

The Axnay Rejects

EPISODE TWENTY-ONE – THAT SHOWBOAT BETWEEN THE STICKS.

It had been a productive period for the Axnay Rejects. They had, in fact, never been so efficient. Every day, for the last week or so, they'd targeted the area where they'd be hunting in advance. They'd made their kills swiftly and precisely then returned to the guild without delay. They'd managed to turn their usual eight hour day into a five hour one, yet still increase their overall kills and bounty rewards. Rico put their new, successful formula down to Sofia's excellent planning skills. Sofia had the same delusion about Rico. In truth, however, their new way of doing things had come about because Max, Leila and Tommy were all fed up with Sofia and Rico's displays of affection. Since getting engaged they'd been sickeningly sweet together. And so, their three teammates had gathered, discussed a way to shorten their working day then implemented it. The three of them had then gone their separate ways. This was a trying time for all three of them. Leila hated Tommy, and Max and Leila couldn't even look each other in the eye, having woken up from an unexpected sexual encounter. Such tension had made breakfast time awkward, to say the least.

LEILA: Sofia? Can you pass me the pepper, please?

SOFIA: Of course.

LEILA: Can you do so without stopping to kiss Rico on the cheek first?

SOFIA: I...

LEILA: Or the lips!

(Sofia pouted.)

SOFIA: Fun sponge!

(She then reached for the pepper and winced.)

SOFIA: It's out my reach.

RICO: Here!

(He grabbed the pepper then placed it down in front of Max.)

MAX: What the fuck do I want that for? I'm having cereal! It's a match day, remember? I eat *sensibly* before matches!

RICO: I know. I was giving it to you, so you could pass it on to Leila.

MAX: Oh.

(He gulped.)

MAX: Right. Yeah... not a problem. I can do that. Simple stuff.

RICO: I'm sure it is, mate.

MAX: Well, yeah.

(He then took a deep breath, picked up the pepper and blindly held it out to his side, in the hope that Leila would be quick about grabbing it from him.)

MAX: Pepper!

(Tommy was incensed.)

TOMMY: Dude! You're pouring pepper all over my grapefruit!

MAX: Fuck. Sorry, mate.

TOMMY: So am I!

(He then swiped the pepper and slammed it down in front of Leila.)

LEILA: Gross! I don't want it now you've had your grubby mitts on it!

TOMMY: Fine! Go without then! Like I'm gonna have to! That was the last grapefruit!

SOFIA: No, it wasn't!

TOMMY: Oh, what do you know?

SOFIA: I do all the shopping!

TOMMY: Um...

SOFIA: Which isn't fair, by the way. We're meant to share out the chores. Why do *I* have to...

(Not about to explain his part in dodging the chore, Max swiftly glanced at Tommy.)

MAX: Sorry about the grapefruit, mate.

(Also eager to get away from Sofia's rant, Tommy happily obliged him.)

TOMMY: I wouldn't worry about it, mate. I mean, these things happen, don't they? Can't be helped.

MAX: Well, may I say that's a very mature attitude you've taken?

TOMMY: You may indeed. And may I say, you're looking wonderfully tall this morning?

MAX: You may, yes. It makes no sense, but thank you for saying so.

TOMMY: Happy to do it, Max. Happy to do it.

(They then glanced at Sofia, desperately hoping she'd returned to eating her food and had forgotten all about it.)

SOFIA: Next time, you two can do the shopping!

TOMMY: Shit!

MAX: Fuck!

(He then held up his palm.)

MAX: Nope. No stress! Not today. Not for me! It's the big game tonight. The title decider. The winner gets to be crowned Axnay Volley Champion of whatever year this is.

RICO: You don't know what year it is?

MAX: I'm from a rural community where Calendars have no meaning.

RICO: Right...

(He flinched.)

RICO: Hang on. Title decider? I thought you said East Axnay had it the bag!

MAX: Well...we did, but...

RICO: So North Axnay caught you up, did they?

(Max sighed.)

MAX: A little bit, yeah. A big bit actually. The entire bit. That's why it's winner takes all.

RICO: And if it's a draw?

MAX: We win the title, but how often do draws happen?

RICO: Yeah...

(Max gave him an enquiring glance.)

MAX: How come you didn't know about that? Have you stopped following the game altogether?

RICO: Pretty much. Some horrible cunt stole my place in the team, you see? And I lost all interest.

MAX: Yeah? You should have a word with that bloke!

RICO: It was you!

MAX: Anyway, moving on... it's a big game tonight. Don't stress me out.

