

The Axnay Rejects

EPISODE SEVENTEEN – BAD LOSERS; TERRIBLE WINNERS.

When the five members of the Axnay Rejects were forced to band together as a team, exactly one calendar year ago, many at the warrior's guild feared for their lives. This was a team made up of two low-level swordsmen, a technician who didn't even want to be there, a magic caster who constantly shot her own team mates and a healer, notorious for verbally abusing her own allies. A good number of their peers feared that if the beasts they were fighting didn't kill the two inexperienced swordsmen their wayward magic caster just might. The vast majority also believed that the magic caster would probably end up murdering the healer as well. The healer's abuse could indeed be savage and the magic caster was not a tolerant woman. They were a team that for all intents and purposes, seemed destined for disaster. What a difference a year makes.

The team's Power Blade, Max Carter, now level twenty-three, was becoming more and more adept at his craft by the day. He was a far cry from the man who, one year ago, had reluctantly charged into his first battle with horror-filled eyes, shrieking about his terrified desire to go home. It had not been the bravest of starts. The contrast between then and now, however, was stark. Nowadays, he always led the charge with confidence and accepted hits without complaint whilst putting his full faith in the team's healer. The perfect attitude. Suffice to say, he'd be an asset to any team.

The warrior who'd assisted Max in his first battle, was the Speed Blade, Rico Stanway. He'd only been a level five himself at the time. To a degree, it had been a case of the partially-sighted guiding the blind. They were two low-levels with just enough knowledge to get the job done and survive. Now, however, having worked side-by-side for a full year, they went about their sword-work like a well-oiled machine. They were fast, efficient and extremely capable. Success followed success and in that time, Rico had managed to work his way up to level twenty-five.

Assisting the two frontline swordsmen with powerful blasts of magic from the back row, Leila Winter, the magic caster, was also experiencing something of a golden period. Whereas she'd once been just as much of a danger to her teammates as the enemies they were fighting, she'd blossomed into an excellent ally. And all because she'd started to wear the glasses she so badly needed. She would never *admit* they were glasses, however. Happy to let her pretend that her glasses were indeed the fashion accessory she claimed they were, her team-mates were delighted by what she'd become. She was now level thirty-seven and never missed her target.

In the back row with Leila was Sofia Nice, the healer. In recent months, she'd become unrecognisable from the person her team-mates had first met. Back then, whenever called upon to speak, she'd whimper out nervous words with absolutely no confidence whatsoever. She'd been meek and pathetic. Once her adrenaline started to flow in battle, however, she'd become the exact opposite. Cruel, abusive and downright spiteful. Those

sides of her personality had now vanished. With a future of love and happiness in her sights, she'd become cheerful, confident and kind. The change had been a blessed relief for all.

Also making up the final row was Tommy Brightlingsea. One year ago, when he'd been forced to join the Axnay Rejects against his will, he didn't even know what class he was. He'd had no interest in a warrior life and went into battles feeling more than a little hard done by. Having finally accepted his lot in life, however, he'd improved immensely. He still lacked for enthusiasm, but he was no longer fighting his fate. As a result, he'd managed to make way up to level eighteen. His efforts were no longer a token gesture and quite often made all the difference. His days of being a passenger were over and his team were delighted to have him on board.

Having improved so much since they'd first banded together, everything in the Axnay Reject's garden should have been rosy. They should have been a harmonious example of true camaraderie and friendship. A beacon of fellowship for others to aspire to. This, sadly, was not the case. There was one small dispute stopping them from being perfectly united. Unsurprisingly, the source was Leila. She had a gripe with one of her teammates that she wasn't about to let go of any time soon. It was a grudge she even held onto in battle.

On this, the anniversary of their coming together, while Max and Rico performed their heroics in the frontline against a hundred Calibras, and Sofia healed with everything she had, Leila's disdain remained firm. Having blasted a large group with her magic, she scoffed with contempt for the creatures then looked to Sofia.

LEILA: Sofia, can you tell Tommy a disorientation spell might be a good idea right about now?

(Sofia rolled her eyes then looked to Tommy.)

SOFIA: Leila said...

TOMMY: I heard!

(He ruffled his neck.)

TOMMY: I already did it.

SOFIA: Righto.

(She then resumed healing.)

LEILA: What did he say?

SOFIA: You heard him.

LEILA: No, I didn't. I don't *hear* his words anymore because he's dead to me, remember?

SOFIA: Right...

(She shook her head.)

SOFIA: He said, you do *your* job and he'll do his.

LEILA: No, he didn't! He said he'd already done it!

SOFIA: And how would you know if you can't hear him?

LEILA: Um... I can read his lips.

SOFIA: Then why ask *me*?

LEILA: Because...

(She growled.)

LEILA: Forget it. You're a useless go between, you are.

SOFIA: I just want you to get on with the fight and not involve *me* in your petty squabbles, that's all!

LEILA: Petty???

SOFIA: Well... yeah. No offence.

(Leila shook a disappointed head.)

LEILA: You've changed. I liked you when you were all pathetic and accommodating. The old you would have done as you were told. Now you're all confident and... well... I miss the good old days.

SOFIA: When I lived my life in fear?

LEILA: Yes!

SOFIA: I see. Your thoughtfulness moves my heart.

LEILA: See? That's exactly my point! You never *used* to answer back! Such a shame. Whatever have you become?

(Tommy's voice then rose up from the other side of Sofia.)

TOMMY: Rico's asking why you're not firing your magic, Leila.

(Leila just stood there and smiled, making an exhibition of ignoring him.)

TOMMY: Fuck sake.

(He sighed.)

TOMMY: Sofia, can you tell Leila to fire her magic?

SOFIA: Don't drag me into...

TOMMY: Sofia!

(Sofia rolled her eyes again.)

SOFIA: Fine! Leila, can you shoot at the Calibras, please?

LEILA: Sure. Seeing as *you* asked me to, Sofia. Happy to.

(She then unleashed a powerful blast of magic and obliterated twenty enemies. A smug expression ensued.)

LEILA: Happy now, Tommy?

(She gasped in horror at herself.)

LEILA: I mean, Sofia, ask Tommy if he's happy now!

SOFIA: *You* ask him!

LEILA: How can I? As far as *I'm* concerned, we left him at home.

SOFIA: Fine. You can ask him when we get back then.

(She then rolled her eyes and looked to where Rico and Max were battling hard. Max was thrusting his sword across himself like an angry colossus and Rico was zooming from right to left chopping through Calibras like they were made of paper.)

MAX: Smoothly done, mate. Now come back through!

RICO: Will do. I just need to see if Leila's going to attack what I missed first!

(He nodded.)

RICO: Nope. She's busy scowling at Tommy.

MAX: Off you go then!

RICO: Righto!

(He then proceeded to zoom back through from left to right. Upon doing so, however, a bright flash of lightning appeared before his eyes, temporarily blinding him. Completely disorientated, he staggered sideways then toppled out of the fight.)

RICO: I stand corrected! She took her shot; just much later than expected.

MAX: You're just lucky she missed!

(Rico rubbed his eyes.)

RICO: Yeah, but... not as lucky as Leila.

(Sure enough, in the back row at this time, a wincing Leila was holding her palms aloft defensively.)

LEILA: Um...

SOFIA: I'm going to kill you, woman!!!

LEILA: Calm down, Sofia. Nobody got hurt. And it was his own fault for charging back too soon. He knows he has to wait for me to shoot the beasts behind him.

SOFIA: You're just lucky you didn't hit him! Really, *really* lucky. If you had, I'd have encased you in a protective bubble then filled it with water!!! I'd have drowned your middle-aged arse!

LEILA: Middle-aged???

SOFIA: Old then!

LEILA: Old???

SOFIA: And wrinkled! There are prunes with smoother skin than you! Why, in some lights, you look like a giant testicle!

(Leila growled.)

LEILA: This conversation does not end well for you, Sofia!!!

(Just then, Tommy chimed in using his chirpiest voice.)

TOMMY: Drop it now, ladies; the beasts are all dead. Turns out your final blast did the trick, Leila.

SOFIA: Shut up, Tommy!

LEILA: Yeah! Tell Tommy to shut up from me as well, Sofia!

SOFIA: Leila says shut up too!

TOMMY: Right. Now you're going to oblige her.

SOFIA: Shoot when you're supposed to next time, Leila. Because if you endanger my fiancé ever again, you're going to feel pain.

LEILA: Yeah? Pain, huh? I happen to *know* a thing or two about pain! Let me show you!!!

(She then proceeded to chase Sofia round and round The Reject's shiny new carriage.)

LEILA: Come here!!!

SOFIA: I can't! I'm scared!

(She whimpered.)

SOFIA: Apparently, my adrenaline wore off at exactly the wrong time!

LEILA: Stop making excuses!!!

(As the two of them proceeded to charge around the carriage, Max and Rico returned to Tommy's side and joined him in a despairing sigh.)

RICO: Really?

MAX: I thought those days were over.

RICO: I'd rather hoped Leila's days of firing lightning magic at me were over too.

TOMMY: She got distracted, mate.

RICO: By being angry at you?

TOMMY: Well, yeah. Who else would she be angry at?

MAX: Sofia. She's angry at her right now.

TOMMY: Yeah... she *was* angry at me. Then Sofia got angry at *her* for almost shooting you. And this is the result.

RICO: Sofia having a meltdown.

TOMMY: Yup.

RICO: She hasn't done *that* in a while.

MAX: Leila hasn't almost killed you in a while; that's why.

RICO: True.

(Tommy sighed.)

TOMMY: This can't go on, lads. Leila's anger at me is threatening our team spirit. We need to nip this nonsense in the bud.

RICO: Nip it in the bud? The bud? Mate, she's been angry at you for months! There was snow on the ground when it started, now summer's here! That's not nipping it *in the bud*. The flowers have already blossomed.

(Tommy furrowed his brow.)

TOMMY: Right. Yeah. Thanks, Rico. Picking me up on my choice of semantics is exactly the tonic we need right now. Excellent work. I mean, seriously. That was just what we needed. I'm impressed. That pedantic and pointless speech might well have saved the day.

RICO: Tommy...

TOMMY: I know people say that *not all* heroes wear capes, but you should definitely buy one.

RICO: Mate...

TOMMY: Fine. We won't *nip in the bud* then. But we do need to take action.

MAX: Seconded.

(He sighed.)

TOMMY: I mean, I can handle her being angry at me. I can. I'm used to it now. But when it's going to distract her in battle, then it's a problem. And we need to resolve it.

RICO: I can't argue with that.

TOMMY: Or pick me up on my semantics.

RICO: Let it go, mate!

(He then shook his head and glanced to where Sofia and Leila were catching their breath beside the carriage.)

LEILA: I'm knackered now.

SOFIA: Same.

LEILA: And it's all your fault! Why do you run away when you know I can't hurt you anyway???

SOFIA: Why do you *chase* me when *you* know it too?

LEILA: Well...

(She shrugged.)

LEILA: Anger makes people react in unusual ways.

SOFIA: I know. Like when I get excessively mean! Anger makes *me* react badly too.

LEILA: That's no excuse!

SOFIA: It was *your* excuse!!!

LEILA: Don't make stuff up!

SOFIA: Leila...

(She sighed remorsefully.)

SOFIA: Sorry, Leila. I didn't mean those awful things. You have lovely, smooth skin.

LEILA: Thank you. And in that same spirit of contrition... you're... a cunt.

SOFIA: That's contrition, is it?

LEILA: I tried. But I don't like you and that came out.

SOFIA: Right...

(Just then, Rico, Max and Tommy appeared at their side.)

RICO: Leila, we need to talk.

MAX: And by talk, he means *you* need to listen.

TOMMY: And by listen, he means grow up.

RICO: That's not helpful, Tommy.

(Leila sighed.)

LEILA: Actually, Rico... you're right. We *do* need to talk. We really can't go on like this.

RICO: You agree?

LEILA: I do. In fact, I've been thinking about it for a while now.

(She smiled.)

LEILA: We should go back to the guild and talk to Chi about getting a new member.

RICO: What?

LEILA: I mean, it makes sense, doesn't it? We've been a person light since Tommy's tragic death.

TOMMY: My what?

(Leila shrugged.)

LEILA: Not that he did anything in battle anyway, so his untimely passing hasn't affected us professionally, but I think being one member light is making Sofia cranky. You should have heard her outburst a minute ago.

(She then about turned and clambered into the carriage. The others just watched her go and shook their heads.)

RICO: She's...

SOFIA: Impossible.

MAX: Yet ridiculous.

TOMMY: Yeah... this ends now.

(He then clambered on board their state of the art carriage. After receiving their fortune back from the guild, The Rejects first move had been to rehire their driver, Dave, then buy back their luxury carriage. It made travelling to and from battle extremely relaxing. This return journey, however, would prove to be anything but.)

As their carriage headed through the trees, en route to Axnay, Rico tried his best to mediate the current dispute between Tommy and Leila. Tommy was a willing participant. Leila, however, was proving to be her usual stubborn and awkward self. Flipping between insisting that Tommy was dead and trying to speak to him through a go between, she was making their lives extremely difficult.

RICO: Leila, stop it.

LEILA: Stop what?

RICO: Being ridiculous.

(He gave an exasperated sigh.)

RICO: You know damned well Tommy isn't dead. In fact, you just instructed Sofia to tell him his side of the story was bollocks.

LEILA: No, I didn't.

RICO: Yes, you...

(His shoulders slumped.)

RICO: For fuck sake. Leila...

TOMMY: No. No, no, no. Let *me* speak up again, Rico.

RICO: Fine. *I'm* not having any luck, so you might as well.

TOMMY: Chi already used the black marble to find out what happened that night. It's confirmed! It's not bollocks *at all*! I was so drunk, I carried the wrong drunk woman home, that was all! I didn't have sex with her! I just put her into the bed, climbed in next to her then fell asleep. At the time, I was convinced it was *you*, Leila!

(Leila glanced nonchalantly to her side.)

LEILA: Sofia, could you ask Tommy *how on earth* he could confuse me for a forty year old with pink hair?

SOFIA: Well, you're not much younger yourself, to be fair.

(She then clammed up and stared at Rico in horror.)

SOFIA: *That's* not gonna do me any favours.

RICO: Maybe you'd better sit out of slapping range.

SOFIA: It's fine. I'm self-healing as we speak.

(She then glanced nervously in Leila's direction. Unsurprisingly, she was scowling back at her bitterly.)

LEILA: I'm nowhere near forty!!!

SOFIA: Um... okay.

LEILA: Not even close! And you *know* that! You came to my twenty-ninth birthday party, just a few months ago!

MAX: That was your thirty-first!

(He winced.)

MAX: That wasn't a helpful comment either.

LEILA: Wow! You people are horrid! Horrid! Why I let you join my team, I'll never know.

TOMMY: *Your* team?

LEILA: Tell Tommy he's not *allowed* to speak, Sofia!

TOMMY: Whatever.

(He rolled his eyes.)

TOMMY: It's an improvement on being dead, I suppose.

LEILA: *Because* he's dead!

SOFIA: No. I'm saying nothing of the sort. I'm fed up with this. Leila, he made a mistake because he was blind drunk. *Normally* that's no excuse. If you get drunk and make a mistake, the consequences are entirely of your own making and *you* have to live with them. But *you* seem to have forgotten that *you* were blind drunk too!

LEILA: No, I wasn't!

SOFIA: You were passed out drunk on the table!

RICO: And if you *hadn't* been passed out drunk on the table, it wouldn't have happened.

LEILA: What sort of insane logic is that?

RICO: It's not insane!

(He sighed heavily.)

RICO: All drunk Tommy *knew* was that he had to carry his equally drunk girlfriend home. Unfortunately, in his drunkenness, he didn't realise that Chi was passed out drunk at our table as well. So he picked her up thinking she was you.

LEILA: She has pink hair!

RICO: That's irrelevant! The point Sofia's making is, if you'd been sober, he wouldn't have thought *twice* about carrying a drunk woman home! He'd have staggered home with *you*, side by side.

MAX: Point being, he made a drunken faux pas. And seeing as you were also blind drunk, *you* can't hold it against him!

(Leila scoffed.)

LEILA: I can't believe this. Making out like it was all my fault; whatever next! This is victim shaming! *I'm* not the one who mistook a sexy twenty-something in the prime of her life for an aging pink-haired divorcee. That was him. And it was offensive!

Offensive! And that's my final word on the matter!

(She then sat back and folded her arms bitterly.)

LEILA: I'm glad he's dead!

(Realising they were getting nowhere, Sofia, Rico and Tommy and sat back and sighed in defeat. Max, however, sat forwards and furrowed his brow.)

