

The Axnay Rejects

EPISODE EIGHTEEN – A BLANK CANVAS.

As the head of the warrior's guild, Chi's working life rarely varied from day to day. She'd sit at her desk handling the guild's paperwork then a shadow would loom over her. This darkening of the light could only mean one thing. A warrior had arrived to report his or her kills and collect the bounty for it. On this day, that shadow was cast by Max, Rico and Sofia from the Axnay Rejects. Sofia's shadow, however, was only partial. She was half hiding behind Rico, trembling nervously. It was the first thing Chi noticed when she glanced up at them. It immediately aroused her suspicions that there may have been an incident. Those suspicions were then confirmed when she noticed the overly innocent grins on Max and Rico's faces. With a sigh, she could only sit back and glance up at them despondently.

CHI: Well? Out with it. What has my alleged team of the year done now?

(Max shrugged a little too innocently.)

MAX: Just our jobs.

RICO: Successfully, I might add.

(Sofia whimpered.)

SOFIA: In the end.

RICO: And that's all that matters!

MAX: Yup. We're in this business to get results, not to look good doing it.

RICO: So, yeah... there's nothing to see here, Chi.

MAX: That's right. Now if you'd just allow us to turn in our results, we'll be on our way.

(Rico and Max then shared a defiant nod. Chi furrowed her brow.)

CHI: You know the black marble will *tell* me what happened, right?

MAX: Nothing hap...

CHI: But you also know, I'd rather hear an honest account from the horse's mouth than find out via the marble. Call me old fashioned, but I'm a big fan of honesty.

RICO: Right... well... nobody's lying to you, Chi. We *did* get the job done.

MAX: Successfully, like he said.

RICO: But... if you want to be *hypercritical*, there may have been a minor occurrence than made our final fight a little more difficult than it might have been; that's all.

CHI: Care to share?

MAX: No.

CHI: And why's that?

MAX: You'll shout at us.

CHI: I'll shout at you even louder if I have to find out via the black marble.

MAX: You make a good point.

(He sighed despondently.)

MAX: Fuck it. I'll come clean.

CHI: Yeah, you do that.

(She flinched.)

CHI: Wait!

(She raised a suspicious eyebrow.)

CHI: Where are Leila and Tommy? I swear, if you tell me they're in hospital...

RICO: No, they're fine. Look.

(He gestured to a table further down the guild. Chi peered around him then furrowed her brow.)

CHI: I see. And they're fine are they?

MAX: Why, they're as right as rain, Chi.

CHI: Then why is Leila glowering at Sofia like a rabid wolfhound?

SOFIA: I didn't mean it.

CHI: I see. That explains that then. But why is Tommy staring straight ahead, looking like he's just seen a ghost? *While* being fondled by a poltergeist!

RICO: I dunno. He always was a bit weird.

CHI: Rico...

(She sighed.)

CHI: Look, I know Leila has anger issues, so forget her. That terrified trance Tommy's in, however, that's not normal. Now what happened?

RICO: Well... not a lot. Not really. I mean...

MAX: No. Just don't mate. Like I said earlier, we need to come clean.

RICO: Right... fair enough.

(He smiled.)

RICO: The floor's yours, mate.

MAX: You cunt!

CHI: Max!

MAX: Um...

CHI: What the hell happened?

(Max looked at her uneasily for a moment then sighed.)

MAX: Yeah, okay. You win.

(He winced.)

MAX: You know my sword?

CHI: The one I told you to polish back when you registered?

MAX: Yeah.

CHI: That tatty old sword that you subsequently *neglected* to polish, despite my strict instructions to do so?

MAX: Um...

CHI: The one I *warned* you about six months ago, saying it might break if you neglect it?

MAX: Yeah, that one.

CHI: I know it.

MAX: Right. Well...

(He scratched his neck.)

MAX: It broke.

CHI: Twat!

MAX: Yeah...

(He sucked his teeth.)

MAX: It's was poor timing, really. It broke right at the start of the battle.

CHI: Fuck sake, Max.

MAX: Yeah... um... anyway... that happened and... bad things ensued.

RICO: Which I think we can all agreed is an occupational hazard that could happen to anyone.

(He smiled.)

RICO: So there's no need to make an issue of it, and we should all forget it and move on, I reckon.

(Chi sighed.)

CHI: And normally, I'd agree with you. I mean, it *can* happen. To anyone. But why am I surprised it happened to *you lot*? The calamity kings of the old Axnay town.

MAX: That's a bit harsh.

CHI: Is it? I told you only yesterday. No more calamities. And what did you say? You said, yes, Chi. And here we are, not twenty four hours later...

RICO: See? This is why we were nervous about approaching you. Yes, we said no more calamities. But you can hardly *call* a sword snapping a calamity. But in light of the timing, we knew you'd make an issue of it.

MAX: Which we feel is unfair.

CHI: Oh, do you?

(She sat forwards and folded her arms.)

CHI: Let's hear about it then. Let's hear how you dealt with the issue, shall we? Then we'll see if was a calamity or not.

MAX: Right. That's fair.

(He nodded.)

MAX: See... my sword snapped...

CHI: I know.

MAX: And I was getting hit.

CHI: So Tommy quickly raced back to the carriage to get your back up sword, right?

MAX: Um... I don't own a...

CHI: You know, the backup sword that no self-respecting warrior would ever travel without.

MAX: Right...

(He winced.)

MAX: Well... seeing as I don't *have* a backup sword, Rico quickly threw me his.

CHI: Right... he threw you his Speed Blade sword. A light sword, designed to cutting flesh at speed.

MAX: Yeah.

CHI: And how long did it take to snap *that* one?

(Rico gasped.)

RICO: How did you know *that*???

CHI: Like I said, your sword is designed to cut flesh at speed. A Power Blade slugs at bones and shells! It was bound to snap if a Power Blade used it!

RICO: Oh. I didn't know that.

(Chi rolled her eyes.)

CHI: So *you* had to get *your* backup sword?

RICO: Um...

CHI: Seriously?

RICO: I didn't know I'd need a spare!

(Chi sat back and sighed.)

CHI: No wonder you didn't want to tell me. You two are bloody useless.
(She prodded the table with her forefinger.)
CHI: It's the foremost basic of a swordsman's itinerary. A backup blade!
MAX: And how we were supposed to know that?
CHI: Because you're professional bloody swordsmen!!!
MAX: Oh.
(He winced.)
MAX: You make a compelling argument.
CHI: I know.
(She shook her head.)
CHI: Okay, so there you were without a blade between you. What did you do next?
RICO: Panicked.
MAX: Bad answer, mate.
RICO: I was being honest.
(He sighed.)
RICO: While we were panicking about losing our blades, the enemies suddenly stopped focussing on us and charged at the back row instead.
CHI: That explains Tommy's horrified trance.
RICO: Yeah...
(He scratched his head.)
RICO: It was ugly. Sofia went into overdrive with her healing and Leila started shooting them with her magic.
MAX: Tommy passed out.
RICO: Swearing like troopers, they were.
MAX: Which wasn't very ladylike.
SOFIA: I didn't mean it.
RICO: The two of them were swarmed for a good half a minute until Max remembered, he had his Pulse skill. Luckily, when he charged in and did *that*, the enemies started attacking him again. That allowed to Sofia to heal him while Leila shot the enemies around him.
MAX: But not *just* the enemies around me. She hit *me* six times.
(He held up his hand. It was flapping around erratically.)
MAX: It's been doing that ever since.
RICO: But Max's hand doing weird things aside, we came out of it unscathed.
CHI: Right...
(She looked to Max despairingly.)
CHI: It took you thirty seconds to remember you had a Pulse skill?
MAX: I was panicking.
CHI: Idiot.
(She shook her head then raised her voice.)
CHI: What is it with you people???
MAX: Easy.
(Chi calmed herself then sat back.)
CHI: Morons. Team of the year, my arse. How can you not know about carrying a backup blade?
(She sighed.)

CHI: You disappoint me. Constantly. Yet somehow... team of the year.

(She stood up then furrowed her brow.)

CHI: To the black marble. I'll register your bounty then I'm going to lay down for a bit. Working with you lot gives me a headache.

(She then strode away to the black marble, growling under her breath.)

CHI: Retirement can't come too soon for me. It just can't.