(He glanced anyway innocently. Not about let him get away scot free, Rico smirked at him.)

RICO: So... how come it's gone down to the wire? Your lot been losing a few have you? Got a butterfingers for a goalkeeper?

MAX: No, you cunt!

(He ruffled his neck.)

MAX: Donkeys for strikers. We lost three in a row and North Axnay won three in a row, now it's down to this game. Not because East Axnay's keeper was shit, but because we couldn't bloody score.

(He then flinched.)

MAX: And because of that cunt!

RICO: Me?

MAX: No, you cunt! North Axnay's new goalkeeper. Remember I told you their other one got injured?

RICO: Yeah. It was just before you told me the league was already won.

MAX: Stop throwing that at me! I'm trying to make a point.

(He ruffled his neck.)

MAX: That point being, their new keeper is a cunt!

RICO: And that's fine. So is East Axnay's.

MAX: Less of that, you knob. This bloke is a *complete* cunt. Calls himself The Masked Braggart! As a puritan of the sport like you at least *used* to be, you'd hate him, mate. Hate him. All gimmicks and showmanship. I mean, a mask for fuck sake.

(Rico glanced at him coldly.)

RICO: See... that's... nah.

(He sighed.)

RICO: I wanted to wash my hands of the game entirely after you cunted me over.

MAX: Mate...

RICO: But that *does* annoy me.

(Sofia sighed.)

SOFIA: He's gonna rant now. He always does this was he hears about row-boating at sport.

RICO: Showboating, babe.

SOFIA: Yeah...

(Leila chuckled.)

LEILA: That's how much attention she pays to your rants.

SOFIA: Well... yeah.

RICO: Yeah, well never mind that. This is a serious issue!

(He sneered.)

RICO: Sport needs integrity! Without it, it becomes theatre. And theatre is not sport!

(He nodded.)

RICO: Sport is a battle. You fight hard and you fight to win. And you fight to win *fairly*. You fight to *prove* you're the best man out there! Or the best team. That's the pure essence of sport. If you win, you know you're the best. If you lose, you know the other fella beat you fair and square. You shake his hand and move on!

(He snarled.)

RICO: Showboats though... no fucking integrity there. They want to win by winding up their opponent with their annoying antics. A sure sign that they're a bit shit, so will happily destroy the very spirit of sport itself just to get a medal! It's not trying to be the best and respecting the other guy if he defeats you. It's about trying to cheat the odds. And that... that's not on!

(Leila grimaced.)

LEILA: Blimey. No wonder you switch off when he starts, Sofia!

(Sofia looked at her in a daze.)

SOFIA: Sorry, what? I was miles away.

LEILA: Thank you proving my point.

SOFIA: Um...

MAX: Pipe down, Sofia. I'd like to address Rico's point!

SOFIA: Hey!

MAX: I'm glad you feel like that, mate, because the bloke's a first class wanker. I mean, you have to see this cunt to believe it.

(He nodded.)

MAX: And you should. Pop along to the stadium tonight, mate. You can help our fans boo the twat!

RICO: I will!

SOFIA: Um...

RICO: Someone needs to stand up to these showboating fuckers and that someone is gonna be me!

(He thumped the table.)

RICO: I will not have the integrity of the sport I love, tarnished by some horrible vaunter.

MAX: What?

RICO: A show-off!

MAX: Gotcha!

RICO: I'll be there, mate. With bells on!

SOFIA: But you said you'd take *me* out tonight!

RICO: I...

(He looked to Sofia and grimaced.)

RICO: Oh... um...

MAX: Sorry, Sofia; bro's before ho's. He'll have to take you out another day.

RICO: Well... you say that, mate, but we're *not* bro's, are we?

SOFIA: I'm not a ho either, Rico.

RICO: Well, yeah... I mean... that's a given.

MAX: Rico. Mate. Listen. Do not violate the man code!

RICO: What man code?

MAX: The one that says, when your mate needs you, you drop your bird and come running!

RICO: Right...

(He grimaced.)

RICO: That's the *lonely* man's code, surely.

MAX: Lonely men are still men! And tonight, the men need you!

SOFIA: I need him too! We made plans.

MAX: Plans are made to be broken!

TOMMY: I'm pretty sure that's rules, mate.

MAX: Does it matter?

SOFIA: Yes! I was looking forward to tonight.

(She pouted.)

SOFIA: Cancelling on me wouldn't be fair!

RICO: Hmm...

(He nodded.)

RICO: She's right, mate.

MAX: No, she isn't!