MAX: If you want to feel that way, Leila, fine. Be offended. Be upset even. Feel what you need to feel. But don't take your anger into the battle. You delayed earlier, making Rico think you weren't going to shoot. So he did his run. Then you shot! That could have ended really badly.

LEILA: Right? He should pay attention.

MAX: No, *you* should pay attention. Have your tantrums if you must, just don't take them onto the battlefield.

LEILA: I never would.

MAX: You just did!

LEILA: That was Tommy's fault.

(At this point, Max gave up as well. Realising he'd been wasting his breath, he sat back and sighed despairingly.)

MAX: It's like talking to a coal bunker.

RICO: Wasn't it always?

MAX: Unfortunately... yes.

At the warriors guild, at this time, Chi, her assistant Kiki, and several hired assistants, were hanging up party decorations and adorning all the tables with cloths and ornaments. That evening, the guild would be hosting its first annual awards ceremony. Chi, however, wasn't exactly thrilled about it. As she made clear to one of the hired assistants, Rico's former landlady, Emmy, she believed it was a completely unnecessary waste of time.

CHI: I mean, why? Why do we have to *celebrate* their achievements? They become warriors to make money. And they *get* money! A lot of it. That should be all the reward they need. Giving them awards as well is just a needless overindulgence!

EMMY: Well... maybe.

CHI: No, not maybe.

(She sighed.)

CHI: Warriors are overpaid, oversexed and overjoyed about it. And believe me, it goes to their heads. They're egotists, one and all. So the last thing we should be doing is kissing their arses for a job well done. That'll only make them worse!

(She shuddered.)

CHI: The winners are going to be unbearable.

EMMY: Right. Well... okay. So who *are* the winners?

CHI: I don't know. The local authority chose me to *host* it, so I'm not allowed to know. Kiki's done all the working out.

EMMY: I'll ask her then.

CHI: She won't tell you.

EMMY: Why not?

CHI: Because if she does, I'll throttle her.

(She nodded.)

CHI: Now give me a hand putting up the main banner.

EMMY: Will do.

CHI: Thank you.

(With that, she headed over to a large box and peered inside it.)

CHI: Fuck sake. I hate decorating.

EMMY: It shows. I bet you'll be glad when this ceremony's over, won't you?

CHI: Well...

(She sighed.)

CHI: To tell you the truth, it might be a fun night. I'm *kind of* looking forward to it.

(Emmy laughed out loud.)

EMMY: You could have fooled me.

CHI: No, I am. I just resent having to decorate, that's all. And giving them awards really is a pointless extravagance, like I said, but... the ceremony itself *should* be fun.

EMMY: I see.

CHI: Now... let's...

(She grimaced.)

CHI: Actually, we can do the banner after I've had a pee. Just a minute.

(She then strode away to the toilets. Emmy calmly watched her go then allowed herself a devilish smirk. A group of male warriors were waiting just inside the door while their team-mate reported their kills to Kiki. She'd only applied for the assistant's job because she had an ulterior motive and this was most definitely an opportunity. Not about to let the moment pass her by, she strode over to the four young men and smiled.)

EMMY: Warriors.

(The tallest of the men smiled.)

LORENZO: Complete stranger.

EMMY: What team are you then?

LORENZO: Who's asking?

EMMY: A sexy woman with large boobies.

LORENZO: In that case, I'll tell you.

(He beamed with pride.)

LORENZO: We're The Axnay Annihilators!

EMMY: Ooh. Sexy name.

(One of the other team members beamed.)

SALVA: We're a sexy team.

EMMY: Of sexy *men*.

SALVA: The sexiest!

LORENZO: Well... we don't find *each other* sexy, obviously. But *women* have said...

EMMY: And they were right to say it.

(She allowed herself an evil smirk then nodded.)

EMMY: It's a relief to hear you don't find each other sexy, actually.

SALVA: We're not sad about that either.

EMMY: I'll bet.

(She smiled.)

EMMY: But it's an extra big relief to *me* because the last warrior I chatted up turned out to be gay. And I do hate wasting my efforts.

(All four of the men gasped.)

LORENZO: Gay?

SALVA: There's a gay in our midst?

EMMY: Yeah. Max his name is. Such a shame.

SALVA: What? No. Max isn't gay. For a while he was seeing all five Rico's Girls and *they're* bloody tasty.

(Lorenzo grimaced.)

LORENZO: Hmm... *he was*, yes. Then he sabotaged their relationship on purpose.

SALVA: What? He did?

LORENZO: He did. I overheard him tell that Tommy fellow.

SALVA: But why would he throw away a life of sleeping with sexy women?

(His jaw then dropped.)

SALVA: You mean... *he is* gay!

EMMY: Yup. Gay^{er} than a tulip on a warm Spring afternoon.

(She smiled.)

EMMY: Anyway... I'd better get back before Chi comes out and wonders where I got to.

(With that, she about turned and headed back to where she'd been, snarling under her breath.)

EMMY: I'll fix *you*, Max. Bloody promising me daily sex then bugging off and not coming back. The nerve. Using me like that. Not on. Well, you're not going to get away with it, mister; that's for certain. Once this rumour takes hold, your guild mates are bound to give you the battering of a life time. Like you deserve! And I for one, can't wait to come to the hospital and taunt you about it.

(She then arrived at the box where the banner was housed, just in time to see Chi emerge from the toilets.)

EMMY: Welcome back.

CHI: Thank you.

EMMY: Shall we get this banner up then?

CHI: Let's. The sooner the decorating's complete, the sooner I can think about enjoying my evening.

(Emmy beamed fiendishly.)

EMMY: I'll be enjoying the evening too.

CHI: What? How? *You're* not on the guest list.

EMMY: No, but...

(She allowed herself a devilish smirk.)

EMMY: I'm sure fantastic things will happen here tonight and that brings me more joy than you'll ever know.

CHI: Right...

That evening, at Sir Mighty's mansion on the edge of town, The Axnay Elite gathered for a few drinks before heading to the ceremony at the guild. Sir Mighty, Artful Shadow and Duke Thunder were all dressed in their finest tuxedos. Velvet Vortex and Countess Brilliance had donned their most elegant evening dresses. Their hair and makeup was perfect. Vortex was especially pleased with how she looked, to the point where she was eager to make Brilliance admit that she was the prettier of the two. She wasn't, but magic casters were a uniquely deluded species. And so, she continued to hint at her superior aesthetics relentlessly, whilst ignoring every other topic of conversation. This was especially frustrating to her team-mates, because they'd only met up before the event because they had an important message to get across to her.

VORTEX: This eye shadow really does bring out the sparkle in my eyes, don't you think?

BRILLIANCE: I do, but...

VORTEX: It's a shame *you* couldn't find a shade to do the same for you, really.

BRILLIANCE: My makeup is fine!

VORTEX: Oh, I agree. *Fine* is exactly how I'd define it.

(She smiled.)

VORTEX: And if fine is good enough for you, you have my full support. Personally, I prefer to go the extra mile and look exceptional.

BRILLIANCE: Velvet...

THUNDER: Anyway, that's enough about makeup.

VORTEX: Is it though?

THUNDER: Yes!

VORTEX: I disagree!

(She nodded.)

VORTEX: We should take a vote. Who looks the most exquisite?

SIR MIGHTY: I do. Now let's move on.

VORTEX: Out of Brilliance and I!

THUNDER: Let's not get into that...

VORTEX: Why not?

SHADOW: Because you won't like the result.

(He winced.)

SHADOW: Shit. That was just asking for trouble.

VORTEX: What do you mean, I won't like the result???

THUNDER: Nope! Enough now! Just stop!

VORTEX: Thunder...

THUNDER: I said, enough!

(He nodded sternly.)

THUNDER: We've met up early for a reason, Velvet. That reason being you.
VORTEX: Me?
(She gasped.)
VORTEX: Not *another* intervention!
THUNDER: It's not an intervention!
MIGHTY: We just want to talk to you in advance of the award ceremony, so that you don't make a fool of yourself when we get there!
VORTEX: That's an intervention!!!
MIGHTY: No, it's...
(He grimaced.)
MIGHTY: Actually, you're right. It *is* an intervention.
THUNDER: An important one.
VORTEX: Rubbish. I don't need you lot telling me how to live my life all the time.
BRILLIANCE: We don't!
VORTEX: Yes, you do. Just last week you had a go at me for throwing stones at orphans!
THUNDER: That's right! Because we're trying to keep you out of jail! You're on probation, remember?
VORTEX: Of course I do. Chi reminds me every time she bloody sees me!
MIGHTY: And yet, you still keep doing stupid things.
VORTEX: Like what?
MIGHTY: Putting vinegar in Sofia's wine and worms in Leila's hair!
VORTEX: They're jokes! I'm just being playful!
BRILLIANCE: You're being hateful!
VORTEX: I'm being playful!
(She ruffled her neck.)
VORTEX: Because I hate them!
SHADOW: We know.
THUNDER: And that hatred might just see you back in jail.
VORTEX: Only if they catch me.
(She giggled.)
VORTEX: They still have no idea it's me doing it.
THUNDER: Yes, well, never mind that. Tonight's intervention is about a much bigger problem.
VORTEX: Oh?
THUNDER: Our honour as nobles.
VORTEX: Honour is a birthright!
MIGHTY: No, it's a way of life. And being *considered* noble is something you have to earn.
VORTEX: Rubbish.
(She rolled her eyes.)
VORTEX: But fine. Seeing as you all seem to have bought into that silly notion, I'll play along. What do you need from me?
BRILLIANCE: Modesty.
THUNDER: And humility.
VORTEX: I object! Such foolishness is unbefitting of one as great as I!

BRILLIANCE: For pity's sake.

SHADOW: It's important, Velvet!

(He sighed then sat down in front of her.)

SHADOW: Listen to me, will you?

VORTEX: Do I have to?

SHADOW: Yes!

VORTEX: Fine. Make it quick.

THUNDER: Why? We're in no hurry.

VORTEX: I know. I just want to get on with hammering home how much prettier than the countess I am.

BRILLIANCE: Wow. She's so...

SHADOW: Never mind that. Just listen for a moment.

VORTEX: Fine. Begin.

SHADOW: Thank you.

(With that, he ruffled his neck then started to relate his concerns.)

SHADOW: The final award of tonight's ceremony is going to be the award for the team of the year.

VORTEX: Yup. And I can't wait to rub everyone else's face in it when we win!

SHADOW: Yes, well, that's the thing, you see? You can't *do* that, Velvet.

VORTEX: I can!

(She beamed.)

VORTEX: And I will.

SHADOW: Don't!

VORTEX: But I *have* to! Shadow, we're going to win that award by a clear country mile. We have the best team with the most kills *and* the sexiest magic-caster. The rest of them are just peasants with a skill or two. We're so much better than them. Why?

Because we're noble. And this is the perfect opportunity to hammer home that point.

(She nodded.)

VORTEX: How's this for an acceptance speech? We won the team of the year award because our team is better than yours. Why? Because we're noble! Noble people are just better! Now show some respect and start remembering your place, paupers. Perfect, right?

(She exhaled.)

VORTEX: It's going to be a great night.

SHADOW: Not if you do that, it won't.

VORTEX: Excuse me?

SHADOW: Just...

(He shook his head.)

SHADOW: You explain it to her, Thunder. I've already lost the will to live.

THUNDER: Righto.

(He stood tall.)

THUNDER: Velvet... being noble means being classy.

VORTEX: Like me!

THUNDER: No. Actually *being* classy.

VORTEX: Why, you rotten...

THUNDER: It means being humble in victory, gracious in defeat, and conducting oneself with dignity at all times. You see, a true noble doesn't see a group of orphans and throw stones at them.

VORTEX: Since when?

(Thunder ignored her and continued his speech.)

THUNDER: A true noble sees a group of orphans and offers them help and support. You see, being noble means looking down on nobody and never demanding respect! No, no; a noble *earns* respect!

VORTEX: Right. Well... with all due respect, you've made this speech a million times and it's complete and utter cobbles. Being noble means being rich and affluent and making sure every other bugger knows they're beneath you.

THUNDER: Velvet...

VORTEX: Nope! Tonight, when we win the team of the year award, I'm going to milk the moment for all its worth, and by the time I'm finished, every peasant at the guild will finally understand his or her lowly status in life. And let's face it; it's long overdue.

(Thunder groaned in defeat.)

THUNDER: I'm wasting my breath here, aren't I?

VORTEX: Yup.

BRILLIANCE: Then allow *me* to try.

VORTEX: What's the point? You know I won't be changing my mind.

BRILLIANCE: Or maybe you will.

(She nodded.)

BRILLIANCE: You see, it's very simple, Velvet.

VORTEX: What is?

BRILLIANCE: What I'm about to say.

VORTEX: Is it a full and frank admission that your makeup is inferior to mine?

BRILLIANCE: No, I was going to say that tonight can go one of two ways. When we win the team of the year award, you can either be humble and modest or you can be unbearable.

VORTEX: I choose the latter!

BRILLIANCE: Which will anger all the other warriors and *infuriate* Chi. At which point, she'll head for her cabinet, tear up your probation agreement and send you back to jail!

VORTEX: Rubbish!

BRILLIANCE: It's not rubbish. She *ordered* you to start being civil towards ordinary folk, Velvet. She didn't just request it or ask you to *try*. She made it a condition of your probation! And she meant it!

(She furrowed her brow.)

BRILLIANCE: She even cleared out the top drawer in her cabinet and put one document in there! Your probation agreement! She then made a point of saying it was there for easy access, because she'll rip it up without a second thought if you don't start being a better human being! That was a stark warning and you need to heed it!

(Vortex looked to her uneasily for a moment then furrowed her brow. The countess was right. Such an act of arrogance would indeed anger the other warriors and breach her probation agreement. To avoid going back to jail, something she lived in fear of, she'd

have no choice but to behave herself. Far from happy about it, she pouted indignantly then grumbled under her breath.)

VORTEX: Fine. I'll pretend to be gracious then.

BRILLIANCE: Good. Make sure you do.

VORTEX: I said I would, didn't I?

BRILLIANCE: And we appreciate it.

(Vortex ruffled her neck bitterly.)

VORTEX: Whatever. Just... do you makeup again, you look hideous.

BRILLIANCE: Now you're just lashing out.

VORTEX: Nope. You look like a gargoyle.

BRILLIANCE: I look stunning.

MIGHTY: Hear, hear.

SHADOW: Seconded.

THUNDER: Motion carried.

BRILLIANCE: Then I rest my case.

VORTEX: Whatever.

(She then folded her arm and pouted like a sulking goldfish. Happy to let her do it, Thunder exhaled then looked to his other three team-mates.)

THUNDER: Now we've got *that* issue resolved, I'm looking forward to this evening.

MIGHTY: Me too. We've worked damned hard this year, so it'll be nice to get a little recognition.

SHADOW: Indeed. Day after day, cull after cull; it can get tedious after a while. But knowing we're going to be the recipients of awards and accolades makes it all feel worthwhile.

BRILLIANCE: And *what* an accolade. Team of the year!

(She then glanced at Vortex.)

BRILLIANCE: It's going to be a struggle for you to politely applaud the teams who come second and third, isn't it?

VORTEX: I won't lie. I'll be straining every sinew not to mock them for their failure. But I'll manage it somehow.

(She pouted.)

VORTEX: I don't *want* to go back to jail.

THUNDER: Then you need a new perspective.

VORTEX: That paupers *aren't* diseased lowlives? Behave.

THUNDER: No, I mean a new perspective for *tonight*. Don't look at those in second and third as failures. It's not a failure to come second to *us*, after all. Coming second to us was a given. So just applaud them for their sterling efforts in managing to be the best of the rest.

VORTEX: Hmm... maybe...

SHADOW: So... who do you think the two runners-up will be?

MIGHTY: The Axnay Rejects and Rico's Girls, of course.

BRILLIANCE: He's right. They both managed to bag a colossus.

VORTEX: Even if The Rejects *did* steal theirs from us.

THUNDER: Now, now, Velvet.

VORTEX: Don't worry. I won't mention that fact tonight.

THUNDER: Jolly good.

(He nodded.)

THUNDER: Yup. This is going to be great. We'll get acknowledged for being head and shoulders above the rest and The Rejects will get some well-deserved applause.

BRILLIANCE: Indeed.

MIGHTY: I just hope Chi reads out the statistics.

SHADOW: What? Why?

