKA: Wait!!!

(He paused as Mandika rushed up to him.)

MANDIKA: You said you'd stay and help rebuild!

(Flaxley nodded.)

FLAXLEY: Yes, but now you have a *competent* Lefiat!

(Lefiat looked uncertain.)

LEFIAT: I'm not a builder, Flaxley!

(With her arms draped around Flaxley's neck, Kritz looked over her shoulder.)

KRITZ: Nor is he, he's a motivator!

FLAXLEY: Precisely. It's your job to motivate the people to build, Lefiat. And

Mandika, it's yours to give them hope!

MANDIKA: Hope?

(Bonson nodded.)

BONSON: Yes, hope! Like abandoning all taxation until the city has been rebuilt. Help the people back onto their feet.

MANDIKA: I see! I can do that!

FLAXLEY: Don't be worried, Lefiat. Just be the champion of the people you always wanted to be. You've dreamed about it long enough. Now go and live it.

(Lefiat nodded positively.)

LEFIAT: I will! And while I'm there I'll set the record straight with you, Flaxley. The people deserve to know that you're the hero and I was the fool. I'll just rebuild my own legacy. A real one this time.

(Bonson looked flabbergasted.)

BONSON: Well said, Lefiat! That actually impressed me.

DEREK: Me too!

(Much to their surprise, Flaxley wasn't keen on the idea.)

FLAXLEY: Lefiat. You always were a hero. When our troubles started I was a knight. I was strong, tough and capable of taking care of myself. You... you were a quivering fool. And yet still you came through despite being frightened of your own shadow. You deserve as much credit as the rest of us!

(Lefiat nodded positively.)

LEFIAT: Thank you, Flaxley!

FLAXLEY: You're welcome!

KRITZ: Not only that, Lefiat, you can't destroy your own legend at a time like this. The people need to believe in their hero. It'll help them no end.

(Lefiat nodded.)

LEFIAT: Then their hero is what they'll get!

(He turned to Mandika.)

LEFIAT: Come, my love... sorry, Flaxley... let's go to the balcony and tell the people what we plan to do.

MANDIKA: Now?

LEFIAT: We must start right away!

(Mandika exhaled.)

MANDIKA: Wow, I love the new you!

(She gave him a cheesy grin.)

MANDIKA: I mean even more!

(She then looked to Bonson and nodded.)

MANDIKA: It might be because I'm feeling all loved up right now, but I feel like giving you your old room back. Oh, and this...

(With that, she stepped up to him and kissed him on the cheek.)

BONSON: Why... thank you. For the room, not for dribbling on me.

MANDIKA: Whatever. You're an arse, Bonson, a complete bastard, but I love you.

(She beamed.)

MANDIKA: Come on, Lefiat. Let's go.

(As Mandika and Lefiat rushed from the room, Bonson beamed proudly. In that moment, he felt like the gaping hole that had plagued his heart for decades had been well and truly plugged.)

BONSON: Bolshie little shit, like I care what *she* thinks of me.

(He then turned away and wiped a tear of joy where nobody could see him.)

BONSON: Stupid happiness.

(Having watched on as Mandika and Lefiat reached the end of the corridor then disappeared from sight, Flaxley and Kritz smiled to one another.)

FLAXLEY: So, how long do you reckon it'll be before they fall out again?

KRITZ: I give them a week! Mandika can't have changed that much surely.

FLAXLEY: Agreed!

(Derek shook his head.)

DEREK: I think you might just be surprised.

BONSON: Only time will tell, I suppose!

(He beamed.)

BONSON: Right, I'm off to Roger the new missus! So long, chaps!

(As Bonson rushed away, Derek laughed to himself.)

DEREK: He's cold, rude, heartless and hideously callous, but you have to admit, he's a funny bugger!

(Kritz and Flaxley glowered at him.)

KRITZ: No we don't!

FLAXLEY: Not at all!

DEREK: Fair comment! Tifaeris, anyone?

FLAXLEY: Let's go!

DEREK: Let me guess, I'm driving... alone!