RICO: She is. I made plans with Sofia first, and I'm gonna stick to them. Letting her down is not something I plan on ever doing. That's literally the only one of my vows that I've finished writing.

MAX: And that's fine. But you're not married yet, so let her down while you still can!

RICO: Nope. Sorry, mate. As much as I'd love to boo and throw bricks at that bloke, I won't let Sofia down to do it. No way. I'm out.

MAX: I see...

(He nodded.)

MAX: You disappoint me. Traitor.

SOFIA: Traitor? How is he traitor?

MAX: He's a traitor to his gender, Sofia! A betrayer of men! A man who'd abandon his brothers all for the sack of a little slap and tickle with some tart!

RICO: It's got fuck all to with slap and tickle! It's...

SOFIA: You might want to point out that I'm not some tart either!

RICO: Right... that was also a given.

SOFIA: Wow. I'm quickly going off you!

RICO: Because I love you so much, the idea of you being a ho or a tart doesn't even register with me?

(Sofia eyes glazed over adoringly.)

SOFIA: Well argued.

RICO: Thank you.

MAX: Now try arguing with me! Why are you such a treacherous ne'er-do-well?

RICO: I'm not. I'm just a man who keeps his promises.

MAX: But never to his fellow man! Pussy-whipped fool! You're a disgrace! This treasonous act will not go unpunished.

(Tommy nodded.)

TOMMY: Right? You know what you should do, Max?

MAX: Enlighten me?

TOMMY: Forget it and move on. Your argument is ridiculous and you sound like a cunt.

MAX: I see. So you're another betrayer of the trouser-hood are you?

TOMMY: Trouser-hood?

MAX: The collective of your fellow men!

TOMMY: Yeah, but trouser-hood?

MAX: It's a perfectly valid phrase.

RICO: It really isn't. In fact the entire argument is stupid, so I suggest we abandon it and get to work.

LEILA: On our day off? You can fuck right off!

RICO: What?

(His face lit up.)

RICO: I forgot we had the day off!

SOFIA: So did I.

RICO: I'd have stayed in bed if I'd known.

SOFIA: Same.

(She blushed suggestively.)

SOFIA: But then... it's not too late to go back there, is it?

RICO: No. No it is not.

(They then upped and fled the dining room, looking forward to jumping into bed with each other. This left Leila in a deeply uncomfortable position. She couldn't look Max in the eye and Tommy was still very much in her bad books. Extremely ill at ease, she glanced along the table briefly then fled the room.)

LEILA: Bye!

(Spotting her leaving, Max drew a sigh of relief.)

MAX: Thank fuck she's gone.

TOMMY: Right? She's so annoying.

MAX: Well, yeah... but it's worse than that!

(He winced.)

MAX: I ended up in bed with her one day last week.

(Tommy glowered at him.)

TOMMY: What???

MAX: I know! And it wasn't in one of your silly, 'chuck Chi into bed then go to sleep' situations either. We doinked!

TOMMY: How the fuck did that come about?

MAX: That nightshift. Followed by coffee at that café, laced with whisky. It was the perfect storm. Tiredness and a lack of sobriety! One thing led to another and before you know it, I had a Leila-shaped cock thimble!

(Tommy shook his head.)

TOMMY: I see. So this is how it feels to be Rico.

MAX: What?

TOMMY: You're a woman rustler, you are, mate. A fucking love cuckoo.

MAX: I have no idea what any of that meant.

TOMMY: No... of course not.

(She shook his head.)

TOMMY: I'm gonna do some whittling!

(With that, he headed off up the stairs, grumbling to himself.)

TOMMY: That bloke does not understand boundaries.

(He then sighed to himself. He hadn't been with Leila for a good six months and she'd been vile towards him ever since. And yet, for Max to help himself without even considering consulting him first just felt wrong.)

TOMMY: I hate you, Max. I really do.

At the warrior's guild, at this time, Chi was doing press-ups on the floor next to her desk. She'd been trying to complete fifty of them every morning for just over a week now. It was a target set for her by the interim minister of defence in order to pass her mandatory physical exam. So far, the best she'd managed was forty-three. Standing over her as she made yet another attempt, her assistant couldn't help but sympathise.)

KIKI: Fifty, huh? That's brutal.

(Chi wheezed her reply.)

CHI: You don't say.

KIKI: Yeah, that's way too many for someone your age.

(Chi promptly collapsed flat onto her face then glowered up at her.)

CHI: My age???

KIKI: Um...

(She gulped.)

KIKI: I think I've said too much.

CHI: Actually, you said just enough if your intention was to get me to boot your arse up and down the yard for the next two hours.