MIGHTY: Because I'm interested to know. Rico's Girls killed a colossus, but other than that they just have Empies to their name. The Rejects have a colossus and an *assortment* of low levels beasts to theirs. Whereas we have a lengthy catalogue of mid to high-level beasts from the more dangerous territories. So I'd *love* to know how much greater our *total number* of kills is, *and* how much higher the bounty was.

SHADOW: Hmm... well... at a guess, I'd say that, with our immense powers, we're probably killing things at four times the rate the others do; and at ten times the difficulty. So, by my estimation, our earnings are probably four times higher than The Rejects, even if you factor in their colossus.

(He shrugged.)

SHADOW: It would be nice to hear an *official* tally though.

BRILLIANCE: Quite. It'll also be nice to hear the awed-gasp from the other teams when they realise how much of a higher level we operate at.

VORTEX: Um... maybe it'd better if they *didn't* gasp in awe at us, actually. If that happens, the smugness *will* consume me and I *will* become unbearable. And I really don't want to end up in jail with my head buried between Barbara's thighs again!

MIGHTY: And that's why you need to learn to be modest. No smugness, just a kind smile for those watching.

THUNDER: Quite right. We can save the smugness for when we get home.

MIGHTY: Or we could just *not* be smug at all.

THUNDER: Yes, well... it won't be easy, my friend.

(He beamed.)

THUNDER: We're so much better than the other teams, it's ridiculous. So much so, we could have taken three months off to go fishing and *still* be the team of the year.

SHADOW: Yes, but... forgone conclusion or not...

THUNDER: I'll be humble.

SHADOW: Good lad.

Across town, a short while later, The Axnay Rejects were walking down a quiet street together, en route to the warrior's guild. Clutching Rico's arm, Sofia looked more than a little uncomfortable. She was desperately trying to tune out Leila's voice. All magic casters, it seems, were cut from the same cloth. Since meeting Velvet Vortex for the first time, Countess Brilliance had found herself taking deep breaths and counting to ten more times than she could remember. It was a pain Sofia knew all too well. Since the minute they'd set out, Leila had been on her case about her hair and makeup, very much like a carbon copy of Miss Vortex, and it was grating her last nerve.

LEILA: Though to be fair, I can't fault you for the evening dress. That white and gold number goes well with your blonde hair. Full marks for that. And your white heels complement the dress magnificently. But the hair and makeup...

(She sucked her teeth.)

LEILA: You should have come to *me*. I told you that would happen, didn't I?

SOFIA: Told me *what* would happen?

LEILA: That!

SOFIA: What?

LEILA: Whatever that is. I don't know. I should imagine they daren't give it a name.

SOFIA: My hair looks nice!

LEILA: Your hair looks like an afterthought! As for the makeup, well... where is it?

SOFIA: It's subtle.

LEILA: It's non-existent, you mean.

(She shook her head.)

LEILA: You should have let me do it.

SOFIA: No. I did that once and you caked it on with a trowel.

LEILA: Yes, and you looked extremely sexy!

SOFIA: I looked like a prostitute!

LEILA: Exactly!

(Sofia stared at her blankly.)

SOFIA: What?

LEILA: Why do you think prostitutes put it on that thick? To attract men! It's sexy.

SOFIA: I don't need to attract men! I already have the best one!

(Rico beamed.)

RICO: Make a note of that, gents. The *best* one. The best...

LEILA: Don't interrupt!

(She rolled her eyes.)

LEILA: Honestly, Sofia. You never listen to me. Such a shame. You did such an excellent job with the dress then ruined it by putting your hair up like a scarecrow and putting so little makeup on, nobody can see it.

RICO: Nope! I'm not having that.

LEILA: I said *don't* interrupt.

RICO: Yes, but I'm going to. I love what she's done with her hair. I think it's very sexy.

And her makeup is perfect. Her eyes are even *more* stunning than normal.

LEILA: Yeah, right. What do you know about hair and makeup?

RICO: What do *you* know about what men find attractive?

LEILA: Everything!

MAX: Lesbian, are we?

LEILA: No. I've just learned what men like from my many years of attracting them.

RICO: And yet you're still single. Maybe *your* approach has been attracting the wrong kind.

MAX: The kind who like prostitutes.

LEILA: How dare you?

(She clutched her hands to her hearts in order to make an exhibition of taking offence.)

LEILA: How can you be so cruel? Why would you try to knock my confidence like that?

Why? Why would you do that? I spent ages getting ready. Picking out the right evening dress, perfecting my hair and applying the right amount of makeup is a precise science and I worked hard on it, thank you. To go through all that only to be ridiculed and told I look like a prostitute is hurtful! *I'd* never criticise the way *you* lot look!

SOFIA: You've been criticising me from the minute we left the house!

LEILA: I wasn't criticising! I was expressing disappointment.

SOFIA: By criticising me!

LEILA: Rubbish.

(She shook her head.)

LEILA: You make things up, you do.

SOFIA: Leila... I...

(She sighed.)

SOFIA: I give up.

LEILA: That's the spirit.

(She then scowled at Max.)

LEILA: Now I suggest you apologise.

MAX: Fine.

(He sighed.)

MAX: Sorry, Sofia. If I'd known she was going to be like this, I'd have locked her in her room.

(Everyone chuckled with the exception of the obvious one.)

LEILA: You're not funny, you know?

(She furrowed her brow.)

LEILA: You can tell Tommy to stop laughing an' all.

(She scoffed.)

LEILA: Like *he's* in any position to mock. I used to think he was just an ordinary guy who *dressed* like a twat. But now he's all dressed up, I realise the clothes had nothing to do with it. He's still a twat; only now, he's a twat in a suit.

TOMMY: Fuck sake, Leila. How long are you gonna be angry at me for?

LEILA: Sofia, tell Tommy that if he wants to contact me, he can send me a letter.

SOFIA: No, thanks.

LEILA: Sofia...

(Rico rolled his eyes.)

RICO: Look, that's enough of that nonsense.

LEILA: I agree. Behave, Tommy.

(She flinched.)

LEILA: Is what someone should say to him.

RICO: Just don't.

(He nodded.)

RICO: We should all be in high spirits right now. We're off to a posh do. The Warrior's Guild Awards. A prestigious event. We're living the high life right now.

TOMMY: High life? You said it was just a case of a few trophies getting dished out, followed by a massive piss up.

RICO: Well, yeah... but it's a *high end* piss up.

MAX: High end piss up???

RICO: Yeah. You know... with posh booze and live music.

SOFIA: Like a gala.

RICO: Yeah, that's a good word.

MAX: It's still a piss up though, right?

LEILA: Yup.

MAX: Good. I was about to turn around and go home.

RICO: Why would you do that?

MAX: I'm a country bumpkin, remember? Wearing a suit and drinking champagne while politely making conversation is not *my* idea of fun. In fact it's the antipodes of having fun!

TOMMY: Antithesis.

MAX: Yeah, that thing.

(He ruffled his neck.)

MAX: I'm not into all that hoity-toity malarkey. I just want to have a few beers and a laugh with my mates.

RICO: And that's how it'll end up, mate. Bound to. The Elites aside, nobody at the guild likes a formal gathering.

MAX: Good. I'm relieved to hear that, mate.

(He nodded.)

MAX: Seeing as we're not likely to win any awards, there'd be no point in going otherwise.

LEILA: Who says we won't win any awards?

TOMMY: I do.

LEILA: See? Nobody.

TOMMY: Leila...

LEILA: Okay, The Elite might have the team of the year award sown up, but there are other awards.

MAX: Such as?

LEILA: I don't know, do I?

(She beamed.)

LEILA: I'm *hoping* there's one for the best looking magic caster. There's only going to be one winner there.

MAX: Saki from Rico's Girls.

(Leila gasped.)

LEILA: How dare you?

MAX: What? She's well fit.

LEILA: Oh, yeah? Then why isn't *she* the current Miss Axnay?

MAX: She didn't enter this year.

SOFIA: She won it the year before though.

LEILA: That was the year before!

RICO: This year, Sofia won it.

(He beamed.)

RICO: An excellent choice!

LEILA: Hey! *I* was the contestant with most votes!

MAX: Just not as many votes as Sofia, who didn't even take part.

LEILA: That was an anomaly. You all know damned well that I'm the looker in this team.

RICO: I disagree.

LEILA: You're biased.

MAX: Then what's my excuse? And Tommy's.

TOMMY: Hey! You leave me out of it. I'm in enough trouble as it is.

SOFIA: Wow. Guys. Can we change the subject, please? It's not right to make Leila feel bad about herself.

LEILA: Thank you.

SOFIA: Even though she thinks nothing of doing it to me, I'd like to think we're all a little bit more mature than she is.

LEILA: Why, you...

SOFIA: So let's move on, yeah?

LEILA: Let's not.

RICO: Overruled.

LEILA: You...

RICO: These other awards, you mentioned, Leila. What do you think they might be?

LEILA: Best looking magic caster!

RICO: You don't actually think they would...

LEILA: No.

(She sighed.)

LEILA: Probably not.

(She then shrugged.)

LEILA: But there might be awards for the best of each class. Maybe the best kill. We're in with a chance there. And we might get second or third for the team of the year.

MAX: Second or third? They're doing that, are they?

LEILA: Apparently so. First, second and third.

TOMMY: We've got a chance then.

LEILA: Go and talk somewhere else.

TOMMY: What?

SOFIA: At the risk of sounding like Leila, I have a feeling I might get the best healer award if there *is* one.

LEILA: That sounded nothing like me. I'd never compliment you like that.

SOFIA: I meant, at the risk of sounding *arrogant*.

LEILA: What?

(She gasped.)

LEILA: I'm not arrogant!

(She then scowled at her bitterly.)

LEILA: And you're kidding yourself, by the way.

SOFIA: What?

LEILA: You called Chi a low-budget milf! There's no way she's rewarding you for that!

TOMMY: Chi? I thought Kiki was deciding the winners, based on information from the black marble.

LEILA: Are you still here?

TOMMY: Yes!!!

LEILA: That's a shame. But in answer to your question...

(She looked to Sofia.)

LEILA: Tell Tommy, the marble is indeed helping Kiki decipher the winners and the marble knows what a rude and insensitive bugger you are. So no, that award would go to Countess Brilliance.

(Sofia shrugged.)

SOFIA: And that's fine. She's an excellent healer. A deserving winner.

LEILA: Bullshit. Don't pull all the gracious in defeat nonsense with me. You'll be gutted if *she* wins it.

MAX: Providing that category even exists.

LEILA: Well, obviously, you dumb tit!

MAX: Leila...

LEILA: Well, what a pointless contribution to the conversation that was. We were talking hypothetically, for pity's sake. *As if* that category exists. You chiming in to reiterate that our hypothetical conversation was hypothetical was entirely unnecessary.

MAX: I was just saying...

LEILA: That's like saying, if I had a cat I'd call it Dave, but that's only if I *had* a cat!

MAX: Oh, shut up.

(Rico chuckled.)

RICO: Guys, we're almost there now. Can we at least fake some smiles and *pretend* we're delighted to attend.

MAX: We can do that once we reach the door.

SOFIA: And who's pretending? *I'm* looking forward to it. Since I gained some confidence and finally plucked up the courage to apologise to people for my name calling, everyone's been much nicer to me. So as far as I'm concerned, I'm among friends tonight and you can't really ask for more.

MAX: Yes, you can. You can ask for beer.

TOMMY: There'll be plenty of that.

MAX: Then what are we waiting for? Let's get over there, collect a meaningless certificate for coming third in the team of the year event then get some beers down our necks.

TOMMY: Sounds like a plan.

(Rico chuckled.)

RICO: Just don't carry Kiki home afterwards, by mistake.

(At once, Leila and Tommy threw him their most fiery glances. Sofia just looked away. Max on the other hand, stood there giggling while Rico winced.)

RICO: Right... yeah... still too soon, is it?

(As the cold stare lingered, he puffed out then glanced away.)

RICO: Right. Message received.

(He then hurried forth with Sofia clinging to his arm, desperately trying to get away from Leila's scowl.)

RICO: Oh, boy...

At the warrior's guild, a short while later, The Axnay Rejects found themselves seated at a designated picnic table adorned by a white cloth and a floral centrepiece. All the tables had been turned sideways so everyone could see the makeshift stage that had been erected at the front of the guild. Chi and her assistants had somehow managed to transform the guild from a drinking house to a presentable venue. She'd received much kudos for her efforts.

To many of the warriors in attendance, it all seemed a little surreal. They knew where they were, but they barely recognised the place. The decorations had altered the feel of

the place entirely. And seeing all their peers dressed to the nines, as if they were at a wedding, felt extremely odd. The most bewildered in attendance that night, however, was Max. As he supped on an ale while he waited for the ceremony to start, he scratched his head in bewilderment then glanced at Rico.

MAX: Why did that bloke from The Axnay Killers say he's got my back?

(Rico gave him a baffled glance.)

RICO: What?

MAX: When we came in. At least half a dozen of the female warriors gave me a reassuring smile then that bloke... Kevin, is it? He said he's got my back.

RICO: Really?

MAX: Yeah. Then another bloke said "solidarity brother" and a third told me that he and his team-mates will support me.

(He grimaced.)

MAX: Am I about to be arrested or something? What's going on? What do they know that, I don't?

RICO: Well... dunno. That happened, did it?

MAX: Yes.

RICO: And that's why you've been quiet all this time? Thinking about that?

MAX: Well, yeah. It was fucking weird.

RICO: Right...

(He shrugged.)

RICO: Ask them about it.

MAX: Yeah... I might just do that.

LEILA: Wow. You two aren't even listening!

RICO: Yes, we are!

LEILA: Oh, yeah? What did I just say then?

RICO: You said we weren't listening!

LEILA: Before that!

RICO: I dunno.

MAX: We weren't listening.

LEILA: Exactly.

(She rolled her eyes.)

LEILA: I said, there's a rumour going around that one of the warriors here is gay.

MAX: What?

RICO: Who?

LEILA: They didn't say. But if you want *my* guess, I reckon it's...

TOMMY: Don't even bother. You know that's not true!

LEILA: See? He's denying it before I even pointed a finger.

TOMMY: Because it was *obvious* you were going to accuse me. Which is ridiculous, because you're the one person here knows for a fact that I'm not.

LEILA: True. But I'm also the one person here who can tell people you couldn't go through with making love to me because you're not *into* the ladies.

TOMMY: You wouldn't!

LEILA: Sofia, tell him I would.

SOFIA: She would.

TOMMY: I know!

(He ruffled his neck.)

TOMMY: Just don't.

MAX: Look, never mind that. I want to know who it is, so I can take the piss. What did they tell you exactly?

LEILA: Nobody *told* me anything. I just overheard Rico's Girls say that *apparently* there's a gay warrior in our midst. I didn't catch any names. I just heard her say that all the teams are talking about it.

SOFIA: All of them?

LEILA: Yes. Including us, apparently.

RICO: Do you reckon there's any truth in it?

MAX: I hope so. I want to wind him up.

RICO: What for? That's just cruel, mate.

MAX: Cruel? I want to *wind* him up; not *beat* him up. I've got nothing against the gays; which I think you'll find, is rare for a country bumpkin. I'm actually remarkably tolerant of other people's lifestyles. That doesn't mean I can't poke fun at him though. Playfully, of course.

(He ruffled his neck.)

MAX: Not too playfully though. Can't go giving him the wrong idea; he might try to fondle me.

LEILA: Why would he do that? He's gay not blind.

MAX: Excuse me?

LEILA: Just saying, if he's gonna fondle anyone, it'll be Rico.

SOFIA: He'll have to get past *me* first.

RICO: And if he does, I'll flatten the bastard!

MAX: Now who's the intolerant one?

RICO: Intolerance has fuck all to do with it! If any bloke tries to *fondle* me, he's fair game!

MAX: Right... good point.

(Sofia raised a suspicious eyebrow.)

SOFIA: What if a *woman* tries to fondle you?

RICO: I don't hit women. I'll just allow you the pleasure.

SOFIA: Good answer.

LEILA: To a ridiculous question.

(She rolled her eyes.)

LEILA: The poor bugger probably lives a quiet life with his bum chum and has no intention of fondling *anyone*. Why you'd take the conversation down *that* road, I'll never know.

RICO: That was you!

LEILA: No, it wasn't!

RICO: You said he'd probably fondle me!

LEILA: I meant, if he had to choose between you and Max. Of course he'd choose the better looking one.

MAX: Cheek.

SOFIA: Um... why would he have to make *that* choice? How would *that* scenario even come about?

LEILA: Well... someone might kidnap his family and force him into it.

TOMMY: Fuck me. Are we really having this conversation?

RICO: Apparently so.