Inside a large manor house across town, at this time, Sir Mighty, Duke Thunder, Countess Brilliance and Artful Shadow were all seated around a large, circular table, enjoying tea and cake together. This ten bedroom manor house served as The Axnay Elite's base. None of them lived there, however. The only resident was the housekeeper. As a collective, they were so wealthy, they'd clubbed together to buy the residence by pooling their loose change. Sir Mighty had then incorporated it into his estate to avoid paying any tax on it.

Being non-residents of their base was an arrangement that suited them well. Should a situation arise where one of their number needed to be talked *about*, rather than talked *to*, they could simply forget to tell the unfortunate member about the meeting. On this occasion, the one left out was Velvet Vortex. Her reluctance to join their campaign to destroy The Axnay Rejects had made her something of a pariah. This was to be the topic of their conversation. As it turned out, however, it would end up being the *second* item on the agenda. The first being a source of much amusement and jollity.

THUNDER: Sir Mighty, if I was a woman, I'd kiss you.

BRILLIANCE: And if you didn't have that face, I'd kiss you too.

MIGHTY: Yes, well...

(He flinched.)

MIGHTY: What's wrong with my face?

BRILLIANCE: Um... I think I've said too much.

MIGHTY: Yes, you...

(He then chuckled to himself and cast the countess's comments to one side.)

MIGHTY: Forget it. Let's go back to giving me compliments.

(He then looked to Duke Thunder.)

MIGHTY: But let it be known that if you ever so much as *think* about kissing me, I'll throw you out of that fucking window.

THUNDER: You heard the man, Countess.

BRILLIANCE: He was talking to you.

MIGHTY: Indeed. If *she* offered...

BRILLIANCE: I won't.

SHADOW: And that told you.

MIGHTY: I suppose it did, yes.

THUNDER: Although, if you ask me, it's bit harsh to reject the man after his latest bout of heroics.

(Sir Mighty scoffed.)

MIGHTY: Heroics? Hardly. Though don't get me wrong. I'll happily accept the kudos as if it was a bout of heroics, but that really is an exaggeration.

SHADOW: Not much of one.

BRILLIANCE: Indeed. You struck quite the blow in our quest to destroy those pesky Rejects.

THUNDER: Which should *never* be understated.

MIGHTY: True, but... in reality, I only did what *anybody* could have done.

THUNDER: Wrong.

MIGHTY: Oh?

THUNDER: I wouldn't have had the *guts* to do what *you* did last night. In the guild! Where anyone could have seen you, you sneaked up behind Max's and took a screwdriver to his sword.

SHADOW: While his entire team were sitting there with him.

BRILLIANCE: That took courage.

(She sighed.)

BRILLIANCE: It was so sexy. If only you didn't have that face.

MIGHTY: Excuse me?

BRILLIANCE: Um... nothing.

SHADOW: Point being, you deserve all the kudos you get.

MIGHTY: Thanks, chaps.

(He then started to chuckle.)

MIGHTY: That Max fellow doesn't know the first thing about sword maintenance. You can quite clearly see that he doesn't look after it. I doubt he's *ever* cleaned the bloody thing. So the likelihood is...

(He started to chuckle.)

MIGHTY: He won't even notice the missing and loose screws. He'll just charge into battle with it and... snap!!!

(His three comrades burst out laughing.)

MIGHTY: His healer will keep him alive, of course, but with no sword, he'll just have to get scratched and bitten until Rico and that bloody Leila polish them off for him.

THUNDER: Right? Then they'll have to come all the way back to Axnay to fix his sword or buy a new one.

SHADOW: Thus guaranteeing them a low scoring day on the bounty front.

MIGHTY: Best of all. It won't come back to *us*. Chi's warned him about that sword on numerous occasions, so she won't even look into it. She'll just say she told him so.

BRILLIANCE: Priceless.

(They then sat there laughing heartily.)

MIGHTY: I take back what I said. It truly was a bout of heroics.

SHADOW: Indeed. But in future, let someone else hand in our quests. You know, just in case it pops onto you head while Chi is reading you.

MIGHTY: Good thinking.

BRILLIANCE: Um... not really. Now we *all* know about it, any of us could let it slip.

(Silence descended.)

THUNDER: Shit. That's not good, is it?

SHADOW: No. It isn't.

BRILLIANCE: Bugger. Just what we need. Another complication. Going after those Rejects is going to be hard. Our thoughts could give us away at any time. And so could Velvet.

(Sir Mighty nodded.)

MIGHTY: Hmm... she really *is* a problem.

THUNDER: Then let's think of a solution. That is the reason for this secret meeting after all.

SHADOW: Quite.

(He sucked his teeth.)

SHADOW: We want to go after The Rejects, but she lives in fear of going back to jail, which *would* be the penalty if we get caught doing so.

MIGHTY: So I wouldn't put it past her to drop us all in it.

THUNDER: Do you think she would?

MIGHTY: If we do something and she's afraid of being guilty by association, she definitely would. Those murderous lesbians have struck fear into her very soul.

BRILLIANCE: So what's the answer?

(They then sat there staring at one another, wearing blank expressions for a solid minute.)

BRILLIANCE: Great...

(Just then, an angry voice rose up from the doorway.)

VORTEX: What's going on???

(Mighty, Shadow, Brilliance and Thunder all gasped then stared at her in dismay.)

BRILLIANCE: Um... nothing?

VORTEX: You're holding a meeting! Without *me*! Why would you do that?

SHADOW: Well...

(He looked enlightened.)

SHADOW: Mighty asked *me* to tell you but I must have forgotten.

MIGHTY: I told you no such thing!

SHADOW: Mighty...

MIGHTY: Bloody making it sound like it's my fault...

SHADOW: I said it was *my* fault.

MIGHTY: You...

(He then recalled the conversation in his head and grimaced.)

MIGHTY: Whoops.

(He offered Vortex a warm smile.)

MIGHTY: I misspoke. I did ask Shadow after all.

BRILLIANCE: Tea and cake, Velvet?

(Vortex glowered at the bitterly then strutted to the table and took a seat.)

VORTEX: A big cup! And extra cake!

(She then looked to Shadow and Mighty.)

VORTEX: And less of your bullshit. This meeting was called for a reason! Without me! Therefore it must be *about* me! Why would...

(She gasped.)

VORTEX: You don't trust me to go after The Rejects!

BRILLIANCE: Because you said you wouldn't!

VORTEX: I said I would! Because you said we'd do it fairly and I wouldn't go to jail!

MIGHTY: Right...

(He grimaced.)

MIGHTY: Fairly...

THUNDER: About that...

(Vortex sighed in defeat.)

VORTEX: You're going to go after them *unfairly*, aren't you?

BRILLIANCE: We can neither confirm nor deny this.

VORTEX: Thus confirming it.

(Thunder sighed.)

THUNDER: Look... Velvet, without saying whether we *will* or we *won't* go after The Rejects using underhand methods, we decided to call this meeting with a view to discussing how to sabotage them without... you know... you knowing.

SHADOW: Not that we're afraid you'll drop us in it.

MIGHTY: But because we're worried you'll drop us in it.

(He palmed his forehead.)

MIGHTY: Fuck!

VORTEX: Right. I see. Like that, is it?

(She then climbed to her feet and headed for the door.)

VORTEX: I know when I'm not wanted.

THUNDER: Don't be like that.

VORTEX: Oh, but I must.

(She then stopped and smiled at them.)

VORTEX: Because what I don't know, Chi can't read.

BRILLIANCE: What?

VORTEX: Think about it, simpletons. If you don't *tell* me about the sabotage, I *can't* drop you in it. And seeing as Chi always wants *me* to turn in our quests so she can see if I'm behaving; I'm basically your golden ticket. You can just do things that I don't know about, then Chi will read *me* when we turn our quests in. Thus, she'll never get to find out.

SHADOW: Hmm... keep you in the dark then make you turn our quests in...

MIGHTY: Meaning Chi will have no way of knowing.

(Vortex winked at them.)

VORTEX: See?

(She then walked away rolling her eyes.)

VORTEX: You had to have a *meeting* to realise that? How dumb are you?

(An uncomfortable silence ensued as Vortex headed back through the house.)

VORTEX: Come on, random sexual conquests, let's go upstairs.

MAN: My name's Steve.

VORTEX: Who cares? I'm your conquest not your biographer.

(Left behind, her four teammates looked to one another then shrugged.)

SHADOW: So...

THUNDER: Yeah... do we have a plan?

BRILLIANCE: Yes. Yes, we do.

MIGHTY: Keep Velvet in the dark.

SHADOW: Excellent.