(Kritz and Flaxley smiled at one another.)

FLAXLEY: If you insist!

KRITZ: Yeah, thanks Derek, we owe you one!

(Derek chuckled.)

DEREK: Then I'll give you one!

(As the air around him chilled, Flaxley sneered.)

FLAXLEY: You're right. Compared to you, Bonson *is* funny!

(Sure enough, within the hour, Flaxley, Kritz and Derek's carriage was on its way back to Tifaeris. The horses had survived being left in the wilderness and once they'd been fed and watered, they were on their way. Being the lone horseman, Derek was glad to have time to reflect on the events of the previous few days. Allowing the depth of his role in

the proceedings to sink in, his heart swelled with pride. He had been chosen by the elders, albeit against his knowledge, to play the pivotal role in saving the way of life of an entire planet. No other Leramite could claim such a wondrous legacy. As his reward, he was now heading home to live the rest his life in a sunlit paradise with the one he loved the most. Inside the carriage, Flaxley and his already naked wife, Kritz held each other close and talked softly into one another's eyes. It wasn't so long ago that their lives had been turned upside down when Tifaeris was almost wiped from the map by the Trepe. The fact they'd helped save Guevina from the same fate meant more to them than they'd ever let on. In no hurry to make their sweet love, they were happy to spend quality, intimate time holding one another and talking. In their hearts they both knew forever was a long time and from this day forward, they'd be spending that eternity together.

As their carriage rolled across the plains, the Guevina it left behind was practically an empty shell. The broken souls behind the eyes of the citizens reflected the state of the city in general. Devastated. It would take time for Guevina to recover from this tragedy, just as it had taken Tifaeris many years before. Fortunately for Guevina, they didn't have to wait for their champion to return. He was already there. Very much a different man to the one who'd endured countless near death experiences during his feeble attempts at being a knight, the new Sir Lefiat was determined to show his people the way. At his side, Mandika was determined to play her part. If ever the people needed their queen to give them hope, it was now. She was resolved to give them that hope, no matter what it took. As she stood on the balcony of the castle making her impassioned speech to the survivors, Bonson looked on with his arm around a squirming Kajice. After everything that had happened and how wonderfully well it had worked out for him, all he knew was that he had to help. He may have been under thrall when he started the revolution but he'd carry the guilt with him for the rest of his life. Determined to do all he could to make up for what the elders made him do, he stepped aside Mandika and Lefiat upon the balcony as the Guevina national anthem was struck up in memory of the fallen. As the heartbroken sung for inspiration, their minds wandered. They knew there was little time to mourn and feel sorry for themselves. As soon as possible they'd have to give the fallen their rightful place in Guevina's history then look to the future. That rightful place was as heroes. Not victims. These were heroes who gave their lives for mankind to bring a victorious end to **the return of Everkei**.

THE END...ALMOST

DAMAN SIRIA – With their mission on the mortal world complete, the elders broke their own spell and moved on to the afterlife. Regretting nothing, they went to the next life knowing only that their plan had ultimately saved the people of the world from complete obliteration. They always knew there would be death on a grand scale but knowing all too well how final it would have been had they done nothing, their combined conscience was clear.

DEREK – The three foot tall green alien from the planet Tryme 17 never even tried to find his way back to his home planet. His life on *this* planet was far greater than the one

he'd had before he crash landed here anyway. Here there was absolutely no paperwork and he didn't have to wear a tie. Zanne, his beloved wife, gave him the gift of six children and they went on to form a Leramite colony on an island just off the coast of Tifaeris. Today, Leramites are thriving and constitute an integral part of society. One even ran for president of Tifaeris. He was assassinated.

BONSON – Despite much grovelling and apologising, Bonson failed to get Mandika to reinstate his paid retirement. Determined to make him pay for instigating the revolution against her, Mandika opted instead to make him earn his keep and he was immediately reinstated as her personal butler. To say he was livid about it would be quite the understatement.