KIKI: Right. Sorry.

(She grimaced.)

KIKI: I'm right though, aren't I? That's way too many.

(She flinched.)

KIKI: I mean for anybody.

(Chi gave her a cold glance for a moment then sighed.)

CHI: Yes. It is.

KIKI: I mean, *I* could do it easily, but I'm young and...

(She swiftly hung her head.)

KIKI: Foolish, apparently.

CHI: You know, Kiki, I'm quickly going off you.

KIKI: I'm sure you are.

(She sighed.)

KIKI: So, why's the interim making you do that anyway?

CHI: I told you that last week.

KIKI: Well... kind of.

CHI: Kind of?

KIKI: Yeah. You said you were doing it because some old trout's ex-husband couldn't keep his pants on.

(She shrugged.)

KIKI: You were angry at the time, so I decided not to probe any further.

CHI: Right.

(She sighed.)

CHI: Let's just say she hates me, and when she found out she legally *could* make me suffer, she decided to make it so.

KIKI: Right...

CHI: Legally, we can still be fitness tested, you see? With a physical exam. So she's making me take one. And only me!

KIKI: That's a bit harsh.

CHI: Harsh? It's outrageous.

KIKI: So when is your exam?

CHI: The end of this week.

KIKI: So you have to be able to do fifty by then?

CHI: Yes! Followed by ten sit ups and a five mile run.

(She pouted.)

CHI: It's been miserable.

(Just then, the door burst open and the elected minister of defence, Harold Quimby paced into the room. Having offered many a greeting to the warriors present, and received just as many rude hand gestures in return, he strode up to Chi's desk then nodded.)

QUIMBY: Salutations... Tina? Was it?

CHI: It's Chi!

QUIMBY: Ah, yes.

(He nodded to Kiki.)

QUIMBY: And you're the lovely Kiki. That I do remember.

(Kiki just nodded at him.)

QUIMBY: Anyway...

CHI: Unbelievable.

QUIMBY: Sorry? What is?

CHI: You can't remember my name, but you can remember that of my assistant.

QUIMBY: Indeed. A beautiful woman's name is something a man never forgets. Unless he's gay, which is perfectly acceptable.

(He nodded.)

QUIMBY: I'm being extra careful not to fall into my own traps, so I won't have to banish myself this time.

CHI: And what a blinding start you've made. You've only been here two seconds and you've insulted me already!

QUIMBY: When?

CHI: You forgot my name, then promptly stated a man never forgets to beautiful woman's name. You basically called me an uggo.

QUIMBY: Right... yes... I owe myself a spoken warning then, don't I?

CHI: At least.

QUIMBY: Don't worry. I'll take care of that later. I've just come here to let you know I'm back! My suspension is complete and I'm here to guide you once again.

CHI: Right. Good. Phew.

(She looked to him desperately.)

CHI: Does that mean I won't have to complete a physical exam anymore?

QUIMBY: A physical exam? What are you talking about? They were brushed aside decades ago.

CHI: I know. But that didn't stop your interim from setting me one.

QUIMBY: Interim?

CHI: Yes! Thelma!

QUIMBY: There's a Thelma?

(He then looked enlightened.)

QUIMBY: Wait. Yes. There is.

(He grimaced.)

QUIMBY: She was never the interim though. There *was* no interim. Thelma is my secretary.

CHI: What???

(She furrowed her brow.)

CHI: Secretary??? She set me a bloody physical exam!

QUIMBY: How odd. She doesn't have that power.

CHI: She...

QUIMBY: I'll be having words with her about that.

CHI: You and me both!

QUIMBY: I wonder why she did that then. That's a flagrant abuse of power that she doesn't have. Impersonating a minister too.

(He sucked his teeth.)

QUIMBY: Nasty business that. I may need to look into it further at some point.

(He ruffled his neck.)

QUIMBY: Now seems like a good time. Tell me. Who else did she set an exam for?

CHI: Me and me only! It was personal! We have a history, you see?

QUIMBY: Oh. So it was a vendetta.

(He nodded.)

QUIMBY: I'll discipline her sternly once I get back! But not until I've given myself a damn good talking to about my behaviour.

(He stood tall.)

QUIMBY: Now where were we?

CHI: You said you were here to tell us your suspension is over.

QUIMBY: That's right. And I did that. So why am I still here?

CHI: Your guess is as good as mine.

QUIMBY: I see. Well, if there's nothing else, I'll be on my way.

(He nodded.)

QUIMBY: I hope you weren't too put out by Thelma's behaviour, Chi.