(He nodded.)

SHADOW: Then what's our next move, in relation to sabotaging The Rejects?

(Silenced ensued once again.)

SHADOW: Great.

A short while later, Axnay's minister of defence, Sir Harold Quimby, strode up to the doors of the warrior's guild then cast them open. Without so much as a pause, he then paced inside the building. Eager to get down to business, he marched past where The Axnay Rejects were still trying to calm Leila down then bounded up to Chi's desk.

QUIMBY: Miss Chi!

(Chi glanced up and saw him flip open a notebook.)

CHI: That's me. How can I help you?

QUIMBY: Just a moment.

(He flipped the notebook shut then nodded.)

QUIMBY: You can *start* by telling me your surname. I don't appear to have it.

CHI: My name's Chi! And who are...

QUIMBY: Your name's Chi *Chi*? What are you? A fucking panda?

(Chi blinked at him nonchalantly.)

CHI: I'm a shag. We only have one name. Until marriage, that is.

QUIMBY: You're unmarried?

CHI: Divorced. Why? Who's asking?

QUIMBY: I am.

CHI: Well, yeah, I gathered that.

QUIMBY: And I'm asking in my capacity as the new minister of defence.

CHI: Oh.

(She smiled then reached out for a handshake.)

CHI: You must be Mr Quimble.

QUIMBY: Quimby! Sir Harold Quimby.

CHI: Of course.

(She sat back then gestured to the seat before her.)

CHI: Please. Take a seat.

QUIMBY: Don't order me around. I don't take orders from lower ranks, Miss Chi.

(He then proceeded to take a seat anyway.)

CHI: Right. So...

QUIMBY: I'll come straight to the point, young lady... well... lady, anyway.

CHI: Hey!

QUIMBY: This is for you.

(He then slid his notebook across the desk. A split second later, however, he slid it back to himself again.)

QUIMBY: On second thoughts, no, it isn't. That's my notebook.

(With that, he reached in his pocket, pulled out an envelope then slid *that* across the desk instead.)

QUIMBY: Here.

CHI: Right. What is it?

QUIMBY: It's an envelope.

CHI: I see. Thank you. You've been very informative.

(She then rolled her eyes and opened the envelope. Wearing an inquisitive expression, she then pulled out a letter and perused it with her eyes. Moments later, her eyes bulged and she stared at the minister in dismay.)

CHI: This is a written warning.

QUIMBY: Correct. Nothing gets past you, does it?

CHI: But... what for?

QUIMBY: Read on.

(Chi gave him a distrusting glance then did just that.)

CHI: Homophobia? What? When???

QUIMBY: Don't make it worse for yourself by contesting it.

CHI: But I've never *done* anything homophobic!

QUIMBY: Oh, but you have.

(He nodded.)

QUIMBY: Three separate complainants came to the apartment this morning. All of them testified that when addressing a homosexual called Max earlier, you yelled the words,

"What's wrong with you people?"

CHI: I did?

(She cast her mind back for a moment then furrowed her brow.)

CHI: I was talking about his *team*!

QUIMBY: The gay community?

CHI: The Axnay Rejects! He's their Power Blade. I was chastising them for *yet another* display of embarrassingly hare-brained, half-arsery.

(Quimby scoffed.)

QUIMBY: Do you expect me to believe that?

CHI: Yes! In fact, I can *prove* I'm telling the truth.

QUIMBY: How?

CHI: I can get Kiki, my assistant, to read me, using the black marble.

QUIMBY: Your assistant?

CHI: Yes!

QUIMBY: Sorry. Inadmissible. She's bound to be biased in your favour. You'll have to get someone else to read the marble.

CHI: Only shags can read the marble.

QUIMBY: How convenient for you.

CHI: It's true.

QUIMBY: Stop it.

(He rolled his eyes.)

QUIMBY: You're making a fool of yourself, woman. Just accept the warning and make sure it never happens again.

CHI: It didn't happen this time.

QUIMBY: So you claim.

(He gave her a condescending glance.)

QUIMBY: But I find that extremely hard to believe. You see, I read your file, Miss Chi, and this isn't the first time you've been accused of bigotry.

CHI: Yes, it is!

QUIMBY: No, it's isn't.

(He shrugged nonchalantly.)

QUIMBY: My predecessor just didn't take any action last time.

CHI: What last time?

QUIMBY: The time you...

(He then flipped his notebook open again and scanned his notes...

QUIMBY: Ah, here we go.

(He nodded.)

QUIMBY: Six months ago, you were reported to my department for racism.

CHI: No, I wasn't!

QUIMBY: You were. But no action was taken.

CHI: Because it's bollocks.

QUIMBY: Is it? Is it though?

CHI: Yes. I've *never* said anything racist; ever!

QUIMBY: So are you telling me you didn't say...

(He glanced at his notebook then read from the page.)

QUIMBY: I can't see Leila Winter at night because she fucking black?

CHI: No! Why would I say *that*?

QUIMBY: Because she's black!

CHI: She's white! Extremely so! Okay, her hair is black and so are all her clothes, but she's the whitest person I know. If anything, I'd have trouble seeing her when it's snowing.

QUIMBY: And the racism keeps on coming.

CHI: That's not racist. We're both white!

QUIMBY: Hmm...

(He sighed.)

QUIMBY: Maybe can I let that one slide then.

CHI: Thank you. I didn't even say...

(She then looked enlightened.)

CHI: Wait. I remember. A group of us were outside admiring The Axnay Elite's snowman one night when The Axnay Rejects passed on their way out. And I just happened to remark that from behind, because of her black hair and black outfit, I could barely see her in the dark.

QUIMBY: I see.

CHI: And someone reported me for that??? Who?

QUIMBY: I'm not at liberty to divulge that information. Sophia Holborn's identity must be protected at all costs.

CHI: Sophia Holborn?

QUIMBY: Whoops.

CHI: Velvet bloody Vortex? I'll throttle her.

QUIMBY: Seriously? A threat of violence towards a co-worker? Are you *begging* for another warning. woman???

CHI: I didn't mean it literally.

QUIMBY: Good.

(He gave her his harshest glare.)

QUIMBY: I mean it, Chi. Make sure there's no comeuppance. By law, any repercussions by the accused party *will* result in immediate termination!

CHI: That's a law, is it?

QUIMBY: It is *now*! I just invented it to cover my arse for giving her name away. Complaints are meant to be anonymous.

(He nodded.)

QUIMBY: Now behave yourself in future. No more homophobia or racism!

CHI: I wasn't homophobic *or* racist! Vortex was obviously just bitter about the fact that I sent her to jail. It was a frivolous, flippant complaint. Why do you think it was ignored?

QUIMBY: I'm not paid to think. I'm paid to *do*.

CHI: Without thinking?

QUIMBY: If need be. And one of the things I'm *paid* to do is to put an end to all forms of discrimination.

CHI: Fair enough. In that case, stop calling me woman; you sexist pig. Twice you've done that!

QUIMBY: I have?

(He gasped.)

QUIMBY: I have!

(He sighed ruefully.)

QUIMBY: Oh, well. That being the case, I'd better write *myself* up as soon as possible!

CHI: Really?

QUIMBY: Absolutely! I'm a stickler, Miss Chi. And nobody is above the rules; especially me!

CHI: Oh... well, that's... refreshing.

QUIMBY: Indeed. But *before* I write myself up, let's get down to business.

CHI: I thought the silly accusations of homophobia and racism *were* the business.

QUIMBY: No, that was a secondary issue.

(He nodded.)

QUIMBY: I came to see if you've carried out the order you were sent yesterday.

CHI: Not yet, no. I have questions, you see?

QUIMBY: Oh?

CHI: Well... not even that, really. More like reservations.

QUIMBY: Such as?

CHI: It's a really bad idea.

QUIMBY: I see.

(He furrowed his brow.)

QUIMBY: Carry out the order, Chi. And do it now.

CHI: Minister...

QUIMBY: Now, woman!

(He palmed his forehead.)

QUIMBY: Fuck! I did it again!

CHI: Yes, you did.

QUIMBY: I'm aware!

(He nodded.)

QUIMBY: Nope. Three times is simply unacceptable! I must be punished right away. I tell you what, I'll write myself up *right now* then you can carry out the order.

(Chi looked to him through empty eyes then sighed.)

CHI: Fine.

Across the guild at this time, The Axnay Rejects had finally managed to calm Leila down. She'd be furious all morning after Sofia's harsh words in battle, but having had her ridiculously inflated ego thoroughly massaged, she'd now started to mellow.