LEILA: I know, right. You lot are ridiculous.

TOMMY: Us lot? *You* were an integral *part* of the conversation!

LEILA: Nobody asked for your opinion. Especially not me. In fact, if you keep speaking to me, despite my express desire for you to fuck off and die in a ditch, I might have to get my legal team involved.

TOMMY: What legal team?

LEILA: Pray you never find out. It'll start with an injunction, banning you from talking to me. And if you persist, I will escalate it!

TOMMY: To what?

LEILA: The next level!

TOMMY: Which is?

LEILA: You don't want to know!

TOMMY: You haven't got a bloody clue, have you?

RICO: Um, guys...

LEILA: Yes, I have. I've got *all* the clues!

TOMMY: No, you haven't!

LEILA: I've got more clues than you!

TOMMY: Bullshit. I'm the god of clues.

SOFIA: Wow. They're so desperate to bicker, they've stopped caring whether they're talking nonsense or not.

TOMMY: We're not desperate to bicker. I'm just defending myself!

LEILA: You liar!

TOMMY: Stop talking to me!

(He pointed to his chest.)

TOMMY: Or *I'll* be the one getting the injunction against *you*!

(Leila gasped.)

LEILA: Like you'd be granted one! I'm the innocent party here!

TOMMY: How? *I* made a mistake. *You*, on the other hand, are being a cunt about it.

That's makes *you* the villain!

LEILA: I see... that's how you feel, is it?

TOMMY: That's how it is.

(Leila glanced away bitterly.)

LEILA: Understood. You think *I* was the one who wronged *you*. Got it. If that's how you feel, then quite clearly, your apology was meaningless.

TOMMY: My apology was ignored.

LEILA: I wasn't ignored; it was robustly rejected!

TOMMY: Exactly...

(He gave an exasperated sigh.)

TOMMY: Look... I took the wrong woman home. I accept that. It was *my* error and I really am sorry. Sincerely. But, I've been saying sorry for six months now, haven't I? You just won't accept it. So no more. I'm done.

LEILA: Good. I don't want your apologies. I just want you to fall off a cliff.

TOMMY: See? You just get more and more abusive every time I apologise. You're worse than Sofia.

SOFIA: I can't help it.

TOMMY: Butt out, Sofia.

RICO: Easy, mate.

TOMMY: I'm just saying. If Leila wants to be childish, well... so can I. From now on, rather than being contrite, I'm going to give as good as I get.

MAX: Excellent. That'll make our home lives such a joy.

RICO: Right? You can't beat coming home on a winter's evening to a nice friendly punch-up in front of the fire.

LEILA: It's summer!

RICO: Yes, but, my bet is, this'll be carrying on for quite some time.

TOMMY: It'll carry on until she forgives me.

LEILA: In other words, forever.

MAX: Oh, joy.

SOFIA: We should move out, Rico.

RICO: No, Sofia; those two should.

MAX: Agreed.

(Just then, the lights dimmed and everyone in the guild started to applaud. At once, all eyes became fixed upon the stage. Sporting a silver evening dress, Chi was making her way onto the makeshift stage. The ceremony was about to start. Well aware of this, Leila and Tommy shared one last sneer then glanced to where Chi was getting ready to speak.)

CHI: Evening, warriors.

(A cheer rose up, accompanied by a throng of warm greetings and a wolf whistle from the back of the guild.)

CHI: Really, Stanley?

(The Power Blade from the warrior team, Dark Force, shrugged confidently.)

STANLEY: Yup. Looking good, Chi.

CHI: Even so. Men have died for less.

(She allowed herself a playful smirk, bringing forth a chuckle from the audience.)

CHI: But, sticking with the subject of looking nice... wow, guys. Look at you, all. You look great.

(She nodded towards The Axnay Rejects table.)

CHI: Even Max is wearing a suit. A far cry from the cloth sack he first turned up in.

(Everyone chuckled then an amused voice rose up from the back of the crowd.)

BENNY: His Tutu's in the wash!

(He was then shushed by several disgusted voices.)

JADE: That's so insensitive!

KEVIN: Ignore him, Max! We've got your back, bro!

EDDIE: We support you, man.

HELEN: Your new lifestyle changes nothing!

MAX: Eh? What are you on about!

(Chi coughed, loudly and deliberately.)

CHI: Ahem!

(All eyes returned to her.)

CHI: Now, where was I? Oh, that's it. You all look fantastic. Sharp suits and gorgeous dresses; you've done yourselves proud.

(Another warrior then called back to her.)

RAY: Yup. We're living proof that you *can* polish a turd!

(At once, almost everyone fell about laughing. There were, however, five notable exceptions.)

SHADOW: Childish.

THUNDER: Indeed. Why they'd laugh at something so juvenile, I just don't know.

BRILLIANCE: Poor breeding, I expect.

MIGHTY: *Inbreeding* in some cases.

VORTEX: See? Lowlifes. Why you four are so keen to show them respect, I just don't know. They're everything disgusting and more, and the fact you won't let me belittle them gets more and more ridiculous by the day.

THUNDER: Now, now, Velvet. Nobody said they *weren't* lowly; but it's not *about* them.

SHADOW: It's about *us* being noble and rising above it.

VORTEX: Yeah, right.

(She rolled her eyes then glanced towards the stage again.)

CHI: Anyway, let's get on with the first award, shall we? Best looking female magic caster!

LEILA: Result!

VORTEX: Cool. My first award of the day.

(Much their annoyance, Chi then started to chuckle.)

CHI: Yeah, right. Like we'd give out such an award.

LEILA: What? It was a joke???

SAKI: Why would you do that???

CHI: Because I know what you girls are like.

(She giggled.)

CHI: As soon as I said it, about twenty of you sat up, thinking you'd be a shoo-in.

(As everyone else burst out laughing, the female magic-casters all glowered at her bitterly.)

VORTEX: I fail to see how that's funny, personally.

CHI: Relax, everyone. There won't be *any* vanity awards, this evening. *All* the female magic-casters think they're the sexiest...

LEILA: The others are wrong.

CHI: *All* the male Power Blades think they're the manliest...

MAX: And they'd be right in my case.

CHI: And *all* the healers, male *and* female, seem to think they're the most loving and kind person on the planet.

(Sofia whimpered.)

SOFIA: Hardly. I got kicked out of anger management once for telling the counsellor his face was so ugly, I have to go straight to trauma counselling after every session.

CHI: So we won't be doing that! All tonight's awards will be based on statistics, confirmed by the black marble.

(She nodded.)

CHI: So, anyway, let's get this thing started, shall we?

(Everyone cheered.)

CHI: The first award. Most hits taken by a Power Blade.

(At once, all eyes turned to face Sir Mighty. Sir Mighty just stared ahead, struggling not to look smug.)

CHI: The envelope, if you will, Kiki.

(Kiki then stepped onto the stage in a tight black dress, and received a lusty welcome from all the men in attendance.)

CHI: Easy, boys; she's out of your league.

MAX: We'll see.

CHI: Who said that???

(Max rapidly sunk under the table.)

CHI: Buffoon.

(She then took the envelope from Kiki.)

CHI: Thank you, Kiki.

KIKI: My pleasure.

CHI: Okay...

(She opened the envelope then rolled her eyes.)

CHI: Well that was obvious. The winner is, Sir Mighty.

(To muted applause, Sir Mighty climbed to his feet then waved away the acknowledgement.)

MIGHTY: There's no need for that. I'm just an ordinary man like you, but better.

(He then strode up to the stage and took a small trophy from Chi. Having shaken her hand, he then turned to face the audience.)

MIGHTY: I'd just like to say, a big thank you to my team, my parents, my...

CHI: Tell them in person. Nobody wants to listen to *you* rattling on.

MIGHTY: Do you mind? I'm doing my acceptance speech!

CHI: Ah, good point.

(She smiled.)

CHI: I forgot to mention that. There'll be no acceptance speeches this evening, other than a speech from the winners of the team of the year award.

MIGHTY: Aw.

CHI: Now clear off.

(Sir Mighty sighed then headed away.)

CHI: Well done, Sir Mighty.

(She nodded.)

CHI: Now let's move on to the most kills by a Speed Blade.

(All eyes turned to Duke Thunder.)

THUNDER: Now, let's not be presumptuous everyone.

(He beamed modestly.)

THUNDER: It's not a forgone conclusion.

(He then glanced away, knowing full well that it was.)

CHI: The envelope, please, Kiki.

KIKI: Here you go.

CHI: Thank you.

(She opened the envelope then sighed.)

CHI: Shock, horror... it's Duke Thunder.

(Thunder fake a gasp.)

THUNDER: Gosh!!! Who knew?

(He then upped and strutted towards the stage to accept his award.)

THUNDER: What a pleasant surprise.

CHI: Really? Who are you trying to kid?

THUNDER: I'm not trying to kid *anyone*. I'm pretending to be modest. I mean, I'm genuinely stunned and overjoyed.

CHI: Yeah, right.

(Having receiving his award, he bowed to accept the polite round of applause then returned to his seat. He did so whilst struggling not to smirk gleefully. A pattern was developing that he approved of greatly. It was beginning to look like his team would scoop *all* the awards. It was affirming what he and his team-mates had always believed; they were most definitely a cut above. A few minutes later, when Artful Shadow collected the award for the most successful tactician, his belief grew. The next award, however, might prove awkward. The most successful magic-caster. Velvet Vortex had spent a large portion of the winter either on the run from the guild or in jail. This meant their clean sweep was in danger. As such, when Chi took the envelope from Kiki, the Elite all held hands under the table and prayed.)

THUNDER: Please be, Velvet.

SHADOW: Say, Velvet, go on.

BRILLIANCE: We want that clean sweep.

MIGHTY: Come on, has to be, surely...

VORTEX: It'd better bloody be.

CHI: The winner is...

(She sighed with disappointment.)

CHI: Velvet Vortex!

(Vortex leapt up and punched the air.)

VORTEX: In your face!!!

(She did a little jig.)

VORTEX: Suck it, losers!

(She then thumbed her nose at Leila before heading for the stage.)

VORTEX: Class always tells in the end.

(She then stepped onto the stage to be greeted by a scowling Chi.)

VORTEX: Um...

CHI: If you *ever* do that again, I'll go in that drawer, pluck out your probation agreement and throw it in the fire. Do you hear me?

VORTEX: Um... I was just excited that's all.

CHI: Then find a more pleasant way of showing it. Because if you do that again, the only people getting excited in your vicinity will be your randy cellmates!

VORTEX: Please, no. Chi...

CHI: Then start showing some humility; like your probation agreement states!

VORTEX: Right. Will do.

(She then turned and grimaced at the crowd.)

VORTEX: Sorry. Sorry, everyone. Nobody here is a loser. Not everyone is a winner either. But we *are* all human beings.

(She smiled then swiftly headed back to her table, growling under her breath.)

VORTEX: Barely in some cases. Paupers are just insects that *walk* like humans.

(She then took her seat and nodded to the countess.)

VORTEX: The clean sweep is as good as won.

BRILLIANCE: Yup.

(She beamed.)

BRILLIANCE: And everyone in the guild knows it.

(Sure enough, at every other table, the warriors were slouching against their tables, grimacing as they pondered whether there was any point in them being there.)

CHI: Okay, well... this is all very predictable so far.

(She sighed.)

CHI: Best Healer now.

(She scoffed as Kiki passed her an envelope.)

CHI: You might as well come up here now, Countess.

BRILLIANCE: Okay.

(She upped then started to mince towards the stage, hoisting the bottom of her dress up. As she did so, Chi slipped open the envelope then beamed with delight.)

CHI: Well, bugger me. Sit down, Countess...

BRILLIANCE: What?

CHI: The winner is Sofia Nice!

BRILLIANCE: No!!!

SOFIA: Wait, what?

RICO: Go, babe. Go and get your award!

BRILLIANCE: But it's not fair.

CHI: What isn't?

(Realising what she'd said, Brilliance gasped then swiftly tried to hide her disdain.)

BRILLIANCE: Um... it's not fair because... *I* want to present it to her! She's taught me so much.

CHI: That's very thoughtful of you, but I've got it covered, thanks.

BRILLIANCE: Oh. Okay.

(She then stood there applauding insincerely. Her fake smile was doing a fantastic job of hiding her gritted teeth.)

BRILLIANCE: A worthy winner.

(She then watched Sofia approach the stage, battling to stop her eyes from twitching. Oblivious to the hatred she was receiving from her Elite counterpart, Sofia stepped up onto the stage, turning red with embarrassment. As much as her confidence had improved in recent months, all the cheering and applause was making her uncomfortable. As such, upon taking the small trophy, she could only squeak out a few nervous words.)

SOFIA: Um... thanks, Chi.

CHI: You're welcome.

(She then looked to Kiki.)

CHI: Did you double check the marble on this one? I thought Brilliance was a shoo-in.

KIKI: I triple checked it. During the colossus fight, Sofia cast a shield spell on the entire town; that's what made the difference.

CHI: The entire town?

KIKI: One and all.

CHI: But... that's not a guild skill.

SOFIA: I learned that at the temple.

CHI: Oh.

(She shrugged.)

CHI: Still counts.

SOFIA: Right. Can I go now?

CHI: You may.

SOFIA: Yay.

(She then hurried back to her table, barely taking any care to avoid tripping over the bottom of her dress. Mercifully, she made it back without falling over. Having done so, she placed the trophy down then hid her face.)

SOFIA: Embarrassing.

(Leila chuckled.)

LEILA: Yet glorious.

(She then glanced to where Brilliance was seated among her team-mates, scowling at Sofia through murderous eyes.)

BRILLIANCE: This does not end well for her.

VORTEX: Feeling vengeful? Awesome! You have my full support.

(She exhaled.)

VORTEX: Right now, I feel like we're sisters.

THUNDER: Then you're a bad sister.

SHADOW: Indeed, we need to calm her down; not wind her up further!

MIGHTY: Quite. Behaving like a sore loser is not a noble act.

BRILLIANCE: I don't care!

THUNDER: Yes, and that's the problem.

MIGHTY: A *big* problem. The Rejects might be peasants, but they're our fellow warriors. Good sense, the law and true nobility says...

BRILLIANCE: I know that...

(She growled.)

BRILLIANCE: I just don't like it. That award should be mine. I did my healing without hurting anyone. Whereas, courtesy of her vile tongue, she's hurt just as many people as she's bloody cured.

THUNDER: Yes, but the black marble doesn't calculate hurt feelings from petty insults.

BRILLIANCE: Well, it should. I was robbed!

SHADOW: Countess...

BRILLIANCE: Fine... look... I'll act all gracious and humble. In fact, I already did. So, relax. I won't show anyone up. But I'm not going to pretend it doesn't sting either.

THUNDER: Right... well... fair enough...

(Back at The Rejects table at this time, Leila was giggling as she explained what she was watching to her team-mates.)

LEILA: Priceless. She's virtually foaming at the mouth over there.

RICO: Leila, stop staring. They've already got it in for us; don't make it worse.

LEILA: But it's funny.

MAX: I dare say it is, but if you *have* to mock them, do it stealthily.

LEILA: Stealthily?

MAX: Without looking.

LEILA: Oh, but you *have* to look, Max. The countess's face is a picture.

(Max stared coldly into her eyes for a minute then swiftly took a glance in The Elite's direction. At once, his lips curled up at the edges and he started to giggle. Unfortunately, the move had not gone unnoticed.)

BRILLIANCE: They're laughing at us!

THUNDER: Don't be ridiculous.

(He ruffled his neck.)

THUNDER: They're laughing at *you*.

BRILLIANCE: Yes, and *I'm* one of *us*!

VORTEX: She's right! If you laugh at one of us; you laugh at all of us.

(Sir Mighty furrowed his brow.)

MIGHTY: Behave yourself, Velvet; you're only saying that because you're aching to start a fight with them.

SHADOW: Always have been.

VORTEX: Lies! I've been extremely tolerant of the scrawny little peasants.

(She ruffled her neck.)

VORTEX: Aching for a fight indeed. I was merely standing up for my friend.

THUNDER: You consider her a friend?

VORTEX: Of course!

BRILLIANCE: Then why did you spend most of this afternoon, making an exhibition of telling everyone why *you're* delightfully gorgeous and I'm a basic troll, desperately trying to look acceptable?

VORTEX: I did nothing of the sort!

BRILLIANCE: You lying...

VORTEX: Point is, you *are* my friend and I *am* on your side!

BRILLIANCE: Right... friend...

(She scoffed.)

BRILLIANCE: I'd hate to see how you treat your enemies.