CHI: Then allow me dash that hope. I was *very* put out. Mortified even. I've been exercising like a lunatic and it was all for fuck all.

QUIMBY: Awful. Truly awful.

CHI: Yes, well... just make sure she's punished accordingly.

QUIMBY: Now that I can do.

(He then started to head away.)

QUIMBY: I'll be in contact next time I have a mission for you.

CHI: I look forward to it.

(She watched him leave then looked to Kiki.)

CHI: I'm also looking forward to telling him why I'm going to ignore it.

KIKI: Is that wise?

CHI: Yes.

KIKI: Oh.

CHI: Last time he gave us a mission, we ended up sending fifteen warriors to despatch a hundred Empies!

KIKI: I remember.

CHI: I'm sure you do. Now go and get some work done.

KIKI: Ma'am!

(She sneered.)

CHI: And stop going around being pretty all the time.

KIKI: Um...

CHI: Sorry. Quimby's words from earlier got to me a little.

KIKI: Right...

(Chi sneered bitterly.)

CHI: Calling me an uggo. What a cunt.

That afternoon, Tommy was in the garden of The Reject's base, mending the section of fence between the garden and the side-street next to the house. Normally, this was a job he'd delight in doing. Not today, however. Today, he was in a sour mood. He'd been angry enough when he'd heard about Max sleeping with Leila, but now he was three times as angry. The reason being, he'd only finished replacing that very section of fence two weeks prior. Standing there with a saw and a cutting table before him, his face bore a dark expression.

TOMMY: Wankers. How many times have I told them? Don't kick the fucking ball against the fence! It's not a difficult instruction to understand.

(He then glowered at the broken planks bitterly.)

TOMMY: Another bit of fine craftsmanship destroyed. Cunts. In my day people used to respect another man's woodworking efforts. Not anymore. Now they just kick balls at it. No respect; these bastards. None.

(He shook his head.)

TOMMY: When I told the little bastards to stop doing it they just laughed at me.

(He sighed)

TOMMY: I kind of expected it from Rico, but Sofia? He's a bad influence on her!

(He lifted the saw and proceeded to cut through a piece of wood, making sure not to deviate from the pencil line he'd drawn on the plank. Moments later, the excess wood sheered off and he ruffled his neck indignantly.)

TOMMY: It's not right to go around violating another man's wood.

(Having realised what he'd said, he then allowed himself a smirk.)

TOMMY: It's good job the minister of defence didn't hear me say that.

(He then picked up the plank and headed over to the fence with it. Upon arriving, however, he heard a familiar voice on the other side of it.)

LEILA: How are you not getting this?

(A man's voice the rose up from in front of her.)

DAN: I *am* getting it! Sort off. I'm just not sure... *why* I'm doing it.

LEILA: Because I hired you to play a role, that's why. That's your job; you're an actor.

DAN: Yeah, but... as an actor I usually understand my motivation.

LEILA: Your motivation is to get paid when we're done.

DAN: I mean my motivation as a character.

LEILA: That's simple, numb nuts. You adore me. That's all. It doesn't matter *why* you have to pretend you love me; just make sure you do it well.

(Dan scratched his head.)

DAN: Well... I suppose...

LEILA: Finally.

DAN: Wait!

LEILA: Oh, for pity's sake.

DAN: You're not hiring me to say I love you, just to make your husband jealous, are you? Only I don't want a thump!

LEILA: You won't get a thump!

DAN: Right...

(He sighed.)

DAN: But you're not denying that I'm here to make your husband jealous, are you? So you can't *rule out* me getting a thump.

LEILA: Yes, I can. Because I don't even *have* a husband!

DAN: Oh. Cool.

LEILA: You're here to make my ex-boyfriend jealous!

(Dan furrowed his brow.)

DAN: How is that any different???

LEILA: Well... it's not adulterous if he's only my ex-boyfriend...

DAN: I mean, how is it different of terms of me not getting thumped.

LEILA: Oh.

(She shrugged.)

LEILA: Well, that's easy. My ex is a pussy. He doesn't thump people, he just gets in a temper and goes upstairs to whittle wooden squirrels. The weirdo.

DAN: Right...

(He took a deep breath.)

DAN: Gotcha. Woodworker, huh? Yeah, they're always pussies.

(Standing the other side of the fence, listening to them, Tommy furrowed his brow then mumbled under his breath.)

TOMMY: Cheeky fucking... pussies indeed. I ought to...

(He then fell silent again to listen to Leila.)

LEILA: Pacified?

DAN: Pretty much.

LEILA: Good.

(She nodded.)