LEILA: Fine. Don't get wrong, Sofia, I'm still angry with you, but yes... you make a good point. I *am* the best looking magic caster in the entire guild.

SOFIA: Much, much better looking than Velvet Vortex.

LEILA: That goes without saying.

(She took a deep breath then furrowed her brow.)

LEILA: It still doesn't excuse you saying I belong on a farm though! These are breasts, not udders. And this is a leather *skirt*, not leather skin. As for saying I create enough bullshit to fertilise the western plains...

SOFIA: I didn't mean it, Leila.

(She sighed.)

SOFIA: I was stressed out from all the mistakes everyone made this morning.

(She blushed.)

SOFIA: And there were some cows nearby. I saw *them*, then I noticed you with your exposed cleavage, leather outfit and tendency to fib, and my evil brain made the link.

LEILA: Tendency to fib???

RICO: Yes! You fib all the time!

LEILA: Name one occasion!

RICO: Just this morning, you said we were out of milk, just to get out of making coffee.

SOFIA: You told me *Rico* borrowed my pink top then put it in your wardrobe to frame you.

MAX: You told everyone I'd peed in the hot tub; just so they wouldn't go in there, and you could have it to yourself.

TOMMY: And you keep telling everyone I have a tiny penis and cry after sex.

LEILA: None of those were lies.

(She sighed.)

LEILA: But, in the spirit of camaraderie and because I'm the bigger person here, I'm willing to let your scandalous accusations go. Just this once.

RICO: How noble.

LEILA: I'm a classy lady. Now grow up, you lot. Let's move on.

MAX: Unbelievable.

SOFIA: Right.

LEILA: Pipe down, you two. We've got urgent matters to discuss.

(She nodded.)

LEILA: Like, what we're having for dinner tonight.

TOMMY: Whatever you make, it's your turn.

LEILA: I can't. I have a yoga class tonight.

RICO: Leila...

(He held up his palms.)

RICO: Nope. I'm done with this nonsense. I'm out of here.

TOMMY: Going home, are we?

RICO: Unfortunately not. Max and I need to go to the blacksmith, remember?

TOMMY: Oh, yeah.

SOFIA: I'll go too.

RICO: Awesome.

LEILA: Anything to get away from me, huh?

SOFIA: Pretty much.

(She flinched.)

SOFIA: I mean no. I just like shopping.

LEILA: You *hate* shopping!

SOFIA: I meant I like shopping with Rico.

LEILA: Fine. Go. Abandon me. I see how it is.

TOMMY: Nobody's abandoning you.

LEILA: Nobody asked you, arse face.

TOMMY: Nice...

LEILA: I'm just saying, this would be an excellent opportunity for Sofia and I to make peace. To rebuild what's left of our friendship after she broke it this morning with cruel jibes about my personality and intellect. But fine.

MAX: You mean, us two going to the blacksmith would be an excellent opportunity for you to bully her while we're out.

LEILA: As if I would.

(She received four condescending glances.)

LEILA: What?

MAX: Let's just go, shall we? I, for one, can't wait to get out of here.

RICO: It's not been the best visit, has it?

MAX: No, it hasn't. First we got a bollocking from Chi for breaking our swords then we had to spend an hour calming this stropky mare down before she could make a scene and drop us in even deeper shit.

LEILA: Stropky mare?

MAX: Yeah.

LEILA: I can't believe he called you that, Sofia.

SOFIA: He didn't!

MAX: Look, never mind that. Let's just go.

(He sighed.)

MAX: It's been a rotten day.

LEILA: It has. And I blame Tommy!

TOMMY: What? Why? I didn't do any fucking thing!

LEILA: Exactly!

TOMMY: What?

LEILA: This day *started* turning to shit when their swords broke. And what did you do? Fuck all! I was frantically casting magic, Sofia was healing, Max was getting walloped and Rico, despite being unarmed, was doing his best to get in there and coordinate. And *you* just stood there with that stupid expression on your face.

MAX: That *is* his face!

TOMMY: Fuck off, you. And you can *especially* fuck off, Leila. There's a reason I couldn't intervene!

LEILA: Because you were shitting yourself?

TOMMY: Because I didn't have a skill that would have been helpful.

RICO: Not to mention the fact that you passed out.

TOMMY: I was resting my eyes!

(He then hung his head in shame.)

TOMMY: Who am I kidding? That was embarrassing.

MAX: Yes. Yes, it was. But who cares? Can we just fucking go?

RICO: Bloody right we can. Come on, guys.
(With that, they all stood up from the table. Before they could even take a single step towards the door, however, Chi called over to them.)
CHI: Rejects!!! Assemble!!!
(Max hung his head then growled to himself.)
MAX: Fuck sake. We'll be here forever at this rate.
(He then joined the rest of his team in reluctantly gathering around Chi's desk.)
RICO: What's wrong, Chi?
MAX: If it's about the swords, we were just leaving.
(Chi shook her head.)
CHI: No, it's not about that. I have an assignment for you.
RICO: An assignment?
(He gasped.)
RICO: If you think I'm going back to bloody Nixville, you can think again!
MAX: We're not going anywhere *else* up north either! They're all nutters!
CHI: You'll go where you're bloody well sent!
LEILA: As stated in paragraph two, section six of our contracts. We have to go wherever the head shag sends us.
(Everyone gave her a stunned glance.)
LEILA: What? I looked it up.
(She shrugged.)
LEILA: I wanted to know if she really *could* send warriors to jail or whether she was just abusing her position.
(She sighed.)
LEILA: It was not the answer I was hoping for.
CHI: Are you finished, Leila?
LEILA: What? Oh. Yes. Yes, I am.
CHI: Good. Now...
LEILA: Carry on.
(Chi glowered at her coldly, causing her shy away.)
CHI: Idiot.
(She rolled her eyes.)
CHI: Now, as I was about to say; you have an assignment. A new team has been assembled and it's going to be *your* job to break them in.
TOMMY: Break them in?
CHI: Yeah. Supervise them during their first battle. *Without* taking them home and putting them in your bed afterwards.
TOMMY: Seriously?
CHI: Yes!
(Sofia couldn't help but smile.)
SOFIA: Really? You'd trust us to oversee newbies?
MAX: That's quite the responsibility.
SOFIA: You really have that much faith in us?
CHI: God, no.
(She threw a thumb over her shoulder to where Minister Quimby was standing.)
CHI: It was *his* hare-brained idea.

QUIMBY: Excuse me?

CHI: Gladly.

(She nodded.)

CHI: As the team of the year, *he* thought it'd be a good idea to let *you lot* show them the ropes. Personally, I was dead set against it. If you ask me, letting *you* five idiots handle it, is only going to create another team of calamitous buffoons.

(She sighed.)

CHI: Unfortunately, he's the minister of defence, so he overruled me. I just hope you prove me wrong.

RICO: Okay... so... what do we have to do?

CHI: What I literally just told you.

RICO: Right.

CHI: Take them out into the field, supervise them during their first battle then bring them back with the same number of body parts they left with. Can you manage that?

SOFIA: Of course.

(She beamed.)

SOFIA: Nobody's ever been injured when *I'm* healing.

MAX: Or injured when *we're* out there fighting,

RICO: Yeah, we're not The Axnay Elite.

CHI: And Martin Stevens will be delighted to hear it.

MAX: *He's* in the new team, is he?

CHI: Yes, he is. Treat him well and be sensitive about his language issues.

(Max couldn't help but smirk.)

MAX: Absolutely. If he says anything weird, we'll just trumpet, coffee mug, fertiliser.

(His four teammates giggled.)

CHI: Max?

MAX: Um... yes?

CHI: Would you like a massive fine?

MAX: I would not. Sorry Chi.

CHI: Good.

(She nodded.)

CHI: Anyway...

QUIMBY: Wait, wait, wait.

(He looked to Max.)

QUIMBY: You're Max, are you?

MAX: That's right.

QUIMBY: Solidarity, brother. We're right behind you.

(Instantly recognising that he was referring to the rumour about his sexuality, Max growled.)

MAX: Fuck sake...

QUIMBY: And don't worry. I already took Chi to task about that incident this morning. She won't be making that mistake again, I can assure you.

MAX: Listen, pal...

CHI: Enough!

(She nodded sternly.)

CHI: Let's just introduce you to the new team so you can get going.

MAX: Oh... fine.