VORTEX: You would, yes. When I smite, I smite hard and I smite well. But I fail to see how that's relevant. The issue is, The Rejects are laughing at us and they need to be punished.

(Thunder shook his head.)

THUNDER: Incorrect.

VORTEX: Thunder...

THUNDER: Let them mock. We shall rise above it.

SHADOW: Like good nobles should.

MIGHTY: I concur.

VORTEX: Yeah? Well now you can un-concur!

THUNDER: That's not even a word.

VORTEX: Yes, it is! Because I'm making it one.

(Sir Mighty rolled his eyes.)

MIGHTY: Velvet, think for a minute, will you? We're nobles. The Rejects are peasants.

VORTEX: That's right. So it's up to us to put them in their place.

MIGHTY: No. The point I'm making is that we're nobles. Nobles don't concern themselves with the pettiness of mere peasants. Their views are worthless and any noble worthy of the title would know better than to sink to their level by entertaining them.

THUNDER: Excellently put, that man.

MIGHTY: Thank you.

THUNDER: We're great and they don't matter. So let them mock. Their opinions are irrelevant anyway.

VORTEX: But I want to wreak bloody vengeance upon them!

SHADOW: Nobles don't do that.

VORTEX: This one does.

BRILLIANCE: Then you'll end up back in jail, won't you?

(Vortex looked at her anxiously for a moment then sighed in defeat.)

VORTEX: Stupid probation. The threat of going back to prison defeats my every argument these days. It's all Chi's fault.

(She sneered.)

VORTEX: I should wreak vengeance upon *her* too.

BRILLIANCE: No, Velvet. You shouldn't.

VORTEX: And why the hell not?

BRILLIANCE: Prison, remember?

VORTEX: Aw...

(She sighed solemnly then let her head drop onto the table.)

VORTEX: So unfair.

(Delighted to see that she'd been pacified for now, The Elites drew a sigh of relief then glanced to the stage again. Chi was just about to announce the next set of awards.)

CHI: Okay, everyone. Coming up, we're going to announce some awards for outstanding achievements. Three in all. But first, I need to take a quick sip of my drink. So if your glass is empty, you might want to use this as an opportunity to visit the bar.

(She then stood there agape as half the guild upped and charged towards the bar.)

CHI: Right...

(She looked to Kiki.)

CHI: Apparently, the ceremony is taking a short break.

(Kiki could only roll her eyes.)

KIKI: Warriors.

A short while later, once everyone had charged their glasses, Chi got the ceremony underway once again. She did so with every set of eyes in the building, fixed upon her.

CHI: Right then. Now you've buried all the tables under enough alcohol to scrub the town hall clean, perhaps we can resume.

(One hand rose up from the back of the hall. It belonged to Alvin from The Axnay Tigers.)

ALVIN: Actually, my bottle of imported Sambuca hasn't arrived yet...

(Just then, a barmaid slammed a bottle down in front of him.)

ALVIN: Scratch that! You may continue.

(He then started to sink in his seat, defeated by Chi's angry scowl. All the other warriors could do was wince in sympathy for him.)

ALVIN: Uh-oh.

CHI: Excuse me? I may continue?

ALVIN: Um...

CHI: Are you saying I couldn't continue before, but I can now? Because *you're* ready! Like it's my duty to serve *you*?

ALVIN: That's...

CHI: I had no idea you were that important. I apologise.

(She sighed.)

CHI: I feel awful now. Clearly, I've been neglectful in my duties. I didn't even bother to build you a throne.

ALVIN: Chi...

CHI: Yes, your majesty? How can I be of service? Would you like a cushion perhaps? Or would you like me to assemble all the barmaids in the back room and turn it into your own personal harem? Please, just tell me what you desire. Your wish is my command, after all.

ALVIN: I... well... um... sorry, Chi.

CHI: Yeah...

(She rolled her eyes.)

CHI: Twat.

(She then ruffled her neck before continuing with the ceremony.)

CHI: Okay, ladies and gentleman...

(She glowered at Alvin.)

CHI: Esteemed royalty. It's time for the outstanding achievement awards.

(Leila beamed excitedly.)

LEILA: I'm bound to win *at least* one of these.

CHI: And seeing as every single female magic caster just sat up straight, convinced she's *bound* to win one, I'll just spare your blushes in advance. You haven't! *None* of these awards are for magic casters!

LEILA: Aw.

(She growled under her breath.)

LEILA: This whole contest is rigged.

CHI: Okay... the first award for outstanding achievement, goes to a young lady that nobody expected much from this year.

(At this point, half of the females sat forwards excitedly, praying it'd be them.)

CHI: She's flaky, morally dubious and if we're being honest, she's as unspectacular as it gets in terms of talent. Nobody could accuse her of being an asset to the guild, that's for certain.

(In that moment, the females who'd sat forward, all slumped down, praying the award wouldn't be theirs after all.)

CHI: But despite her numerous shortcomings, when it mattered, she delivered a telling blow in our battle against the beasts. And I *mean* a telling blow.

(She nodded.)

CHI: So the first award for outstanding achievement; the achievement of striking the winning blow against a colossus; goes to... Tika from Rico's Girls!

(As everyone in the guild applauded, Tika jumped to her feet and clutched her hands to her heart, before speaking up in an excited, girly voice.)

TIKA: Oh, my god. That was such an insulting introduction.

(She then swaggered over towards the stage, blushed red with embarrassment.)

TIKA: This is humiliating!

(Watching her head for the stage, Leila couldn't help but growl.)

LEILA: Chi's a liar. She said none of the awards were for female magic casters! What's Tika then? A bag of cement? I bet all three of them go to female magic casters and she'll leave me out on purpose. Just because I accidentally shot her that time.

MAX: Leila, you're being ridiculous.

LEILA: Am I now?

RICO: Yes.

SOFIA: She's forgiven you for that. Just like she forgave me for calling her a low budget milf that time.

LEILA: You're so deluded. She's only *pretending* to be nice.

(She then scowled at the stage again, just in time to see Tika arrive to collect her award.)

CHI: Well done, Tika.

TIKA: Thank you. And thank you for the deeply insulting character assassination.

CHI: Don't be like that, love. I was just hammering home how amazing it is that you actually achieved something.

TIKA: Right...

(She sighed.)

TIKA: You're not hearing yourself, are you? You're basically telling everyone that I'm shit and it's a miracle that I did something right.

CHI: Exactly!

(She beamed.)

CHI: Now you're getting it.

TIKA: Seriously?

CHI: Yes!

(She smiled to the audience.)

CHI: This young lady deserves all the applause she gets, people. Despite being a nothing warrior, even on a good day, she managed to kill a colossus with one deft blast of magic. Low *level* magic at that. She only has the most basic lightning magic, you see? She's a Speed Blade by class.

(Everyone gave impressed nods. Except Leila. She jumped to her feet and scowled at the stage furiously.)

LEILA: What???

CHI: Sit down, Leila!

LEILA: She's a bloody Speed Blade???

CHI: I said sit down!

LEILA: I was beaten to the kill by a millisecond, by a bloody amateur???

CHI: Leila! Sit down, or I'll throw you down!

(All the male warriors cooed excitedly.)

CHI: Not like that, you perverted little bastards!

(She then scowled at Leila again.)

CHI: Sit!

LEILA: Fine!

(She sat down and ruffled her neck.)

LEILA: But if you think I'm going to sit comfortably, you can forget it!

CHI: Right...

(She then rolled her eyes and gestured for Tika to return to her seat. With a sigh, Tika obliged. Watching her walk past, Leila could only shake her head.)

LEILA: This is an outrage.

MAX: How? How is it an outrage?

LEILA: She's a Speed Blade. She should never have taken that shot! She should have left it to me. Instead, she gambled on a secondary skillset and stole our kill.

SOFIA: Yeah... that is a bit annoying.

LEILA: Thank you.

SOFIA: But... only a *bit* annoying.

RICO: Yeah, it's nothing like the cataclysmic disaster *you're* making it out to be.

TOMMY: Well, what did you expect? This is Leila we're talking about. She's the grand wizard of manufacturing mountains out of molehills.

(Leila growled.)

LEILA: Someone tell Tommy...

TOMMY: Bollocks. We're not playing that game anymore. If you want to say something to me, you can do it *directly*.

LEILA: Fine. You're a cock and I hate you.

TOMMY: Whatever. I'm right, aren't I? There's isn't a minor incident known to man that you couldn't inflate into a major disaster.

LEILA: Hey! I've never...

TOMMY: Bollocks! I carried the wrong person home, for fuck sake. Yet, somehow you've magically transformed it into me having a clandestine affair and plotting against you. And it gets more and more sinister by the week. At this rate, come the end of the month, you'll have managed to finagle a dastardly murder plot into the mix.

(Max grimaced.)

MAX: Mate...

TOMMY: What?

MAX: Your descriptions of her ridiculous, ever-growing exaggerations, get more and more ridiculous and exaggerated by the week. You two are made for each other.

RICO: Right? They're basically the same person!

LEILA: How dare you? We have absolutely nothing in common whatsoever.

MAX: Yes, you do.

LEILA: Like what?

MAX: Well... you were attracted to Tommy, so clearly, you *both* love things that are made out of wood.

TOMMY: What's that meant to mean?

SOFIA: Yeah, that was too cruel. His personality isn't *that* wooden.

MAX: I wasn't talking about his personality, Sofia!

(He winced.)

MAX: I was actually making a crude joke about his boner, his wood. It just *sounded* like I was insulting his personality.

(Tommy glowered at Sofia.)

TOMMY: Only to someone who *sees* my personality as wooden!

SOFIA: Um...

(She then shrunk away and hid behind Rico.)

TOMMY: Bloody women!

(He shook his head then glanced up and saw everyone staring at them.)

TOMMY: Um...

(Chi then called over them.)

CHI: Can I get on with the ceremony now or would you like a few more minutes to make exhibitions of yourselves?

(Rico scratched his head.)

RICO: No, no, we're finished.

LEILA: Tommy certainly is!

CHI: Leila, put a bloody sock in it!

LEILA: But...

CHI: Stop! I mean it! In fact, any more outbursts from you and the only award you'll be getting this evening is the award for being the first person ever to get thrown out of the warrior guild awards! Understand?

(Leila just ruffled her neck bitterly.)

LEILA: Fine.

CHI: Thank you.

(She nodded.)

CHI: Okay. Onto the *next* award for outstanding achievement then.

(She smiled.)

CHI: And it's an award for an achievement that can't be understated. It's a *massive* achievement for a healer to go an entire calendar year without ever having to heal herself, but Countess Brilliance...

BRILLIANCE: Yes?

CHI: You've achieved that feat! Now come and get your award.

(The countess pumped her fist triumphantly.)

BRILLIANCE: Yes!

(She snarled under her breath.)

BRILLIANCE: In your face, Sofia. I *still* got an award *despite* you! How do you like those apples?

(She then climbed to her feet and marched towards the stage, giving Sofia a smug glance. Much to her annoyance, however, Sofia was clapping excitedly. She was genuinely delighted for her.)

BRILLIANCE: Now I *know* she's taking the piss!

(She then stormed onwards to the stage. As she did so, however, a conversation struck up behind her.)

RICO: Hold on, that makes no sense.

MAX: What doesn't?

RICO: Surely, having a healer who didn't need to self-heal is an achievement by her team-mates.

(Others around them then chipped in with their thoughts.)

JADE: He's right, you know? *They* should be getting the award. They kept her safe, so she didn't *need* to heal herself.

KEVIN: Yeah; you're right! The *only* possible reason for a healer not to need to self-heal is because her team protected her so well she wasn't in any danger.

EDDIE: So she's basically getting an award for not being required! For standing there and doing fuck all!

MAX: Well, no; she still had to heal her team-mates.

EDDIE: Oh, yeah.

RICO: The point still stands though. *Any* healer can go all year without self-healing if her team can protect her well enough.

MAX: So her team should get the award, not her.

LEILA: Right? Told you it was a fix. They've basically made up a category just to give her an award because she's a noble.

TOMMY: Exactly. It's just another case of the higher-ups looking after they're own.

LEILA: Shut up, you! But yes.

SOFIA: Um...

(Just then, Chi's angry voice cut over them.)

CHI: Shut it, Rejects!

(She threw her hands to her hips.)

CHI: Did you never consider that, *because* her healing was so good, her team were always in prime physical condition; thus *able* to offer up perfect protection while fighting?

(Rico grimaced.)

RICO: Right... well... okay... but...

CHI: But what, fuck face?

RICO: But why single *us* out? Others were questioning it too!

CHI: Because you five morons were the loudest.

SOFIA: I only said "um".

CHI: Put a sock in it!

SOFIA: Aw.

(Chi shook her head.)

CHI: Doubting people's achievements, whatever next? Shame on you! All five of you!

SOFIA: But, I was about to disagree with them.

CHI: Enough! Stop talking!

(She wagged an angry finger at them.)

CHI: Just be bloody grateful we're not giving out calamity awards this evening! If we were, you five silly buggers would have swept the board!

MAX: That's hardly fair.

CHI: No? The only reason *your* healer didn't go all year without having to heal herself, is because your own magic-caster kept trying to punch her in the face!

SOFIA: That's not true! I also kept getting hit by inanimate objects back when I was cursed!

LEILA: And a gang of angry northerners tried to bash our heads in! So it wasn't *all* down to me!

CHI: Even so! No *other* team seem to have a problem with their magic caster trying to punch their healer! Not even The Elites, and they have Vortex! She's a nutter!

VORTEX: Charming!

CHI: Point being, if we *were* doing calamity awards, you silly fuckers would *walk away* with the award for the most self-inflicted injuries! When Leila *wasn't* trying to punch your healer, she was accidentally shooting her team-mates with her magic!

LEILA: Um... this is starting to feel personal now.

CHI: It is! You even shot *me*, remember?

LEILA: Like you'd let me forget!

CHI: Now put a sock in it, Rejects! Any more comments from you and I'll get Kiki to make a list of your calamities and give you a wooden spoon for every single one of them! And you'll probably need to buy a brand new shed to keep them all in!!!

(At once, everyone other than Axnay Rejects fell about laughing. The Rejects simply sunk under the table.)

TOMMY: I'm so glad we came.

MAX: Yeah...

CHI: Right. Now I've nipped that nonsense in the bud... excellent work, Countess. Keep it up.

BRILLIANCE: Thank you. I will.

(She then headed back to her table with her award, giggling heartily at The Rejects.)

BRILLIANCE: You got told off!

LEILA: Yeah? Well, you're a...

MAX: Don't!

RICO: Just let it go, Leila.

LEILA: Oh... fine.

CHI: Right then... onto the next award. The final award for special achievements.

(She ruffled her neck.)

CHI: As much I don't like to embarrass you guys, one team here needs to brace itself.

(Max and Rico shared an exasperated glance.)

MAX: She doesn't like to embarrass us?

RICO: Unbelievable, mate.

TOMMY: She just *crucified* us.

RICO: Yup. And I have a feeling she's about to do it again.

LEILA: Count on it.

SOFIA: Yup. It's bound to be us.

CHI: The recipient of this award is being recognised for making quite the astonishing comeback. Having been mauled and savaged and left at the death's door by beasts, following a world class piece of fuckwittery by The Axnay Elites, he's finally fought his way back to full health, albeit without his little finger.

(At once, The Elite all slid under the table in embarrassment. Every single eye in the guild was upon them, including the giggling foursome of Max, Rico, Leila and Tommy. Sofia could only cringe for them.)

MAX: Priceless.

RICO: Right?

CHI: So, yes, a half-hearted apology to you Rejects. You wouldn't have got *all* the calamity awards. The Elite would have won the uber-calamity award for almost getting the poor bugger killed.

(Vortex raised her hand.)

VORTEX: Um... you can't blame all five of us! *I* wasn't there!

CHI: Oh, that's right. You deserted and ended up in jail.

(She smiled.)

CHI: Maybe I really *was* too harsh on The Rejects, you five silly sods are every bit as hopeless.

THUNDER: Steady on.

MIGHTY: That's an insult too far!

CHI: Is it?

MIGHTY: Yes!

CHI: Shut up!

(She rolled her eyes.)

CHI: Anyway, ladies, gentleman and his immortal highness Alvin at the back there, please put your hands together for the comeback kid himself. Mr Martin Stevens.

(A side door then opened up and Martin Stevens marched out. At once, everyone rose to their feet and cheered for all they were worth. His life had very much been in the balance six months earlier and seeing him so spritely moved them all greatly.)

THUNDER: Outstanding!

SHADOW: Bravo!

TOMMY: Has to be said, lads, this is a nice moment.

RICO: Absolutely.