LEILA: I just hope it works.

DAN: If it doesn't, it won't be because of my terrible acting; I can assure you.

LEILA: Good to know.

DAN: One question though...

LEILA: Oh, for pity's sake. What?

DAN: How will we *know* it's worked?

LEILA: He'll thump you!

DAN: Leila...

LEILA: I'm kidding. Fact is, *you* won't know. And you don't need to.

DAN: Right...

LEILA: *I'll* only find out by how he reacts in the next few days.

DAN: Find out what?

LEILA: Why he's such a cunt!

(She sneered.)

LEILA: He took another woman home! Put her in his bed. And when I told him he was a bastard and I was never going to speak to him again, you'll never guess what he did?

DAN: Laughed in your face?

LEILA: I wish!

(She clutched a hand to her heart.)

LEILA: He apologised, said he understood then skulked upstairs to carve a badger!

Bastard! A real man would have fought for me, but no. He just accepted me calling him a cunt and left the room.

(She sneered.)

LEILA: Quite obviously he never had feelings for me in the first place. And that's where you come in. Make him jealous, Dave!

DAN: Dan!

LEILA: Nobody cares! Make him jealous and make him want to fight for me! That way I can reject him for three months before eventually letting him off.

(She beamed.)

LEILA: He'll be so delighted to have won me back, he'll be putty in my hands! Just what I want from a man!

(Dan stared through her emptily.)

DAN: Right... so... you want him back then...

LEILA: Nice deduction detective!

DAN: Um...

LEILA: Um, what?

DAN: That being the case... wouldn't it just be easier to tell him how you feel?

LEILA: Don't be absurd. Why would I do that?

DAN: Because it sounds to me like he might have gone upstairs to cry, not carve a badger!

LEILA: Cry?

DAN: Well, he is a woodcrafter. Pussy, remember?

LEILA: Well... nope. Can't be that!

DAN: Can't it? Only it sounds to me like, when you told him you never wanted to see him again, you probably sounded like you *meant* it.

LEILA: I did make it sound like that. Of course, I did. I wasn't going to giggle through it and give the game away, was I? I needed him to know I was annoyed.

DAN: And you did! So there's a fair chance, he really liked you, but only walked away because you made it *clear* that your relationship was over.

(Leila scoffed.)

LEILA: Naïve fool!

DAN: I...

LEILA: If that's true... if he actually like me... how come, in the last six months, he's never once fought to win me back? Not once! I've called him every name under the sun in that time too. I've even told him he's dead to me! On several occasions! But he *still* hasn't fought back! I'm making every effort I can, but he still won't do the man thing; call me a bitch then force me into his rugged arms and have his wicked way with me!

(She sighed.)

LEILA: Nope. He clearly wasn't that keen in the first place. But you're going to change that. Make him jealous. Make him envy you. Make him see how lucky you have to be to have a babe like me!

(She nodded.)

LEILA: With any luck, he'll finally grow a pair, grab me by the hips, then do me on the table.

DAN: Right... well... okay.

(He nodded.)

DAN: Let's get started then.

LEILA: Nope!

DAN: Nope?

LEILA: Tonight!

DAN: Tonight?

LEILA: You heard me. Max is going out to play some daft game and Rico and Soppo knickers are going on a date. That means Tommy and I will be the only one's home.

DAN: Fair enough!

LEILA: Romance me well, actor. Tonight is a big deal. Now bugger off and come back tonight about seven.

DAN: Roger.

(The pair of them then went their separate ways, leaving Tommy standing there aghast.)

TOMMY: What the fuck did I just overhear?

(A deeply suspicious expression then appeared on his brow.)

TOMMY: Or *maybe* I should say, what did Leila just *make sure* I overheard?

(He bit his lip.)

TOMMY: What are you up to, Leila? What *are* you up to?

That evening, Max was heading down the road with a bag slung over his shoulder. He was on his way to the stadium for the deciding match of the season. It was fair to say, he couldn't have been more psyched up. He was flexing his arms and stretching his neck with every step he took. Walking at his side, Rico and Sofia found his overly macho display extremely disturbing.

RICO: Mate! What the fuck are you doing?

SOFIA: You look like you sat on an ant's nest.

MAX: Well, I didn't.

SOFIA: Are you sure?

MAX: Yes!

(He ruffled his neck.)

MAX: If you must know, I'm doing my mental preparation routine!

RICO: Is that what it is?

MAX: Yes! What did you think it was?

RICO: Some kind of weird chicken dance.

MAX: Then you, my friend, are a ridiculous person.