(Chi then called out to the side of the guild.)

CHI: Newbies! Assemble!

(At once, five warriors, including Martin Stevens, climbed to their feet then headed over towards Chi.)

CHI: They were just choosing a team name.

LEILA: And what did they go with?

CHI: How the hell would I know, Leila? There were literally doing it just now, while we were talking.

(She glanced over her shoulder at the minister.)

CHI: Now do you see why I'm worried?

QUIMBY: No. The fact she's a bit dim has no bearing on how she performs in battle.

CHI: You'd be amazed.

LEILA: Excuse me?

CHI: Put a sock in it, you.

(She then looked to where the new team had assembled around her desk.)

CHI: Thank you for coming.

MARTIN: Armchair.

(He palmed his forehead then handed her an envelope.)

MARTIN: Our new fishpond.

(The team's magic caster, rolled her eyes.)

DENISE: He means name. Our new name.

CHI: Ah. Excellent.

LEILA: What did you go with?

MARTIN: Dead pancakes.

(He palmed his forehead.)

DENISE: Red Diamonds.

CHI: Yes, well, never mind that. I register it in a minute; after I've sent you on your way. You have a base and a name; you're all signed up; so you're good to go.

(She nodded.)

CHI: But first; introductions. The good news is, both teams have the same setup class wise, so you'll all be able to get advice from a reliable source.

(She glanced at Tommy.)

CHI: To a degree.

TOMMY: What?

CHI: This is the Speed Blade, Martin Stevens.

RICO: Alright, mate? Always nice to meet a fellow Speed Blade.

MARTIN: Hello.

(He shook Rico's hand.)

MARTIN: It's a crowbar to meet you.

RICO: No, no. The crowbar is all mine.

(Everyone sniggered except Chi, Martin and Quimby.)

CHI: What did I tell you about being sensitive?

RICO: I was lightening the mood!

CHI: Yes, well, I'll lighten your bank account if you do it again!

RICO: Consider me told.

CHI: Moving on...

(She looked to Max then gestured to the tallest member of the new team.)

CHI: This is Zack, he's a level one Power Blade.

MAX: Ah. I used to be one of them.

QUIMBY: You still *are* one of them, aren't you!

MAX: Excuse me??? One of them??? One of them???

QUIMBY: Yes. A...

(Having realised what he'd said, he flinched in horror at himself.)

QUIMBY: I meant a Power Blade.

MAX: No you didn't. You were calling me a bandit!

(He snarled.)

MAX: I should take you outside and rip you a new one, pal!

(Quimby reeled back.)

QUIMBY: Good grief! Feisty fellows, these poofs.

(He then gasped in absolute horror.)

QUIMBY: Good god; I can't believe I said that!

MAX: Nor can I! I am *not* one of them!

ZACK: A Power Blade?

MAX: No, you...

(He sighed in defeat.)

MAX: Just carry on, Chi.

QUIMBY: Quite. And while you're doing that, I'll write myself up again. Such a chilling display of homophobic insensitivity cannot and will not be tolerated.

(He then turned away and leant against Kiki's desk to fill out a form. Not sad that he was no longer glancing over her shoulder, Chi nodded then continued.)

CHI: And Sofia, this is Mimi, she's a healer like you.

SOFIA: Awesome.

(She beamed.)

SOFIA: You seem nice.

MIMI: I *am* nice!

SOFIA: Me too. Literally.

(They shared a warm smile which forced a rolling of Chi's eyes.)

CHI: They all joined the guild a while ago, but were waiting for two others to join. And now they have. Leila, this is Denise; their magic-caster. She's a level five. Don't teach her bad habits.

LEILA: Like I would.

(She nodded then offered Denise a conceited smirk.)

LEILA: Stick with me, newbie. You could learn a lot from seasoned professional like me. And not just about magic-casting. I could always give you some much-needed fashion tips.

(Denise offered her a deeply insincere smile in return.)

DENISE: That'd be great. I'm bound to learn a lot from an aging veteran like you.

LEILA: Aging???

DENISE: I'll give the fashion tips a miss though. I prefer to wear styles from *this* century.

(They then stood there growling at one another. Having expected nothing less from two female magic-casters, Chi just scoffed then looked to Tommy.)

CHI: And finally, Tommy, this is James.

(The two of them shook hands.)

TOMMY: It's a pleasure.

JAMES: The pleasure's all mine, Tommy. As a mere level twenty, I'm looking forward to learning from you, sir.

(Tommy could only whimper. James was two levels higher than he was.)

TOMMY: Yeah... I look forward to... that... too.

(He palmed his forehead.)

CHI: Okay, so now you know each other...

(She was then interrupted by the two magic casters, doing what female magic-casters do.)

DENISE: So? What are you then? Like... fifty?

LEILA: Fifty??? You cheeky...

DENISE: I was only asking.

LEILA: I look nothing like fifty, you cheeky twat. I'm in my prime. Unlike you. What are you? Twelve?

DENISE: Nope. I'm nineteen and sexy.

LEILA: So am I!

(She glanced away innocently.)

LEILA: If anyone from the Miss Axnay Pageant asks.

CHI: Stop it, you two! I've had enough magic-caster on magic-caster violence for one lifetime. Behave or expect a hefty fine!

(Leila and Denise both shook their heads then resumed silently glowering at one another.)

CHI: Thank you. Now go. Get out there and do yourselves proud.

(She nodded.)

CHI: Just listen to what The Rejects tell you, newbies. They *talk* a good fight. Just be careful not to copy any of their mistakes.

MARTIN: Will do.

CHI: Good. Now leave.

(Quimby then spoke up from behind her.)

QUIMBY: Actually, *I'll* be leaving first.

(He held up a pair documents.)

QUIMBY: Two written warnings. That's a month's suspension without pay.

(He then headed for the door, sighing ruefully.)

QUIMBY: It's not been the best first week in the job; I have to say.

(Chi watched him leave then furrowed her brow.)

CHI: Why are you still here? Go and kill things!

RICO: Actually, we need to go to the blacksmith first.

CHI: Do it then!

(She rolled her eyes.)

CHI: Newbies, you'll have to wait here, I suppose.

(She nodded.)

CHI: But when The Rejects get back, your new career will begin in earnest.

Just over an hour later, with their new swords ready to go, The Axnay Rejects headed out to begin aiding the new team in their first battle. A second carriage, containing the *members* of that team was right behind it. Looking forward to the assignment, Leila was unusually upbeat. Two of her teammates, however, were focussed on something else, so her proclamations of excitement were falling of deaf ears.

LEILA: I said, I'm looking forward to this.

MAX: We heard you.

RICO: Twice.

LEILA: Then acknowledge me!

MAX: We did!

RICO: We agreed.

LEILA: No, you didn't. You said you were looking forward to using your new blades then talked about *them* instead.

RICO: We still agreed that we're looking forward to the fight.

LEILA: Yes, but you ignored *my* reasoning!

(Max rolled his eyes.)

MAX: Fine. Go on then. What is it?

(Leila ruffled her neck.)

LEILA: I don't know if I can be bothered to tell you now.

RICO: Fine. We'll talk about our new swords again then.

(Leila shrieked.)

LEILA: No! Don't do that.

(She nodded.)

LEILA: I'll share.

(She beamed.)

LEILA: We have complete novices to train. Imagine! They're like a blank canvas we can mould into an image of ourselves.

MAX: You don't *mould* canvases, Leila. You paint on them!

LEILA: Fine! Then we can *sculpt* them into...

MAX: A portrait?

LEILA: No!

(Max, Rico and Sofia all chuckled.)

LEILA: I hate you lot sometimes. Most of the time, actually. But now especially!

RICO: Don't be like that, Leila. We're just excited about having new blades.

MAX: Yeah. I've never had a shiny one before.

TOMMY: You would have if you cleaned the old one.

MAX: That's not the point!

SOFIA: It is a *good* point though. You really need to look after this one.

MAX: And I will.

(He ruffled his neck.)

MAX: Bloody cheek. Just let me enjoy my new toy, will you?

RICO: As I shall enjoy mine.

(He beamed.)

RICO: Did you see that ornate handle?

(Everyone groaned.)

TOMMY: Yes. Now stop going on about it.

RICO: But it's a work of art, mate.

SOFIA: That's what worries me.

RICO: What?

SOFIA: I think it's literally *that*, Rico. A work of art. Purely ceremonial.

RICO: That's ridiculous.

SOFIA: Is it?

RICO: Probably.