MAX: Good for him.

SOFIA: I'm glad we came now.

LEILA: Right?

(They then continued to applaud until Martin took his award from Chi.)

CHI: Good to see you again, Martin.

MARTIN: Thanks.

CHI: You're welcome.

(She exhaled.)

CHI: We weren't going to do speeches, but I think you need to say a few words.

MARTIN: Um...

CHI: Please. Everyone's so happy to see you, it'll make their day.

MARTIN: Hmm...

(A cheer then rose up from the audience.)

ALL: Speech! Speech! Speech!

(Chi nodded then stepped back and gestured forth to signify that the floor was his. Martin could only gulp then turn to face the audience. Sweating uncomfortably, he then scratched behind his ear and waited for the applause to subside. In that moment, he had everyone anxiously waiting on his next word.)

MARTIN: Right... so... I...

(He forced a nervous smile.)

MARTIN: Thank you for all your trousers. Roof tiles.

(He sighed.)

MARTIN: Boobies. I'll try a biscuit; handbags.

(As everyone stared at him blankly, he hung his head and sighed again.)

MARTIN: Radish.

(Just then Kiki rushed over and whispered in Chi's ear.)

CHI: What? Speak up.

KIKI: The part of his brain where words are stored still hasn't healed properly.

CHI: What? Is this true, Martin?

(Martin nodded solemnly.)

MARTIN: Cobbled mattress.

CHI: Right.

MARTIN: I'm physically tankard, but my speech is still bobble hat.
KIKI: He knows what he *wants* to say, but other words come out.
(Martin nodded to Kiki.)
MARTIN: Pointy giggle sausage.
KIKI: He meant yes.
CHI: I gathered that.
(She winced.)
CHI: Maybe you should give the speech a miss.
MARTIN: Trampoline.
CHI: Right.
(She then looked to the audience.)
CHI: Everyone; Martin Stevens!
(She then applauded him off the stage. By herself. Everyone else was staring at him agog.)
CHI: Clap, you fuckers.
(Sprung into action, the warriors did just that.)
CHI: That humiliation wouldn't have set back his recovery, would it?
KIKI: We can only hope that's not the case.
CHI: Shit.
(She shook her head in an annoyance then stood tall.)
CHI: Look... let's just bring this to a close now, shall we? I'm sure you're all looking forward to going to town on all that booze you've acquired.
(A loud cheer rose up.)
CHI: I thought as much.
(She nodded.)
CHI: Okay. Here it is then. The team of the year award.
(At once, all eyes turned to face The Axnay Elite. At this point, they couldn't have looked more smug. Mercifully, after a good ten seconds, Thunder suddenly remembered their plan.)
THUNDER: Shit! Modest and humble faces, everyone. Quick!
MIGHTY: Fuck. Good point.
SHADOW: Quite right. Dignified and gracious expressions, chaps.
BRILLIANCE: On it.
VELVET: No, I'm good.
THUNDER: Velvet...
VELVET: What? I'm better than them and they know it. So, if anything, *pretending* to be humble is just insulting them.
(She beamed.)
VELVET: Which I love.
(She then sat back and nodded modestly.)
VELVET: May the best team win.
THUNDER: And may they be celebrated, no matter *who* they are. We're all warriors here, after all!
SHADOW: And in that sense, we're all *winners* too.
MIGHTY: Absolutely!
BRILLIANCE: No losers here. Not tonight. We're all one and the same.

SHADOW: Rich or poor.

THUNDER: Indeed, yes. I'll be delighted no matter who wins!

(They then shared a series of nods. It was safe to say, they were delighted with their performance. They had, however, fooled nobody.)

LEILA: That's just taking the piss, that is.

MAX: Right? They know they've won. Who do they think they're kidding?

(Sensing animosity in the hall, Chi bit her lip. The Elite were obviously faking humility and it wasn't going down very well with their peers. Sensing it might be a good idea to get the award over and done with therefore, Chi swiftly spoke up.)

CHI: Okay. The winning envelope, please, Kiki.

(Kiki hurriedly handed her three envelopes.)

CHI: Three?

KIKI: First, second and third.

CHI: Oh, yeah.

(She then placed the second and first envelopes down on her lectern.)

CHI: Okay, let's do this in reverse order then, shall we?

(At once, The Elites sat forward to form a huddle.)

THUNDER: Okay, does everyone remember the plan?

BRILLIANCE: Yup. When the second and third places are announced, we have to nod approvingly to signify our belief that the runners-up thoroughly deserve their prizes.

VELVET: Even though second and third place are as good as coming last, we'll applaud generously and show them as much fake respect as we can muster.

SHADOW: And we'll *continue* our display of bogus humility when we're announced as the winners a few moments later.

MIGHTY: By acting shocked and pretending to think we're not sure we *deserve* such an accolade.

THUNDER: Perfect.

(He then glanced at Vortex.)

THUNDER: And you're *sure* you can pull off a display of fake modesty, are you?

VORTEX: Yes, you cheeky twat.

THUNDER: Excellent. Then we're good to go.

(He nodded sternly.)

THUNDER: Okay... game faces, everyone. It's time to get our meekness on.

(With that, they all sat back and looked at Chi as if butter wouldn't melt in their mouths.)

CHI: In third place...

THUNDER: Brace yourselves chaps; and get ready to clap.

CHI: The Axnay Elite!!!

(At once, a huge gasp echoed around the room all eyes swung towards The Elites.

Bizarrely, they'd remained seated and were clapping enthusiastically.)

THUNDER: Bravo!

MIGHTY: Quite! Well done!

SHADOW: Well deserved, I say.

VORTEX: A sterling effort.

BRILLIANCE: Absolutely fan...

(In that moment the penny dropped and they all stared at Chi in disbelief.)

THUNDER: I'm sorry... did you just say...

BRILLIANCE: We came third???

CHI: Trust me; I'm as stunned as you are.

(She glanced towards Kiki.)

CHI: You verified this, right?

KIKI: I did indeed. They're third.

CHI: Blimey.

(She beamed.)

CHI: Oh, well. Come and get your award then.

(The Elites all glanced at one other in horrified dismay then Thunder leapt to his feet.)

THUNDER: Third???

CHI: That's right.

THUNDER: Third???

(Artful Shadow, Sir Mighty and Countess Brilliance then leapt to their feet with him.)

SHADOW: This is an outrage!!!

MIGHTY: We're the best team here by far!!!

BRILLIANCE: By far!!!

THUNDER: How could we possibly have come third???

CHI: That's a good question, to be fair.

KIKI: Well... not really. You *know* how, Chi. Two other teams collected a greater total bounty! It's as simple as that!

THUNDER: Impossible!!!

KIKI: The result was verified by the black marble!!!

SHADOW: Liar!!!

MIGHTY: We've been sabotaged!!!

THUNDER: This is a fix!

BRILLIANCE: We demand a recount!

CHI: Hey!

BRILLIANCE: Or do we have to get our legal teams involved???

CHI: Legal teams?

THUNDER: You heard! Clearly this contest has been manipulated to make us look bad and we're not having it!!!

(Chi glowered at him bitterly.)

CHI: Is that so???

THUNDER: That *is* so, yes!!!

(Watching Chi growl, Vortex whimpered in terror.)

VORTEX: Stop it, guys. Chi's absolutely livid!

SHADOW: So are we!!!

VORTEX: And that's great an' all, but I'm not going back to prison for anybody!

(With that, she upped and hurried towards Chi.)

VORTEX: Yay! Third place! I'm so, so delighted and I can't wait to accept the award.

THUNDER: What the hell are you doing Velvet???

VORTEX: Preserving my liberty!!! I've grown rather fond of not being fondled by murderous lesbians and I'd like to *keep on* not being fondled by them!

SHADOW: Traitor!!!

VORTEX: Call me what you like, Artful. You seem to forget, *you're* all on probation too!

THUNDER: So fucking what??? We'd rather go back to jail than accept such an insulting award!!! Right, chaps???

(He then glanced to where his ashen-faced team-mates were all glancing away, hiding their faces as they retook their seats.)

THUNDER: Chaps?

SHADOW: Sorry, Thunder... prison changes a man.

THUNDER: Into a sissy in your case.

CHI: Thunder???

THUNDER: What?

CHI: Sit down and shut up!

THUNDER: Or what?

CHI: Or you can go back to jail.

(She glanced over her shoulder.)

CHI: Pass me the incarceration forms, would you, Kiki?

KIKI: Certainly.

THUNDER: Um... no need. You make a compelling argument.

(He then sat down and joined his three team-mates in sheepishly staring at the table.)

CHI: An excellent choice.

(She then pushed the award for third place into Vortex's hands and folded her arms.)

CHI: I don't need to tell you how wise you were to opt out of that undignified display of sour grapes, do I?

VORTEX: No.

CHI: Good. Now go and sit down.

VORTEX: Yes, ma'am.

(She then sprinted back to her table and retook her seat. She did so whilst glowering at her whimpering team-mates.)

VORTEX: Shame on you. I mean, seriously! When did *I* become the sensible one???

MIGHTY: The day you became shit-scared of going back to jail.

VORTEX: Yeah? Well...

(An enlightened expression then appeared on her face.)

VORTEX: Blimey. The system works.

CHI: Anyway, moving on. In second place...

(She tore open the second place envelope.)

CHI: Rico's Girls!!!

(The Elites all gasped in disgust then glowered at the stage, desperate to protest. Purely out of fear of going to jail, however, they didn't say a word. They just sat there looking mortified as Rico's Girls all headed for the stage, excitedly.)

TIKA: I have no idea how this happened, I'm just so glad it did.

SAKI: It happened because you killed that colossus.

ALYSSA: And you knew that. You just wanted someone to *say* it.

TIKA: Guilty!

(They all giggled.)

AMIE: This is a good, good day.

LISA: Right? We've got an award!

(They then strutted up to Chi and beamed with gleeful delight.)

TIKA: This is so exciting.

CHI: Right? Exactly!

(She glowered at The Elites.)

CHI: Watch and learn! *That's* how you react to winning an award.

(She then handed the award to Tika and watched on as she returned to her table with her teammates, gushing excitedly at their shiny new trinket.)

CHI: That was more like it.

(She nodded then picked up the envelope containing the name of the team of the year.)

CHI: Okay. It's time for the big reveal.

(With that, she glanced into the crowd then rolled her eyes. Rico, Max, Leila and Tommy weren't even looking at her. Instead they were leaning towards The Elites, grinning at them with a degree of smugness that was hitherto unseen. Rico was leaning so far towards them he was virtually at a ninety degree angle. The Elites were too embarrassed to look at them right now, but should they glance up, The Rejects wanted them to see how smug they were being. As the only other team to have killed a colossus, the fact they'd won was obvious to one and all. Well aware of this, Chi could only shake her head and glance to Kiki.)

CHI: Tell me it isn't them.

KIKI: I wish I *could*, Chi, but the black marble doesn't lie.

CHI: Well... no...

(She mused to herself.)

CHI: But *I* could.

KIKI: Chi. No.

CHI: Right. Yeah. Sorry.

(She then opened the envelope and shook her head in dismay.)

CHI: The team of the year is...

(She sighed.)

CHI: The Axnay Rejects.

(As everyone but The Elites and The Rejects themselves, erupted into a frenzied round of applause, Leila slowly stood up then grinned at the Elites.)

LEILA: First place. It's not quite as prestigious as third, but it'll do.

(She then joined her team-mates in strutting triumphantly up to the stage. In this moment, if looks could kill, The Elites would be wanted for five murders.)

THUNDER: Arrogant, bloody...

VORTEX: Don't! I can't go to jail. I won't! Especially in *this* sexy dress, they'd eat me alive. And when I say eat...

BRILLIANCE: We get it!

(They then scowled at the stage, just in time to see Chi hand over the trophy.)

CHI: Well done, guys. As nauseating as you are, nobody can deny that you've done an excellent job.

TOMMY: You say the kindness things.

(Chi scowled at him.)

CHI: I do, yes, but it's not an open invite to carry me home and put me in your bed again!

LEILA: Like he *needs* an invite.

TOMMY: Seriously?

CHI: Don't start!

MAX: They didn't; *you* did!

CHI: I said shut up!

LEILA: No, you didn't!

CHI: Well, I'm saying it now!

(She ruffled her neck.)

CHI: Which is ridiculous, because this is the one award where a *speech* is expected.

(She sighed.)

CHI: Just... make it brief.

LEILA: Right. Leave it to me.

TOMMY: Happy to.

SOFIA: Agreed.

RICO: Yeah.

MAX: Just don't be rude and embarrass us.

LEILA: Oh, like I would.

(She then looked to the assembly and beamed with delight.)

LEILA: Suck it, losers.

(She was then dragged to the back by Max.)

LEILA: Hey!

MAX: Don't feel bad. You hung on as long as you could.

LEILA: You...

MAX: Do the honours, Rico.

RICO: What? Why me?

TOMMY: Because I don't want to.

SOFIA: And I might get nervous and start squeaking like a mouse.

MAX: And I'm restraining Leila.

RICO: Oh, fine.

(He then shrugged at the audience.)

RICO: Thanks, everyone. And don't worry, Leila was only joking.

(Everyone gave him a condescending glance.)

RICO: Okay, maybe she wasn't, but what can you do? Female magic caster.

(Everyone chuckled.)

RICO: So... speech... um... well... it's been a weird year. We started off as no-hopers, but we've ended up being the best team in the guild.

(He then glanced at The Elites to see if his comment had riled them. Much to his delight, it had.)

RICO: Awesome.

(He cleared his throat.)

RICO: Anyway, thanks to everyone who encouraged us. It's appreciated. I'd also like to take this opportunity to thank Chi for all her hard work this year.

(Everyone cheered.)

RICO: And a big congratulations to all the other winners. To Rico's Girls; excellent job ladies.

TIKA: Right?

ALYSSA: We rule!

RICO: No. *We* rule; you came second.

(Everyone chuckled.)

RICO: And to The Axnay Elite... chin up...

(He smirked menacingly.)

RICO: There's no shame in coming third.

THUNDER: Die!

CHI: Who said that?

(The Elite just sunk further in their seats.)

RICO: And that's all I have to say, other than that we'll strive to retain this trophy and hopefully we'll be up here again this time next year. Thanks, guys.

(He then marched back to his table with the rest of his team, grinning at The Elites all the way.)

RICO: Excellent.

(Delighted that all the awards had finally been given out, Chi drew a sigh of relief then took centre stage again.)

CHI: Anyway, to spare myself a lot of annoyance when the inevitable demand for a recount comes in...

(She held up a sheet of paper.)

CHI: Blimey, it was really close. The Elites netted fifty million from two hours a day's worth of killing mid to high level creatures. Rico's Girls netted fifty one million courtesy of a colossus and five hours a day's worth of killing Empies. They're low-level enemies, but they killed a lot of them. Most Empty kills by far, actually.

(She nodded.)

CHI: Then it's *not* so close. The Rejects netted sixty three million, courtesy of a colossus, a king beast and an average of eight hours a day in the field.

(She glanced up.)

CHI: That's a lot of field time.

MAX: We thought we had a massive debt to pay off, so we worked every hour we could all throughout the winter.

CHI: Of course.

(She chuckled.)

CHI: I'll have to saddle you with debt more often if that's what it takes to motivate you.

(She then ruffled her neck and glanced away from the scowls she was receiving.)

CHI: Maybe not then.

SOFIA: Definitely not!

CHI: Right.

(She then shrugged merrily.)

CHI: Anyway, that's the ceremony done!

(She beamed.)

CHI: Now it's party time!!!

(At once, a loud cheer went up and the warriors started knocking back their drinks and laughing together. The only ones not celebrating were The Elite.)

THUNDER: That's torn it, chaps. Fuck being noble in our actions. Those Rejects are going down.

(He received three firm, agreeing nods and one sigh of despair.)

VORTEX: Oh, boy.

Half an hour later and the party was in full swing. Three warriors had passed out drunk already and Alyssa from Rico's Girls was fornicating in the corner with the guild's head-chef. Sobriety was in short supply. Kiki worried. If an alert was to sound now, they'd be in trouble. She was the only one who wasn't intoxicated. Even Chi was slurring her speech. A joyous time wasn't being had by all, however. The Elites were drowning their sorrows at their table; angrily complaining about being conspired against as they poured copious amounts of alcohol down their necks. The Rejects also remained firmly at their table. Leila was cuddling the trophy like a child in love with a teddy bear. She wouldn't be moving any time soon and the others were rather enjoying being close to the trophy. And so, rather than mingling, they sat there chatting excitedly as they knocked back their drinks.