SOFIA: Says the guy who sat in an ant's nest.

MAX: I did nothing of the sort!

(He nodded.)

MAX: I'm psyching myself up and stretching at the same time. It's my tried and trusted pre-match routine. And it's worked well for me so far this season!

RICO: So you do that every match day, do you?

MAX: Without fail.

SOFIA: And the funny looks you get don't bother you?

MAX: What funny looks?

(He furrowed his brow.)

MAX: I didn't get any funny looks until you two decided to walk with me! Which is a bit odd, by the way. You said you had plans tonight.

SOFIA: We *have* got plans tonight!

(She shrugged.)

SOFIA: They just happen to involve walking in the same direction as you!

MAX: I see.

(He smiled.)

MAX: Going anywhere nice?

RICO: No. We *thought* about going somewhere nice then Sofia suggested going somewhere shit instead.

SOFIA: I just fancied a change.

RICO: Yeah. So we've decided to spend the night sitting on a bench next to the swamp.

SOFIA: A *broken* bench.

RICO: That's the one.

(Max glowered at them coldly.)

MAX: I asked you a perfectly reasonable question there, you pair of cunts. Was that sarcasm really necessary?

RICO: Absolutely. You asked if we were going somewhere nice. As if going somewhere terrible was a choice we'd consciously make.

SOFIA: Mocking it just felt right.

RICO: Mocking it felt *necessary*.

(Max mused to himself.)

MAX: I would wallop you both normally, but you actually make a good point. That really is a stupid question.

RICO: And surprisingly common. Every year my nan would head for the coast and people would ask her if she's going somewhere nice. Well, yeah! It's nice to her, isn't it? She wouldn't go otherwise. Stupid question.

SOFIA: Why people won't just say 'where are you're going', I just don't know.

(Max nodded.)

MAX: Thanks, you two. It's nice to know I'm not the only one who has these thoughts.

(He then grimaced to himself.)

MAX: But still weird to hear it coming from you, Sofia.

SOFIA: Why?

MAX: Because not so long ago, you used to hide behind Rico and say bugger all. Except for the odd squeak if someone spoke to you directly. It's hard to get used to you being verbal and interesting.

RICO: Mate, that's a bit harsh. She was always interesting.

MAX: I dare say she was, mate, but how was I to know that? She barely said a word to me for the first six months I knew her!

RICO: Even so...

SOFIA: No. Max is right, Rico. Only psychiatrists found my whimpering and squeaking in the background interesting. Fascinating, actually... one of them observed. In a friend situation, it most certain didn't make me the life and soul of the party.

RICO: Well... fair comment. I'll let you off, Max.

MAX: You'll let me off? How generous you are.

RICO: Right...

MAX: To yourself.

RICO: What?

MAX: Allowing yourself to think I give a shit about your objection. How wonderfully self-charitable you are.

RICO: Mate...

(They shared an amused smirk.)

RICO: You're a tit.

MAX: Because women want me and men worship me?

RICO: No.

MAX: I think you mean yes.

RICO: You think incorrectly.

MAX: I think with my brain, and I'm pretty sure that's the only viable method.

RICO: Yes, but it only works if you get the return message to come out of your mouth rather than your arse.

(They shared a childish giggle then Rico smiled to his side.)

RICO: You know, S...

(He glanced behind himself in bewilderment. Sofia was slowly trudging a few feet behind.)

RICO: What are you doing back there?

SOFIA: Pretending I don't know you.

MAX: She was overawed by our excellent wordplay.

(Sofia giggled.)

SOFIA: Actually, I was overcome with the fear that I may have got engaged to an idiot!

RICO: Well that's bollocks. You knew I was idiot from the minute we met.

(Sofia giggled then hurriedly advanced. They instantly shared a loving kiss on the lips.)

SOFIA: Guilty.

RICO: Yeah... thanks.

MAX: Wow. You two are so shamelessly in love, you're enough to put me off my dinner.

RICO: And what's more, we don't care.

MAX: And I never even suspected that you might.

(He nodded.)

MAX: Anyway...

(He pointed down a side street.)

MAX: The arena's this way, so I shall take my leave. Enjoy your date at the swamp.

SOFIA: We'll try, but if none of the benches are broken, we're coming straight home again.

RICO: Her heart's set on that.

(He smiled.)

RICO: See you later, Max. And good luck!

(He furrowed his brow.)

RICO: I mean that! Go out there and win, mate! We can't have that masked tosspot you described, claiming the title and ruining the sport forever.

SOFIA: Oh, no; he's off.