MAX: Probably isn't good enough, mate. Just make sure you've got the other one on hand just in case.

RICO: I brought both, don't worry.
(He ruffled his neck indignantly.)

RICO: Not that I'll *need* the other one. It's *not* a ceremonial sword. It's a practical sword. Razor sharp and deadly. It just happens to *look* awesome as well.
(He exhaled.)

RICO: I'm gonna look so cool brandishing that.

TOMMY: Hardly. The artwork is on the handle. Nobody's going to see that because of your hands.

RICO: Stop shitting in my pudding!

TOMMY: Mate...

RICO: I'm gonna look seriously cool. Now get over it.

MAX: We'll get over it when it doesn't break, mate.

RICO: Then you'll get over it soon, won't you? You'll see. My first sortie will wipe half the buggers out.
(Everyone shared an uneasy glance.)

LEILA: See? My topic doesn't seem so silly now, does it?
(They all glanced at one another then shrugged.)

SOFIA: So... a canvas, huh?

LEILA: Yup. An entirely blank one.

SOFIA: Awesome. And I, for one, can't wait to help shape them. Or... is it paint on them? I don't know. I'm just know I'm looking forward to passing on some wisdom so they'll be safe in the future.

TOMMY: A noble goal.

MAX: It is indeed. And I'm glad you have one, Sofia. I'm looking forward to using my new blade, but I have no motivation for this battle whatsoever.

SOFIA: How come?

MAX: Well... quite frankly, I think the guild are taking liberties.

SOFIA: Liberties?

MAX: Yeah! Nobody trained *us* back when we started out. I was just lucky Rico was desperate for a friend.

RICO: I was desperate for someone to *fight* alongside!
(He sighed.)

RICO: It took forever to make level five because nobody wanted to join me in a hunt.
(He nodded.)

RICO: So, yeah. You make a good point, Max. It's not right that this new team get special treatment.

MAX: And even less right that *we* 've been lumbered with the misery of treating them.
(They shared despairing glances then Max sighed.)

MAX: Nope. Enough of that negative nonsense, I need to devote myself to positive thinking.

SOFIA: You should. It's very therapeutic.

MAX: It is indeed. But it's also a good frame of mind for a sportsman to attain.
(He shrugged.)

MAX: I've got an Axnay Volley match tomorrow night.

TOMMY: Yeah? How are your lot doing this season?

MAX: We, the might East Axnay, are top of the league, my friend. In fact, realistically, only North Axnay can catch us.

(He beamed menacingly.)

MAX: And the good news is, their goalkeeper just got injured. So, basically, they're fucked.

(He exhaled.)

MAX: I love Axnay Volley. I really do.

(He grimaced.)

MAX: I can't believe you quit the game, Rico.

RICO: I had to. Someone stole my place in goal.

MAX: Yeah, but you should still pop along to training. You can be the sub. You're much better than our *current* second choice goalkeeper.

(Rico stared at him agog.)

RICO: No. No way. Nobody can possibly lack self-awareness that much. Mate, I quit because *you* stole my place. It was fucking annoying!

MAX: I know. I was annoyed at the coach too. But don't worry. If you're interested, I'll put a good word in for you.

RICO: I'm *not* interested!

MAX: Oh.

(He shrugged.)

MAX: Please yourself.

(Rico could only shake his head bitterly.)

RICO: The sooner we get there, the better. Because right now, I'm positively aching to kill something with my sword!

In the carriage behind in the meantime, Martin, Denise, James and Mimi were also looking forward to the upcoming battle. It was their first foray into the world of the warrior and they couldn't wait. The same could not be said for their Power Blade however. Having just been told what a Power Blade has to do, he was reluctant so say the least.

ZACK: Seriously? Charge in there?

MIMI: That's right.

ZACK: By myself?

MARTIN: Yeah. The Power Blade takes the hits; ably assisted by the healer.

ZACK: The hits... like... all of them?

DENISE: Yes! You've done something seriously wrong if anyone else takes one.

MARTIN: Actually, *I* might take a corkscrew. I mean a few.
(He gulped.)
MARTIN: I just hope I don't get flashbacks and freeze.
ZACK: Yeah? Well you should *also* hope I don't say fuck this and bugger off home.
(Mimi, a kind person at heart, smiled warmly then attempted to calm him down.)
MIMI: It'll be fine. We literally have the team of the year with us.
(Denise, *not* a kind person by heart, scoffed.)
DENISE: Like that's any guarantee of safety. You were with a team of level fifties when *you* were brutally savaged, Martin. Them Rejects are *not* level fifties, so what's to say you won't meet the same fate?
(Zack gulped.)
DENISE: Or worse.
ZACK: I want to go home.
MIMI: You'll be fine, Zack. I hear The Reject's healer is really good. *She's* a level fifty.
DENISE: So was The Elite's healer and look what happened there!
(She sighed then offered Zack a rueful smile.)
DENISE: I just hope you have your affairs in order.
ZACK: Nope! Stop the carriage! I'm getting out!
(The team's technician furrowed his brow.)
JAMES: Calm down will you, lad? I have it good authority that Martin's accident came about because of an incompetent mistake.
MARTIN: That's right.
JAMES: Well, that's not going to happen this time, is it?
ZACK: You don't know that.
JAMES: No, but I do know *this*. The Rejects wouldn't have been voted team of the year if they made silly mistakes.
(Hope returned to Zack's eyes.)
ZACK: I see. Well... that's reassuring.
DENISE: No, it isn't! They weren't *voted* team of the year. They won it for making the most money. For all we know, they're a bunch of accident prone buffoons, who happened to bag a few lucky beasts.
(In that moment, the hope vanished from Zack's eyes again.)
ZACK: I'm doomed.
(James could only shake his head at Denise.)
JAMES: You not a good person.
DENISE: I don't have to be. I'm sexy.
JAMES: Right...
(He grimaced uncomfortably.)
JAMES: It's going to be fun, working with her.

Just over an hour into their journey, The Rejects carriage came to a halt next to the road. The new team's carriage pulled up behind. Moments later, five people climbed from The Reject's carriage. Only four emerged from the one behind it, however. Hoping to change all that, Mimi was staring into the carriage, speaking into her kindest voice.
MIMI: Zack, please. You'll be perfectly fine.

ZACK: I know. Because I'm not going!

MIMI: Zack... come on. Don't throw away a potentially rewarding career because of a few nerves.

ZACK: A few nerves? A few nerves??? Try a morbid fear of a gruesome and painful death.

MIMI: That's not going to happen, Zack.

(Just then, Leila peered into the open carriage and grimaced.)

LEILA: Out, you. We've got things to do.

MIMI: He's terrified, poor thing.

LEILA: What of?

ZACK: Bloody dying! In pain! Having watched a beast make a snack of both my legs.

(Leila scoffed.)

LEILA: That's not gonna happen.

ZACK: You don't know that.

LEILA: I do. Our healer might well be a whimpering annoyance, but nobody's ever been injured when *she*'s healing.

MIMI: Is that true?

LEILA: Yeah. Why do you think she won the best healer award? She heals everything, that woman. It's like a mad compulsion.

(She shrugged at Mimi.)

LEILA: So, fair warning. You'll be healing Zack when it's your turn, but I'm willing to bet Sofia sneakily joins in. She can't help herself. Hates the idea of anyone getting hurt, that one. She's such a weirdo.

(Leila then headed away again. As she did so, Zack slowly started to emerge from the carriage.)

ZACK: So... the healer of the year is gonna heal me?

(He bit his lip.)

ZACK: That's reassuring.

MIMI: I'm glad you feel that way. Oh, and... none taken, by the way.

ZACK: What? No! I wasn't saying you'll be bad at it or anything...

MIMI: Okay...

(She forced a smile.)

MIMI: Anyway...

(She then turned and saw the rest of the party standing behind her.)

MIMI: Hi, guys. We're just waiting for...

ZACK: I'm here.

MAX: Good, good. We can start the lesson then. Now here's what you need to know...

(His mind instantly went blank and he stared straight ahead of himself.)

MAX: Um...

RICO: Mate, it's not really something you can explain. We'll have to *show* them how it's done.

MAX: I can live with that.

(He nodded.)

MAX: Okay, newbies, this here meadow-cum-woodland thing...

LEILA: This field with trees in it.

MAX: Yeah, that. It's a well known Empy hunting ground. So believe me when I say, we won't kept waiting long.

(He nodded.)