RICO: That trophy is a thing of beauty.

MAX: And then some.

(He beamed.)

MAX: It probably wasn't cheap either. That thing weighs a ton.

RICO: The best metals do, mate.

TOMMY: Do they?

RICO: I have no fucking idea.

(He nodded excitedly.)

RICO: Nor do I care. I just know that that trophy is a fine piece of craftsmanship.

(Tommy scoffed.)

TOMMY: Craftsmanship? Fuck off. Like metalwork is hard.

MAX: What?

TOMMY: Any idiot can work with metal.

RICO: Oh, here we go.

TOMMY: What? It's true! *Real* craftsmen work with wood.

MAX: Mate you're talking bollocks.

TOMMY: Am I though?

(He furrowed his brow.)

TOMMY: If you make a fuck up when you're crafting with metal, you can just melt everything down then start again. And if you cut the wrong bit off, you can just weld it back on. You can't do that with wood. If you chop off too much wood, it's gone. You can weld *wood* back together!

RICO: No, but you can *glue* wood back together.

(Tommy was incensed.)

TOMMY: Glue? Fucking glue?

(He then started to remove his jacket.)

TOMMY: I aint having that! Outside, you!

RICO: What?

TOMMY: No self-respecting woodcrafter would *ever* glue a work of art back together! And I should flatten you for even suggesting it!!!

RICO: Right...

(He grimaced.)

RICO: You want to take me outside for a fight then, do you?

TOMMY: Yes!

MAX: Mate, he could flatten you with his eyes closed.

TOMMY: Not if I flatten him first.

MAX: Yeah, but you won't. He'll beat you into the middle of next week without even breaking a sweat.

TOMMY: Bullshit! I'll get a *few* blows in, at least!

MAX: No, you won't!

TOMMY: Shut up, Max. He needs to understand that woodcrafters do *not* use glue!

RICO: I *already* understand that, mate.

TOMMY: What? You do?

RICO: Yeah! You told me just now and I believe you.

TOMMY: Oh. I see.

(He ruffled his neck then slid his jacket back on and sat down.)

TOMMY: Fine. Just make sure you remember it, because there's plenty more where that came from.

RICO: Where what came from? Nothing happened!

TOMMY: Right... yeah... well... it's possible that I may have had too much to drink.

MAX: Yeah... we're not oblivious to that possibly, mate.

RICO: Right?

TOMMY: But still... look on the bright side. If *I'm* this drunk, Leila has must have passed out long ago.

SOFIA: Yup. She fell asleep ten minutes ago, still cuddling the trophy.

RICO: Oh, cool. I don't mind her when she's asleep.

SOFIA: It's *not* cool, Rico.

RICO: What? You usually love it when she's asleep. It's the only time she doesn't pick on you.

SOFIA: I'm not referring to that. Of course, it's nice when she dozes off. I'd never disagree with *that* point. It's just that... I haven't had a chance to hold the trophy yet.

(She furrowed her brow.)

SOFIA: I reached for it, but she slapped my hand away.

RICO: Well, try it now; while she's asleep.

SOFIA: She was asleep when she did it. It's like she got some kind of nocturnal protection spell on the go.

RICO: Yeah... that's... unlikely, to be honest.

SOFIA: And yet it's the only explanation I can come up with.

(Just then, Chi plopped herself down on the bench, next to Max.)

CHI: Rejects!

SOFIA: Hi, Chi.

MAX: Alright.

TOMMY: Chi.

RICO: Hi.

(Chi looked to them through bloodshot eyes then scoffed drunkenly.)

CHI: Team of the year? How the bloody hell did that happen? I mean, seriously. You're having a laugh, aren't you?

MAX: Excuse me?

RICO: *We're* not having a laugh, no. You *gave* us the award.

TOMMY: So if *anyone's* having a laugh it's you.

(Chi sneered at him.)

CHI: Haven't you got some random, unsuspecting women to put to bed?

TOMMY: Seriously? You can't keep throwing that at me, Chi. I get enough of that shit from Leila.

(Leila suddenly yelled in her sleep.)

LEILA: Leila!

(She then fell silent again.)

SOFIA: Well, that was different.

TOMMY: Never mind that. Chi, I made one mistake; and you said you'd forgiven me. Therefore, you *can't* keep throwing it back at me.

(Chi scoffed.)

CHI: Actually, Thomas, I can do what I like! I'm a slag!

MAX: Shag!

CHI: Easy, tiger; I'm out of your league.

MAX: You're forty.

CHI: And yet...

(She then wagged her finger at them.)

CHI: Stop changing the subject.

(She rolled her eyes.)

CHI: Honestly. Team of the year? You lot. What a joke.

MAX: Chi...

CHI: Your magic caster spends half her life trying to thump your healer! And she spends the other half shooting you all by mistake! And your Power Blade spent six months setting fire to himself. A power blade who turned up a year ago, wearing a cloth sack and had no idea what a bloody class was! How the hell did *you* end up being the team of the year? How shit are the rest of them?

RICO: Chi, that's...

CHI: That's what? Too factual for your sensitive ears? Well, suck it up, buttercup. That was just the tip of the iceberg. Your magic caster is so bloody erratic, she shot *me*, for fuck sake! And I was standing behind her! That was the same day your healer told me I was fucking useless and suggested that I was a cheap dating option for desperate young men with no money! Low-budget milf indeed!

(She shook her head.)

CHI: You've been every bit the disaster your name suggests. Leila had to clean the kitchens for a month as a punishment for being a hapless clown, and we had to send your healer to anger management. And she couldn't even do that right! Every time the therapy got too intense for her, she'd abuse the therapist so viciously, she made him cry. He was so traumatised by the end of it, he ended up quitting the profession!

SOFIA: I'm not proud of that. And I have been much better lately.

CHI: That won't give him his career back.

(She shook her head.)

CHI: Honestly, I've never known such a hopeless collective. I mean look at your technician.

TOMMY: Yeah... I feared I might be next.

CHI: When he's not collecting random women to tuck up in bed, he's trying to defeat giant beasts with a carving of a wooden dog! I mean, we all know that technicians are supposed to get creative and think outside the box, but come on! Don't think *that* far

outside the box! That was about as sane as trying to hammer in a nail with a pickled onion. And yet you became the team of the year!!!

(She grimaced.)

CHI: The only normal one is Rico. And he's such a screw-up, he has a team of randy slags named after him; none of whom are his dopey girlfriend.

RICO: Easy!

CHI: Fine. His easy girlfriend then.

RICO: That's not what I meant!

SOFIA: And hey!

MAX: Chi, why would you come over here just to slag us off?

(Chi looked at him blankly.)

CHI: What? I didn't! I came over here to congratulate you on winning the team of the year award. Well done, team. You may be a nauseating pain in my arse that I have to reprimand every five minutes, but you've done a great job.

(She then upped and staggered away, hiccupping and staggering sideways.)

CHI: Morons.

(Max watched her go then blinked nonchalantly.)

MAX: Well... that was nice.

SOFIA: Right? That was quite the moving tribute.

TOMMY: It really was. I had to battle away tears.

(He watched Sofia giggle then bit his lip.)

TOMMY: I still can't get used to you being all chatty and outgoing, Sofia.

MAX: Doesn't seem right, does it? It's like we traded in the old, broken Sofia for one that works.

SOFIA: That's called the Rico effect.

RICO: I'm a woman pleaser.

SOFIA: Just one woman though. Me.

MAX: At least that's what he tells you.

RICO: Mate...

MAX: I'm kidding, Rico; relax, mate.

SOFIA: It's fine. I know he only has eyes for me. And that's why I'm happy.

TOMMY: I thought you were happy because you were going to get engaged.

SOFIA: We are!

TOMMY: When?

RICO: When I propose.

TOMMY: And when is that? You chose a ring together six months ago.

MAX: Yeah. Why are you dragging your feet?

(Sofia grimaced.)

SOFIA: That's a good question, actually.

(She gasped.)

SOFIA: You haven't changed your mind, have you?

RICO: No!

MAX: Then what's the delay?

RICO: Well... I had a plan, didn't I? Involving going out on a boat. Then we ended up in debt and I couldn't afford the trip anymore.

TOMMY: Yeah, but you can now.

RICO: Yeah, but the bloke who owned the boat, sold it and retired. The new owner won't let me hire it.
(He ruffled his neck.)
RICO: So I need to come up with a plan B... and... I'm kind of stuck for ideas.
TOMMY: Just ask her now.
RICO: Fuck off, you. I want to do something awesome. Elaborate. And I want it to be a surprise.
(He nodded.)
RICO: I'll think of something though. And you're gonna love it, Sofia.
SOFIA: Yay! Consider me satisfied with that answer.
MAX: Right, well... if you need any help coming up with romantic ideas...
TOMMY: Just ask your other girlfriend.
RICO: Tommy!
(Tommy chuckled.)
TOMMY: I'm kidding, mate.
RICO: Well, don't.
(He shook his head.)
RICO: Cunt.

Just across the room at this time, The Elite remained in a huddle at their table. Not about to stop griping about coming third any time soon, they were getting more and more bitter by the second. Duke Thunder was especially angry. Glowering over his shoulder at where Leila was cuddling the trophy with a gleeful expression on her face, he snarled hatefully then thumped the table.

THUNDER: Nope. I'm done. No more Mister Nice Noble!

SHADOW: What?

THUNDER: It's over. After trying to destroy those Rejects that time, we showed them nothing but kindness. And what did they do? Throw it in our faces! So what was our next move? To accept their right to feel aggrieved and continue to be nice. Well, look what it's lead us to. Humiliation! I mean, look at the smug expression on Leila's face.

BRILLIANCE: I've seen it!

(She sneered.)

BRILLIANCE: It makes me want to bite her face!

MIGHTY: And punch all her friends.

SHADOW: Don't tempt me. Our kindness was wasted on those peasants. We gave them smiles; *they* gave *us* resentment.

THUNDER: Exactly. And it makes me think our initial approach was the correct one after all. Rather than accepting them, we need to do everything in our power to destroy them!

MIGHTY: Hear, hear. We should never have deviated from that path in the first place.

BRILLIANCE: Seconded.

SHADOW: Motion carried. It's time we made those damned Rejects suffer!!!

(Watching them snarl, Vortex bit her lip.)

VORTEX: Um... actually, chaps... do you mind if I sit this one out?

THUNDER: What? Yes, we *do* mind!

VORTEX: But...

THUNDER: Velvet, you're either with us or you're against us. Which one is it?

(Vortex tapped her fingertips together nervously.)

VORTEX: Well... you know... nobody wants to see The Rejects suffer more than *I* do...

SHADOW: Then work with us.

VORTEX: I'd love to, but...

(She sighed heavily.)

VORTEX: I can't.

THUNDER: Velvet...

VORTEX: No!

(She shook her head.)

VORTEX: Chi is watching me like a hawk. And if I make one false move, I'll be back in the cells before I even know it.

SHADOW: Then we'll have to make sure that we don't *make* any false moves.

MIGHTY: Indeed. We'll stitch them up and destroy their lives fairly.

THUNDER: And if Chi doesn't like it, so what? Prison isn't *that* bad.

VORTEX: Isn't that bad???

THUNDER: Not by *my* recollection, no.

VORTEX: Then your experience was very different to mine.

(She furrowed her brow.)

VORTEX: Barbara and Lucy will murder me if I ever go back inside. They planned to murder me last time, but Chi secured me an early release, so they didn't get the chance.

Next time, they won't hesitate. They'll kill me on the first night.

BRILLIANCE: Not if you shoot them with magic!

THUNDER: Prisoners have their magic restrained.

BRILLIANCE: Oh.

VORTEX: So, yeah... sorry, guys. You're giving me a choice between being rich, powerful and gorgeous and being dead. I chose the former.

SHADOW: I see. Then you're letting the side down horribly.

MIGHTY: Like a traitorous... well... traitor.

THUNDER: Indeed. Like we said, you're either with us or against us, so if you're saying you're not *with* us, you must therefore be the enemy.

BRILLIANCE: We shall now turn our backs on you.

(With that, all four of Vortex's team-mates turned away from her.)

VORTEX: Right... that's a bit childish, don't you think?

SHADOW: The treacherous turncoat says what now?

VORTEX: Guys...

BRILLIANCE: We should trade her in and get that Martin fellow back.

SHADOW: I agree.

THUNDER: He'd rather die than rejoin us, but I agree.

VORTEX: Don't be like that. I just don't want to upset Chi and get sent to my death in prison. Am I really being that unreasonable?

MIGHTY: Yes!

THUNDER: We already told you it'll be different this time. We'll ruin their lives and obliterate them fairly.

VORTEX: Yeah? How?

(Her four team-mates went very silent.)

VORTEX: Well? Come on. How?

BRILLIANCE: Um... well... we'll destroy them by... being better than them.

SHADOW: Yeah.

VORTEX: Just by doing our jobs then?

MIGHTY: Well... yes.

VORTEX: Oh.

(She shrugged.)

VORTEX: Then count me in. Chi won't throw me in jail for that.

THUNDER: Though we might *try* some skulduggery if we think we can get away with it.

VORTEX: Then count me out again.

BRILLIANCE: Velvet...

VORTEX: What? You *can't* get away with it. The black marble knows everything! Chi will look into anything untoward and it'll be game over.

THUNDER: Right... well... fine... we'll just annihilate them by being better than them then.

VORTEX: Okay. In that case, you can count me in.

BRILLIANCE: Hmm...

VORTEX: Hmm?

BRILLIANCE: I'm not sure we want you anymore.

THUNDER: Indeed. If your compliance isn't a given then...

VORTEX: Don't be a moron. I'll be the same person I always am.

BRILLIANCE: Arrogant and rude?

VORTEX: Forthright and loveable.

MIGHTY: Right...

THUNDER: Okay... fine. You're in. But as a punishment for hesitating, you have to buy the cake for afternoon tea tomorrow.

VORTEX: It was my turn anyway.

THUNDER: Good.

VORTEX: Good.

THUNDER: Then we're agreed.

VORTEX: We are, yes.

(She beamed.)

VORTEX: The Rejects are going down!

A short while later, Max stepped up to the bar at the back of the guild then nodded to the barmaid to get her attention. Wearing a wide smile, she hurried over to him and gestured for him to speak.

MAX: Two pitchers of ale, please, love.

BARMAID: Coming up.

(She then headed away to prepare his order. Watching her backside as she went, Max couldn't help but smirk.)

MAX: I do like a nice arse.

(Just then, another warrior, Greg from The Axnay Kingfishers, stepped to his side and smiled nervously.)

GREG: So it's true then?

MAX: What is?

GREG: You're fond of a nice arse.

MAX: Absolutely.

GREG: Good to know.

(He fiddled with his neck nervously.)

GREG: You know... people say *I* have a nice arse.

(He then turned around so Max could see his posterior, before glancing over his shoulder and fluttering his eyelashes at him.)

GREG: What do you think?

(Max looked at him as if he was insane.)

MAX: How many beers have you had?

GREG: Just enough.

(He then turned and smiled into Max's eyes.)

GREG: You?

MAX: Would I be ordering more if I had?

GREG: Good point. Well...

(He winked.)

GREG: Come and find me when you have.

(He then headed away. Max watched him go and raised a baffled eyebrow.)

MAX: Did he just wink at me?

(A voice then rose up from the other side of him.)

KEVIN: He did indeed.

EDDIE: You might be in there, mate.

MAX: What? In where?

HELEN: Personally, I think it's adorable.

MAX: What is?

HELEN: Well, it's not like it used to be, is it?

MAX: What isn't?

HELEN: People like you are free to be yourselves nowadays.

MAX: People like who? What are you on about?

JADE: She's saying people are more liberated and tolerant.

MAX: Of what?

JADE: Gays.

(Max looked through her blankly.)

MAX: And what's that got to do with anything?

(Just then, a horrified expression crossed his brow.)

MAX: Wait! What??? You think I'm a shirt-lifter???

KEVIN: Yeah. And we're okay with it.

EDDIE: All to their own, Max. You have our full blessing to pursue whatever's in your heart, mate.

(Max gaped for a moment then furrowed his brow.)

MAX: And who said *that* was in my heart???

JADE: Chill, Max. We all know.

HELEN: And it's fine.

JADE: Better than fine, actually. We're happy for you. And for what it's worth, I personally think that you and Greg would make a lovely couple.

MAX: No, we fucking wouldn't! I like women.

EDDIE: Sure you do, buddy.
(He winked at him knowingly.)

MAX: I do!!!

KEVIN: Mate, come off it. We *know*!