Bonson never again set foot in the inn, partly because there was a bar in the castle but mostly because the people there wanted to kill him for making false promises and leading them down the garden path. Hating every second of being a butler again, his only release was coming back to his room where his own personal butler, Kajice always had an ale and a backrub ready. After their wedding, Kajice became resolved to waiting for the old man to die so she could finally be free. Unfortunately for her, Bonson went on to become the first person in Guevina history to live to over 100 years old. Upon his death, she celebrated her long awaited freedom so vehemently, she had a heart attack and died.

MANDIKA – After much hard work, alongside Sir Lefiat, Mandika managed to turn Guevina back into a proud city. She halted all taxes for three years and even paid builders from overseas with her own money. Sadly, however, she underestimated the nation's affection for Lefiat. Despite all her hard work, Lefiat was given all the credit, something Flaxley knew all about. Angered by Sir Lefiat stealing her thunder she soon returned to her bitter, cantankerous ways. Having worked together so well with him to rebuild Guevina, she and Lefiat soon drifted apart. Five years later, determined to rid herself of the credit stealer, she fired Lefiat from his post as royal knight. As a result of her actions, she was subsequently overthrown by her own elite guards.

LEFIAT – After being sworn in as the sovereign king at the will of the people, Lefiat's first task was to swear Mandika back in as his queen and second in command then fire the elite guards for rudely overthrowing her in the first place. He was, after all, sworn to protect her. Not only that, but to stand by and let his wife be overthrown without taking action would have been awfully poor form. In response to being fired, the elite guards rose up and overthrew him, before subsequently replacing Mandika to her rightful place as sovereign. Delighted to be sovereign again, Mandika reinstated the elite guards and gave Lefiat his job back as royal knight. During all the upheaval, the one thing both Mandika and Lefiat had learnt was that even if they didn't always like each other very much, they most definitely needed one another. Should they ever forget that, the elite guards would always be waiting in the wings to remind them. And so, they stayed together, living moderately happily forever after.

KRITZ – Within a year or so of playing her part in defeating Everkei, Kritz completely lost her will to fight. Focussed on being the best wife and mother she could be, she

learned to cook and improve things in the home. Extremely proud of being the wife of the town's leader, she even quit her post as head of the Tifaeris and Trepe alliance to concentrate on standing by her man. As Tifaeris grew in size, the palace she longed for was built overlooking the coast as a thank you from the townspeople to her and Flaxley for all they'd done.

Shortly after returning from helping liberate Guevina from Everkei, Kritz conceived twins for the second time, both girls. She rarely found the need to complain to her husband, such was her deep affection for him and respect for all his endeavours. Luckily for her, when she did have a grievance, her good friend Phisele was always on hand to help her scowl at him. She was blissfully happy. Naturally, on the rare occasions she felt her children might be being threatened, the psychotic, violent Kritz would resurface with a gusto. She may have lost the will to fight but never lost the ability. As was ever the case, only a fool would mess with her.

FLAXLEY – As president of the soon to be renamed “Republic of Tifaeris”, Flaxley had a lot to be proud of. His finest moment being the completion of the long term building plan to connect Tifaeris to Trepe Village. It was upon celebrating this monumental success that he got his beloved Kritz pregnant with twins for the third time, again both girls. When he wasn't getting Kritz pregnant, much of his spare time was spent pursuing his dream that one day his son would grow up to become a knight and follow in his heroic footsteps. Unfortunately, his son seemed more interested in playing with his sister's toys and taking dancing lessons than learning the way of the sword. He worried. To make matters worse, his eldest daughter's skill with the blade was quite formidable. Thanks to his astonishing ability to knock up Kritz with two children at a time, he ended up with 5 teenage daughters, a nightmare for any father. Sadly for him, none of his daughters were even remotely as effeminate as his son.

PHISELE – Having mastered several fighting styles, Phisele joined the newly formed Tifaeris army at the age of 16 and became a general only six months later. At the age of eighteen, she rose up to become the head of the entire army, second only to the president, Sir Flaxley himself. As the years went by, she married well on four separate occasions. Sadly for her, all four of her husbands died in tragic, freak accidents. Thankfully, they all left her a small fortune in their wills. Despite all these horrific personal tragedies, Phisele went on to live a happy life as a member of Tifaeris' wealthy elite.