MAX: We'll fight the *first* group that come; you can fight the second. You just have to watch how we do it then emulate it when it's your turn.

MIMI: Okay. Any tips?

SOFIA: Keep everyone healed and trust them to keep you safe in return.

MIMI: And if they can't?

SOFIA: Head for the hills.

(She paused.)

SOFIA: Actually, don't. There's Empies up there too.

MARTIN: I'm sure it'll be flaps. I'm quite confident now I know Sofia's here.

MIMI: Ouch!

MARTIN: No halibut. I mean offence! *No* offence.

MIMI: Yeah... I've been getting that a lot.

RICO: Yeah, well, never mind that.

(Just then, a loud cry rose up from behind them. At once, they spun around and saw a hoard of Empies charging towards them.)

ZACK: No!!! Death, doom and destruction!!!

MAX: Yeah. For *them* it is. Let's go, mate.

RICO: Damn right.

(With that, Max and Rico took off towards the hoard of Empies. At the same time, Leila, Sofia and Tommy stepped up behind them in readiness to form the back row. The members of the new team, swiftly scaled their carriage to get a better view.)

MIMI: This is exciting.

ZACK: More to the point, it's safer up here.

(He then looked to where Max was racing towards the pack.)

ZACK: That's just suicidal!

JAMES: Hardly, he's cast his shield and Sofia is healing him, look.

(He nodded.)

JAMES: Any second now, his Pulse should kick in then he's ready to tango.

DENISE: Not literally, I hope.

JAMES: Well, obviously.

(Just then, Max reached the hoard of Empies and came out swinging. Sure enough, his Pulse magic then triggered and all the enemies swarmed towards him.)

MAX: Got them, mate!!!

RICO: Sweet!

(He beamed.)

RICO: Then it's my time to shine! This blade is gonna tear them fuckers asunder.

(With that, he charged to the side of the battle, before zooming forth to begin his first sortie.)

RICO: Okay, Empies, let me introduce you my good friend, humiliation!!!

(He then swung his brand new blade into the first Empies in his path, only for the blade to snap into four pieces.)

RICO: No!!!

(Look quite the fool, he then dashed to the other side of the battle and winced in embarrassment.)

RICO: I'll... um... just fetch the other one.

MAX: You think???

RICO: Um... yeah.

(He then raced towards the carriage to collect it. He did so with an uncomfortable grimace on his face. It was bad enough that newbies had witnessed his silliness, but in order to fetch his replacement sword, he had to run the gauntlet of an unimpressed Sofia.)

SOFIA: So, you and your *good friend* 'humiliation' know each other intimately, I see.

RICO: Babe...

SOFIA: Honest to god, Rico. If that's what life is with you is going to be like, can you do me an almighty favour and propose to Leila instead?

RICO: Don't be like that. How was I to know it wasn't a real sword?

SOFIA: Apart from the fact that every bugger on the planet told you so?

RICO: Well... lucky guess.

SOFIA: Right...

(She rolled her eyes then glanced towards Max.)

SOFIA: Hang in there, Max. Rico will be back once he's found his brain. I'm guessing it'll be like looking for a needle in a haystack.

(She then scowled at Leila.)

SOFIA: Seriously? Rico's delayed, so you're going to take a tea break while you wait, are you?

LEILA: Excuse me?

SOFIA: Shoot the bloody Empies! You can't hit Rico after all, he's on a quest to find his long lost brain cell.

LEILA: I already did!

SOFIA: Yeah. Once! And that's it, is it? You're done for the day?

LEILA: Sofia, you gobby squeak-goblin; if you must know, I'm *trying* to keep one eye on the fight and the other on wherever Rico went. I don't want to randomly shoot, only to find him charging straight into twenty thousand volts, do I?

(She then turned to the fight and angrily blasted her magic. Having been distracted by her anger at Sofia, however, she ended up blasting her magic five feet over the heads of the enemies.)

LEILA: One fucking word, Sofia, and I'll be beat you until look like Tommy.

TOMMY: Hey!

LEILA: What? I'm just saying, she'll be ugly once I'm done with her.

TOMMY: I know that!!!

(Just then, Max called out from the front of the fight.)

MAX: Tell Rico to hurry up! This new sword of mine is a pain in the arse.

TOMMY: What's wrong with it?

MAX: I'm not used to the weight, mate. I've mistimed two swings already.

(He then lashed his sword across himself.)

MAX: Make that three!!!

(He was then physically jumped on by three Empies. Mercifully, Sofia was on hand to heal him until he'd fought them off.)

MAX: Thanks, Sofia.

SOFIA: You're welcome. Keep up the good work.

MAX: You cheeky...

SOFIA: I've changed my mind, Leila. Rico should propose to Max. They're made for each other. Partners in rubbish.

(Just then, Rico came charging back with his second new sword.)

RICO: Sorry about the delay!

(He snarled.)

RICO: But I'm back now, and some Empies are about to feel pain.

SOFIA: Unless *that* turns out to be a ceremonial sword too.

RICO: It isn't!!!

(He then zoomed into the battle and proceeded to chop down some Empies.)

RICO: Feel my wrath!!!

SOFIA: No! *You* feel *mine*! Leila was about to bloody shoot then! She spotted you and quickly had to abort. Thank god she remembered her glasses. If she's hadn't...

LEILA: I don't bloody wear glasses!!!

SOFIA: And I don't squeak and whimper when I'm nervous.

LEILA: Yes, you do.

SOFIA: Exactly, my point.

LEILA: Why, you...

SOFIA: Just fire your magic!!!

LEILA: I will once Rico's done his run.

(She rolled her eyes.)

LEILA: Fucking tyrant.

(She then watched Rico cull a large number of beasts with his shiny, new blade then obliterated a large number with her magic.)

MAX: Nice! Now polish them off, Rico.

RICO: Will do.

(He then zoomed through twice more, leaving Max with the final two. They made for an easy kill. Delighted that it was over, Rico drew a sigh of relief then joined Max and Tommy in watching Leila chase Sofia round and round in circles. Their usual post-battle routine.)

MAX: We're not having the best of days here, are we?

RICO: Nope. We should have stayed in bed this morning, I think.

TOMMY: Definitely. Everything we've done today has gone horribly wrong.

MAX: And will probably *continue* to do so.

RICO: Yeah. Fuck it. Let's go home.

MAX: Agreed.

(With that, they took two steps towards the carriage then froze on the spot. All five newbies were staring at them agog.)

RICO: Right... yeah... I forgot about them.

(He then glanced to Sofia and Leila.)

RICO: Leila! Not in front of the newbies!!!

LEILA: Don't tell me what to do!!! Sofia has to die!!!

SOFIA: I didn't mean it!

LEILA: No, you never fucking do!

(Max took a deep breath then bellowed.)

MAX: Enough, you two!!!

(In that moment, Sofia and Leila froze. Sofia grimaced at him uneasily and Leila scowled furiously.)

LEILA: Don't shout at me.

MAX: Just behave.

(He rolled his eyes then looked to the assembled members of the new team.)

MAX: So...

(He scratched behind his head.)

MAX: That's how it's done.

RICO: Apparently.

(James clambered down from the carriage and approached Tommy.)

JAMES: And it was very enlightening.

RICO: I bloody hope not.

JAMES: It was though.

(He sucked his teeth.)

JAMES: There is one thing I wasn't quite clear on though.

(He then stood with his legs apart and put his hands in his pockets, just like Tommy had done during the fight.)

JAMES: Tell me, Tommy. Is this a battle stance you take in order to make stealth casting easy? Only it *looked* like you didn't do anything.

(Tommy looked at him uneasily for a moment then wandered off.)

TOMMY: You'll figure it out.

JAMES: Quite. Good point. Learn by doing, that's the best way.

(He was then joined by the rest of his team-mates. The Rejects could barely look them in the eye.)

MIMI: So...

(Just then, a second hoard of Empies raced onto the scene. The Rejects could barely hide their delight.)

RICO: Never mind that. It's your turn now. Off you go.

ZACK: I'm not ready!

MAX: Mate, it's easy. Just charge in and trust your healer.

ZACK: I don't even *know* her!

MAX: Just go!

(He then picked him up and threw him towards the enemy hoard.)

ZACK: Why???

MAX: Why not?

(Having landed, Zack jumped to his feet then shrieked. The Empies were almost upon him. He'd been left with no choice but to fight or die. He wisely chose the former. With a look of sheer terror in his eyes, he cast his shield then swung his blade.)