MAX: I'm gonna wallop you in a minute! Who said I was a poof?

HELEN: Everyone's saying it.

MAX: And who told them that?
(He grimaced.)

MAX: Wasn't Rico's Girls, was it?

HELEN: Don't be daft. They just said you being gay explained a lot.

MAX: Like what???

KEVIN: We didn't dare ask.

MAX: I'm gonna throttle them!
(He then glowered towards their table. It was empty.)

MAX: Where did they go?

HELEN: Alyssa's over there, bouncing on Lorenzo's lap.

JADE: Really? I thought she was doinking the chef?

HELEN: No, it's Lisa's turn to do *him*.

JADE: Oh.
(She shrugged.)

JADE: I'm sure they're around; putting themselves about, like they do.

MAX: Right, well, I'm gonna find them and murder them.

KEVIN: What for?

MAX: Telling everyone I'm a bandit!

KEVIN: *They* didn't tell everyone. They just said it didn't surprise them.
(Max stared at him emptily for a moment then headed away without waiting for his beer.)

MAX: Oh, good god.
(Moments later, he approached his table then growled.)

MAX: We're leaving!

RICO: Says who?

MAX: Me! Warriors are not good people! Rumour-mongering bastards.

RICO: What are you on about?

MAX: Let's just leave, for fuck sake.

RICO: I don't want to leave. I want to stay here and drink that beer you forgot to bring over.

MAX: We can drink beer at home!

RICO: I don't want to...

SOFIA: Actually, *I* wouldn't mind leaving now.

RICO: Really?

SOFIA: Yeah. I need to rest up for a bit so I can make you very happy come bedtime.

RICO: Then we shall leave right away.

TOMMY: Fine, just... someone carry Leila.

MAX: Can't you do it?

TOMMY: No. She'll magically wake up and slap me!

SOFIA: You do it, Max. If we leave it to Tommy, he'll only end up taking Tika home by mistake.

TOMMY: Sofia...

SOFIA: Sorry. Everyone else likes making that joke and I felt left out.

TOMMY: Oh, you'll be left out in a minute.

SOFIA: Right...

(She grimaced.)

SOFIA: What does that even *mean*?

RICO: It means he couldn't think of a good comeback.

MAX: Yes, well, never mind that. Let's go.

(With that, he scooped Leila up, trophy and all, and made a beeline for the door. His team-mates followed suit. Before they could quite *reach* the door, however, Thunder, Shadow, Mighty and Brilliance stepped in his path.)

MAX: Move, wankers.

THUNDER: Not until we've delivered our message!

RICO: Bollocks. Just move.

MAX: Or I'll steamroll you!

MIGHTY: I'd like to see you try!

MAX: Then you shall!

SOFIA: Um... be nice, guys. They just want to see what a winner's trophy looks like.

(Rico looked to her in delight.)

RICO: Awesome, babe. That was a world class diss.

SOFIA: What? No, it wasn't.

MAX: No? Then why are they all growling at you?

(Sure enough, the four elites were all snarling at her coldly.)

SOFIA: Eek! Creepy.

(She shied away.)

SOFIA: I didn't even mean it in a cruel way. I just thought they wanted to see the trophy.

RICO: Really? So it wasn't a dig at *them*?

SOFIA: No.

RICO: I see.

(He sighed inwardly.)

RICO: Disappointing.

MAX: Yes, well, never mind that shit. Elites, fuck off out of the way.

THUNDER: No. No until we tell you how it's going to be.

TOMMY: How what's going to be?

THUNDER: The future.

RICO: You're a medium now, are you?

THUNDER: Witty.

RICO: Well... not really.

THUNDER: Quite. You're about as funny as herpes.

RICO: You'd know.

THUNDER: Hey!

(He snarled bitterly.)

THUNDER: You Rejects have got too big for your boots lately. Success has gone to your heads! Well, we're here to tell you, it's not going to last. We're going to bring you down a peg or two.

(Leila's arm then slapped across his cheek, causing him to fold backwards.)

THUNDER: Ow!!!

(He then sprung forwards and glowered at Leila. She was fast asleep in Max's arms still.)

THUNDER: She struck me!

MAX: Yeah, she does that sometimes. Sleep violence. It's a defence mechanism. A natural reaction to when a complete cunt comes too close to her while she's sleeping.

RICO: So you might want to back off.

THUNDER: I'll do no such...

(He then received another tremendous slap across the face.)

THUNDER: Ow!!!

(He rubbed his cheek then stepped back.)

THUNDER: Now listen here, Rejects.

MAX: Speak up. We can't hear you.

RICO: You're too far away.

THUNDER: Oh, fine.

(He then stepped closer again, only to receive a third slap from Leila.)

THUNDER: Ow!!!

MIGHTY: Fuck sake, Thunder. Leave it to me!

(He nodded sternly.)

MIGHTY: You foolish peasants think you're so special, don't you?

SOFIA: A little bit, yes.

MIGHTY: Well, you're not.

SHADOW: *We* are!

MIGHTY: Indeed. And that trophy *should* have been ours!!!

MAX: Says who?

THUNDER: Us!

MAX: Right...

(He scratched his head sheepishly.)

MAX: That was bloody obvious, come to think of it.

(He flinched.)

MAX: But who says your reckoning is correct?

THUNDER: Obviously, *we* do!

MAX: Fuck.

(He winced.)

MAX: I did it again.

RICO: Yeah... maybe I should handle this, mate; you're having a stinker.

MAX: Fair comment.

RICO: Now what do you want, Elites?

BRILLIANCE: To tell you this! Your trophy win this evening was a fluke!

RICO: Says who?

MAX: Seriously? *I* could have done that!

RICO: I meant bollocks. Bollocks is it!

BRILLIANCE: Factor out your lucky colossus fight and you only *made* thirty-three million coronas. We made fifty. And Rico's girls only made twenty if you take *their* lucky colossus out of the equation! Neither of you are *better* than us, you just had a lucky moment each.

SOFIA: That's true, actually.

BRILLIANCE: Don't deny it.

(She flinched.)

BRILLIANCE: Wait, what?

SOFIA: I thought the same thing. You killed thousands of high level creatures. And yet, we won the prize because of just one beast.

(She shrugged.)

SOFIA: It doesn't seem right that you had such an amazing year, but ended up losing because we had one good *day*.

(She offered her a rueful smile.)

SOFIA: Unfortunately for you though, we don't pick the criteria. The *guild* decided to go with financial grand totals to decide the winner.

(She nodded.)

SOFIA: Personally I think you were a bit hard done by there.

(Brilliance stared at her agog for a moment then shook her head.)

BRILLIANCE: Wow. You are such a bitch!

SOFIA: What?

BRILLIANCE: Just when I was starting to like you!

THUNDER: You were?

SHADOW: When?

BRILLIANCE: Does it matter? I'm over it now anyway. *That* was cold! Acting all sympathetic like that. That's just horrible. Cruel! And quite frankly, insulting!

MIGHTY: You tell her!

BRILLIANCE: I just did.

MIGHTY: And I loved it!

THUNDER: Now let *me* tell them something!

(Leila's hand then lashed across his face again.)

THUNDER: Ow!

SHADOW: Step back and leave it to me, Thunder.

(Duke Thunder stepped back then scowled at Leila as she lay sleeping.)

THUNDER: Why does she only slap me?

SHADOW: That's not important, Thunder. What's important is this. Rejects?

TOMMY: What?

SHADOW: You will never win that trophy ever again.

TOMMY: We might!

MIGHTY: You won't!

MAX: Actually, we might.

SHADOW: Actually, you won't. Because it's on!

RICO: What is?

SHADOW: Um...

MIGHTY: He means to say that, this year, we're going to strive to do everything we can to win that trophy.

RICO: You did that *this* year too.
MAX: And failed!
MIGHTY: Shut up, you!
(He ruffled his neck.)
MIGHTY: We won't be failing again; you mark my words. We're going to devote everything we have to making sure you never see another trophy as long as you live!
(He nodded.)
MIGHTY: Be warned. We're gunning for you, Rejects.
SOFIA: I see. We should warn Chi.
(Finally, having remained silent throughout, Vortex stepped forward.)
VORTEX: They mean fairly!
RICO: Are you sure?
VORTEX: Yes! I'm not going back to prison for anybody! I'll make damned sure it's fair!
MAX: I see.
(He smirked.)
MAX: Then what you're saying is, this year, you're going to go all out to be the best team at the guild and win the team of the year award, fairly and squarely!
SHADOW: Yes!
(All five Elites nodded defiantly.)
MAX: Then why stop us to make an announcement? That's what you're *supposed* to bloody do!
(With that, the Rejects headed through them, en route to the door. Much to Thunder's annoyance, Leila slapped him as they passed.)
THUNDER: Ow!!! Why?
(He watched them leave then snarled at his team mates.)
THUNDER: Those five fuckers are going down.
SHADOW: Yes... yes, they are.
VORTEX: But fairly, right?
(Thunder and Shadow just glanced away coldly. It was clear for all to see that the concept of being fair most definitely wasn't something they were going to stick to rigidly.)
VORTEX: Hmm...

As they headed through the streets of Axnay on their way home, Sofia and Rico couldn't help but reflect on what a fun evening they'd had. It had been a night of glory and they were extremely proud of that fact. Despite their success over the year being a team effort, however, Max, Tommy and Leila took no part in their upbeat conversation. Max was positively steaming with rage about the rumour being spread about him. Tommy was gravely concerned about what The Elite's might do to make their lives difficult. And Leila was having a fit of the giggles in Max's arms.

RICO: It's the best kind of award you can get, Sofia.

SOFIA: Oh, I agree. First place.

RICO: Well, yeah, but I'm talking in terms of *how* the award was decided. It wasn't voted for by a panel; they can be rigged. Panel awards are meaningless. And it wasn't

voted for by our peers either. Peers can vote out of pity, or out of bias against your opponent. So that's meaningless an' all. We won the team of the year because the stats proved that we *were* the best team. That means something.

SOFIA: Yup. It means we were awesome.

(She grimaced.)

SOFIA: But... as happy as I am that we won, I can't help thinking that the guild's method for choosing the winner was somewhat flawed.

RICO: What?

SOFIA: Just saying. I agree with the countess. It *should* have been awarded for the number of kills, combined with the *difficulty* of those kills. Not on who made the most money.

(She shrugged.)

SOFIA: Because, you could be rubbish all year then *accidentally* kill a colossus and somehow become the new champion.

RICO: Well...

SOFIA: Rico's Girls are a perfect example of that. They came second, but they're *not* the second best team at the guild. No way.

(She wagged her finger.)

SOFIA: And I'm not just saying that because their name makes them sound like they're sleeping with *my* fiancé behind my back. As much as that fact irks me.

RICO: Yeah... well... I see what you're saying, babe, but you're overlooking something there.

SOFIA: I am?

RICO: Yeah. The Elites might *well* be the best team. In fact, there's no doubting that one. Their skills are second to none and they do a fantastic job in wiping out some pretty nasty enemies. They're peerless when it comes to that. But... the team of the year award isn't *about* who's got the most talented members. It's about how much the guild *values* your kills.

(He shrugged.)

RICO: And it valued ours more. Yes, The Elite killed a lot of high level creatures at five grand per kill. But we killed a colossus. That's worth thirty million. And they don't pay that much because they're feeling generous; they pay it because they *really* want to see colossuses dead. And *that's* why we won. Over the course of the year, our killing spree was more valuable to the guild than anyone else's. Our total bounty was purely a *reflection* of that fact.

(Sofia nodded to absorb his words then beamed with delight.)

SOFIA: You're right. It's not about how great you are as a team. It's about the results you get; even if you are a shambles of a team like us.

RICO: Well... I wouldn't have said we were a shambles.

MAX: Yeah! We're not a shambles. That guild is a shambles, and everyone who goes there is a cunt!

SOFIA: Um... we go there.

MAX: Then you're both cunts!

SOFIA: I meant all five of us.

MAX: Right...

(He nodded.)

MAX: Fine. Everyone except us is a cunt.

(He growled.)

MAX: Unless I find out that one of you spread that rumour, in which case, you can be on the cunt list too. If you survive.

RICO: Wait. What rumour?

MAX: Never you mind!

(He ruffled his neck.)

MAX: But if you do happen to hear any rumours about me, please know that it's bollocks.

(He snarled bitterly.)

MAX: I'm a man, I am. All man. A real man. Cunts.

(He growled.)

MAX: I swear, that fucking guild...

(He then furrowed his brow with annoyance.)

MAX: Will you stop fucking giggling, Leila?

LEILA: I'm not sure I can.

RICO: You're awake?

LEILA: Well, duh!

RICO: I thought you were giggling in your sleep.

LEILA: Then you were wrong.

(She giggled some more.)

LEILA: That was fun.

MAX: What was?

(He flinched.)

MAX: *You* didn't start the rumour, did you?

LEILA: What rumour?

MAX: The...

(He grimaced.)

MAX: Wait. If you're awake, why am I carrying you?

(He then placed her down on her feet. Almost instantly, she staggered sideways then fell into someone's garden.)

LEILA: Max!!!

(She swiftly climbed to her feet and staggered out again.)

LEILA: Why would you do that? You know I'm bad on my feet after you've all forced me to get drunk!

MAX: Forced you?

LEILA: You heard me.

(She ruffled her neck.)

LEILA: Idiot!

MAX: Right...

(He shrugged.)

MAX: At least you've stopped that infernal giggling now.

RICO: Why *were* you giggling anyway?

(Leila promptly resumed giggling.)

LEILA: Oh, yeah. That was priceless.

SOFIA: What was?

LEILA: Five times.

MAX: What?

LEILA: Five times I got away with slapping that Thunder idiot.

(She chuckled.)

LEILA: That was an awesome excuse you made, by the way, Max. Sleep violence. A natural defence mechanism. Brilliant.

RICO: So you were faking being asleep and slapping him on purpose?

LEILA: Yup. And it's was great fun.

(Sofia gave her a sideways glance.)

SOFIA: Um... Leila?

LEILA: Yes.

SOFIA: Pretending to be asleep and lashing out when someone comes near...

LEILA: What about it?

SOFIA: Is that what you've been doing to me?

LEILA: Um...

SOFIA: Every time I go near you after you've dozed off on the sofa, you wallop me.

Like you kept walloping me earlier when I tried to touch the trophy.

(Leila just smiled at her.)

LEILA: Let's not discuss that right now.

SOFIA: Wow.

LEILA: Let's discuss...

TOMMY: The Elite!

LEILA: Hey! Who invited you to speak?

TOMMY: I don't *need* an invite!

LEILA: Yes, you do. And you're invite is denied.

MAX: Behave, Leila.

LEILA: You...

MAX: What about The Elite, Tommy?

LEILA: Hey, I was talking!

TOMMY: They're going to come for us again; you realise that, right?

RICO: Nah. They wouldn't dare.

MAX: Yeah, they're just gonna try to outscore us. You heard them.

SOFIA: He's right. They made their plan pretty clear.

(Max chuckled.)

MAX: They're literally going to punish us by doing their jobs right. Why they had to tell us that in a threatening manner, I just don't know.

TOMMY: Because it *was* a threat!

RICO: Hardly.

TOMMY: Rico, we're talking about nobles here. People with means. And I know Chi can read them and sanction them if they try anything that scuppers us, but they do have other avenues of attack that she might not hear about.

MAX: Bullshit. If that was true, they'd have used them already.

RICO: He's right. They've had it in for us for almost a year now, remember?

TOMMY: Of course I fucking remember.

(He sucked his teeth.)

TOMMY: But they were humiliated just now. By us. So from hereon, they're going to start getting serious.

SOFIA: They were humiliated by us before though. Thunder's dad came to the guild and spanked his backside in front of everyone.

RICO: And just before that, they promised us they'd stop at nothing to destroy us.

MAX: But nothing came of it, because there's nothing they can do.

RICO: Thanks to Chi.

LEILA: So all in all, Tommy, you're just being a massive sissy.

(She nodded.)

LEILA: With a tiny cock.

TOMMY: Less of that, you! It was big enough to make *you* squeal!

SOFIA: Uncomfortable now.

LEILA: I wouldn't worry about, Sofia. He was lying, anyway. I barely even squeaked.

TOMMY: Oh, shut up.

(He shook his head.)

TOMMY: You might not believe me, but I could feel the tension in the air earlier.

(He sucked his teeth.)

TOMMY: Those upper class butt-wipes are going to up their game, and if we're not careful, they're going to find a way to take us out without Chi even knowing.

(He sighed anxiously.)

TOMMY: Things are about to get ugly. I can feel it.

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