KURIK - A mere twenty five years after helping put an end to Everkei, Kurik was buried in Guevina's royal cemetery. He died several minutes later.

ZANNE – A year after Everkei was destroyed, Derek sat back in a comfy chair to reminisce about his travels. Unfortunately for him, Zanne read his mind just when he got to thinking about the part he'd so desperately tried *not* to think about when she was around. His time in Tang Yul. Having read his mind, Zanne was absolutely furious and headed for Tang Yul in a fit of rage to have things out with Chyna Lee. Derek's desperate attempts to stop her failed miserably. Upon confronting the seductress with Derek still making vain efforts to restrain her, Zanne exhaled and there followed the most

bizarre threesome the world will never see!

GUEVINA – In the years shortly after Everkei, Guevina earned a lot of respect. The determination of the people to rebuild and re-establish themselves as a strong nation would be held up as an example of character for years to come. Every resource at their disposal was used to full effect to rebuild the city quicker than most had thought possible. Once these works were complete, a large memorial was erected in the centre of the square that still stands even today.

The people of Guevina never did find out about Flaxley's heroic role in their past. He'd always be seen as something of a clown. Lefiat would forever go down in history as the god like hero who defeated the evil warlord Flaxley with his faithful sidekick Lord Bonson at his side. Bizarrely, history twisted the facts to the point where Kajice was written in as a mighty warrior who fought at Lefiat's side.

TIFAERIS – Twenty years after Flaxley and Kritz returned to Tifaeris, the town was awarded city status and had swelled to twice the size of Guevina. Unfortunately, the growth had been so rapid, crime became something of a problem as outsiders came to plunder the new found wealth. Thankfully, their leader, Flaxley was swift to take action and formed a police force immediately to quell the problem. One infamous case that would remain unsolved, however, was the murder of Flaxley's drinking buddy, Thin Alero. Being quite the entrepreneur, Thin had spotted a niche in the market and exploited it to perfection. He introduced underwear to the Trepe tribe. With efforts to solve the case leading nowhere, nobody ever did get to buy his killer a drink. All anyone knew was that most men in Tifaeris wished *they'd* committed the crime.

In Tifaeris, Flaxley and Kritz's hero status remains even today. The statue of them in the main square is a national treasure and several streets are named after them. There's even a testament to Mandika. After having an argument with Lefiat, she'd ranted loudly about how much she hated him in the middle of Tifaeris' town square. Having cursed the very name 'Lefiat' so vehemently, the people took her to their hearts and the main financial centre still contains a road that bears her name. Lefiat went down in history in Tifaeris much the same way Flaxley had in Guevina. They considered him a joke and calling someone a Lefiat was as insulting as you could get.

TREPE VILLAGE – Thanks to a change in attitudes brought about by the amalgamation with Tifaeris, the once all female, tribal homestead didn't take long to lose its ugly identity as a pariah township. Before forty years had passed, the emancipation of men was complete and Trepe Village became much like any other town. Today, Trepe Village is merely a district of Tifaeris' national capital.

TANG YUL – Thanks to Chyna Lee, modern Tang Yul no longer bears the scars of its war torn past and serves as the world's most popular holiday destination. Partly because the weather is perfect but mostly because the women are easy!

LOUISE – Flaxley's precious sword was welded back together as soon as he got back to

Tifaeris. Although he rarely used it in anger again, it was frequently by his side as a visual deterrent to any fool stupid enough to attempt to date one of his daughters.

And thus, the futile fantasies were written.

THE END

Futile Fantasy Six - The Return of Everkei. The storyline and all characters are a creation of the artist. The artist reserves all rights to this story and everything within.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED - Futile Fantasy Creations.

Conceived and written by Futile Fantasy Creations.

Completed 29/11/07

Final draft 28/10/13