ZACK: I hate you, Max!

MAX: You'll thank me later.

(In that moment, Zack's Pulse triggered and he had the full attention of the hoard.)

ZACK: I'm gonna die!!!

(Five seconds later, when he realised he wasn't in any pain, however, his eyes lit up.)

ZACK: Healing? Nice work, Sofia!

MIMI: Hey!!! That's me!!!

ZACK: Oh.

(He then set about the Empies with a snarl on his face.)

ZACK: You're right, Max. This is fun!

MIMI: Concentrate, you cunt!!!

(Everyone stared at her agog.)

MIMI: Like that, right, Sofia?

SOFIA: Um...

MIMI: Abuse them until they conform. I get it now.

(She nodded then yelled out.)

MIMI: Start killing, you wankers!

SOFIA: Um... you don't *have* to do that.

MIMI: I kinda do. It worked so well when you did it.

LEILA: Hey. Give Sofia her dues. *Her* insults are at least creative. You're just calling people names.

MIMI: And it's working. Look. Martin started.

(Denise nodded.)

DENISE: Me too. I just fired magic over the beast's head. I have no idea what good it'll do, but Leila must have done for it a reason.

LEILA: Are you taking the piss???

DENISE: No. I plan to *later*. But not yet, no.

LEILA: I'm watching you.

DENISE: With envious eyes.

LEILA: You...

(Just then, James's voice rose up from behind them.)

JAMES: Right... so... I've perfected Tommy's battle stance, but I'm not seeing how it's going to enhance my performance any. It's actually hindering me from aiming my magic. In that sense, I feel like I'm doing nothing.

RICO: In that case, mate. You've already learned everything Tommy has to teach you.

JAMES: I'm not so sure...

(He then looked enlightened.)

JAMES: Wait! Now I get it. Yes, yes... that makes sense. A technician is just a supervisor. He only intervenes when things go pear-shaped. That's why he just stood there and did nothing.

MAX: Actually, mate. No. Not even close.

(He looked to Rico.)

MAX: Mate, all they've learned is that magic-casters miss, healers are abusive and Technicians are spare parts.

RICO: Yeah... Chi's gonna freak is they come back and *that's* all they've learned.

MAX: Hmm...

(Just then, Zack yelled out in anguish.)

ZACK: Fuck! There's hundreds of the fuckers!

(Sure enough, another hoard, two hundred strong was joining the throng.)

SOFIA: Shit.

RICO: On the contrary, babe. That's enough for all of us.

MAX: In that case, let's show them how it's done.

(He furrowed his brow.)

MAX: Get your hands out of your pockets and take part this time, Tommy!

(He sneered.)

MAX: We're going in!!!

That evening, at the guild, The Axnay Rejects were feeling somewhat smug. Their second battle against a hoard of Empies had been executed without any mistakes. Essentially, they'd been handed the chance to redeem themselves, and they done so in what they considered to be some considerable style. In reality, they'd merely done a straight forward job properly. After the day's two other debacles, however, this fact seemed lost on them.

MAX: You know, chaps; the word perfection is overused these days. Abused, some might say. Some people declare merely getting something right to be perfection. Well, today we struck a blow for that word. We showed the world what perfection *really* means.

RICO: That we did, mate. Those Empies had no answer to our brilliance.

LEILA: Well, no. Of course they didn't. Empies are shit.

TOMMY: Even so. We exerted our dominance like true fighting gods.

(Leila sighed.)

LEILA: Yup. Loathe as I am to agree with numb nuts here, what with him being a massive nobody; he's right. Even if they *were* easy prey, we whooped them with a flawless display of greatness. And what's more. I looked good doing it.

RICO: We all did.

LEILA: Except Tommy. He looks like a neglected scarecrow.

TOMMY: Fuck sake.

SOFIA: Um... speaking of looking good, Leila. I was thinking, it's quite warm this year, and well... you looked a bit hot and bothered at times.

LEILA: A small price to pay for being aesthetically immaculate.

SOFIA: Yeah, but still. I was thinking, maybe it's time for a change.

LEILA: Why the hell would I alter perfection?

SOFIA: For your own comfort.

LEILA: Sofia...

SOFIA: No. Hear me out. When I was too cold, *you* stepped up and gave me the Leila Winter, Winter makeover.

LEILA: And?

SOFIA: Maybe you should let me return the favour.

(Leila gave her an astonished glance.)

LEILA: Are you seriously suggesting...

SOFIA: Yup. You need the Sofia Nice, Nice Summer makeover.

LEILA: You are. You're *actually* suggesting...

SOFIA: That we go clothes shopping.

(Leila paused.)

LEILA: Hmm... I do enjoy clothes shopping.

SOFIA: Well?

LEILA: Let me think.

(She bit her lip then mused to herself out loud.)

LEILA: Hmm... troubling times. She's asking me to go shopping. And yet, the very idea used to terrify her. This is a worrying sign. My control over my minion is waning...

SOFIA: Um... I can hear you, you know?

LEILA: No, you can't.

SOFIA: Yes, I can. You said...

LEILA: That wasn't me.

SOFIA: Yes, it...

LEILA: Fine. I'll go. It might be fun to try on new things.

SOFIA: Cool.

LEILA: But if they make me look like you, I'm going home.

SOFIA: Right...

(Just then, the barmaid delivered a tray of drinks to their table.)

BARMAID: Here you go, guys.

MAX: What? We didn't *order* another round.

BARMAID: I know. These are courtesy of the people at that table. A thank you for helping them out today.

(She pointed to the team of newbies.)

BARMAID: Oh, and Leila... Denise asked me tell you, she thinks you're really cool.

LEILA: What? Really? She did? Wow. I mean, she's right, but... she said that?

BARMAID: She did. Apparently, you're like a really cool auntie.

(She then paced away, having left the drinks behind. She also left behind a positively furious Leila.)

LEILA: Cool auntie??? Cool fucking auntie!!!

(She snarled.)

LEILA: Oh, it is so on!!! She's for it!

MAX: What? Why? What's the problem.

RICO: Yeah. It was a compliment.

(Sofia shook her head.)

SOFIA: It wasn't.

LEILA: See? *She* knows. Listen to her!

SOFIA: She knows Leila's in denial about getting older and she played on it.

LEILA: I'm not in denial about getting older! I'm *not* getting older.

SOFIA: Point being, she knew exactly what she was doing there.

LEILA: Thank you. Bitch! Her not you. I mean, why would she do that?

SOFIA: Because she's mean like you.

LEILA: Hey! I'm not mean.

TOMMY: Yeah, right. Every time I *speak* you say something mean.

LEILA: That wasn't me.

(She glanced away.)

LEILA: You cock.

TOMMY: See?

LEILA: Oh, shut up.

(She nodded.)

LEILA: Point is. Those newbies are clearly evil.

RICO: Well... Denise is, but the others seem alright.

TOMMY: I'm not a fan of that James fella though. He made me feel like a right tit earlier.

MAX: Because he's a better technician than you?

TOMMY: Yes.

RICO: That's kinda petty, mate. He's was alright. So were the others. Not Denise obviously.

(He chuckled.)

RICO: They couldn't have picked a more ridiculous name though.

MAX: Red Diamonds?

RICO: Yeah.

(He chuckled some more.)

RICO: That'd be a ruby, mate.

MAX: Right? What a bunch of wallies.

LEILA: Actually, guys, red diamonds are a thing.

RICO: What?

LEILA: They are. In fact, they're the rarest and most expensive coloured diamond there is. You certainly wouldn't throw one in the bin.

(Max and Rico looked her blankly for a moment then scoffed.)

MAX: Fucking know all.

RICO: Right?

LEILA: Oh, that's nice.

SOFIA: Let's not argue, guys. It turned out be a good day in the end.

RICO: Did it?

SOFIA: Yup. You both have better swords now, and after that last fight, we proved that we're as good as anybody when it matters. I, for one, feel positive about that.

(Everyone looked to her for a moment then shrugged with varying degrees of agreement.)

RICO: She's right.

MAX: You're biased.

RICO: Even so. She *was* right.

(He smiled.)

RICO: We're good at what we do. And that bodes well for the future.

(He nodded.)

RICO: Very well! It's gonna be a good, good year, guys; I can feel it.

(Glowering at them from the table behind, however, Duke Thunder disagreed somewhat.)

THUNDER: Not if we can help it, pal. You and the rest of your band of scrawny peasants are going down. In flames!

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