RICO: But it matters, Sofia. Call me a sporting puritan if you like, but if you allow changes like showboating and gamesmanship to happen, the entire thing becomes tarnished, and it's important to me that that's not allow to happen.

MAX: And it won't.

(He sneered.)

MAX: I'll have the lads psyched up to destroy them cunts tonight, mate. And put that showboating wanker in his place forever.

RICO: Good!

(They then shared an overly manly handshake.)

RICO: Now go! Kill them!

MAX: Don't mind if I do!

(He then about turned and marched away, still performing his bizarre pre-match routine. Watching him go, Rico and Sofia could only smirk.)

RICO: If only he knew what a tit he looks.

SOFIA: Well, we did try to warn him.

RICO: Then our collective conscious is clear.

A short while later, at forty four Whitley Street, Tommy was sitting in the living room, *pretending* to read a book about overseas carving techniques. In reality, he was actually just sitting there, waiting for Leila to spring her plan. Now and again, he'd peruse half a page then glance to where she was sitting impatiently on the other sofa. It couldn't have been more obvious that she was waiting for someone to knock on the door. He couldn't help but shake his head at her. Her plan had him in something of a quandary. If she genuinely wanted him to be jealous and fight to take her back, he'd gladly do it. Despite her callousness towards him in the last six months, he still found her fascinating and would gladly take her back.

He couldn't help thinking, however, that she'd deliberately discussed the plan where he could hear it. And that she'd done so for nefarious reasons. He might well fight to win her back, only for her to use it against him. He could throw Dan out then take her in his arms, only for her to tell Chi he molested her. She was a person of such a devious nature, he genuinely had no idea what she was planning. As he thought it over in his head, he bit this lip then accidentally mumbled too loudly.

TOMMY: What are you up to, woman.

(Leila glanced about herself in bewilderment.)

LEILA: How odd. I thought I heard the voice of our old technician. The one who tragically died in a freak taking Chi to bed accident.

(Tommy scowled at her.)

TOMMY: Seriously?

LEILA: It spoke again!

(Tommy furrowed his brow.)

TOMMY: Fine. I'll play along.

(He then performed a ghostly voice.)

TOMMY: I am the ghost of Tommy Brightlingsea. Leila... why are you such a...

(Leila swiftly glowered at him.)

LEILA: Such a what???

TOMMY: Don't ask me, ask the ghost.

LEILA: You *are* the ghost! Dead bloke!

TOMMY: Oh. Fair enough. Why are you such a bitch?

LEILA: Charming!

TOMMY: No, it's not.

LEILA: What?

TOMMY: Being a bitch isn't charming!

LEILA: Oh, what would you know about it?

TOMMY: Plenty.

LEILA: Yeah, right. You suck.

(A devious expression then crossed her brow.)

LEILA: You know who doesn't suck? My new boyfriend, Dave!

TOMMY: Dan!

LEILA: Oh, yeah! That's right.

(She flinched.)

LEILA: Wait!! What? How would you know that?

TOMMY: Shit! Um... lucky guess.

LEILA: Huh?

TOMMY: Every Dan we meet, Leila, you call Dave!

LEILA: Do I?

(Tommy nodded sternly.)

TOMMY: Yes!

LEILA: I find that hard to believe!

TOMMY: Yeah? Then how else would I *know* you meant Dan when you said Dave?

(Leila eyed him suspiciously for a moment then shrugged.)

LEILA: Fine. Maybe I *do* call Dan's that then.

TOMMY: You do, yes!

(Just then, there was a hammering on the door. At once, Leila leapt to her feet then charged towards the door.)

LEILA: Dave's here!

TOMMY: Dan!

LEILA: Shut up!

(Tommy watched her vanish into the hallway then bit his lip anxiously.)

TOMMY: Hopefully, I can figure out her plan before this ridiculous charade gets out of hand. What is it, Leila. Do you want me, or are you using this actor to make me look bad, purely out of spite? What is it?

(He then sat and pondered the situation for a few moments, when Leila came wandering in draped all over her new boyfriend.)

LEILA: Tommy? Meet Dan!

TOMMY: You mean Dave!

LEILA: Oh, yeah!

DAN: It's Dan!

LEILA: Correct!

(She scowled at Tommy.)

LEILA: Stop trying to confuse me.

(A light then appeared in her eyes. This was the perfect opportunity to put her plan into action.)

LEILA: You've always been horrible like that. Unlike my Dennis. Dan!

TOMMY: Derek!

LEILA: It's Dan!

(She ruffled her neck.)

LEILA: Unlike you, he's a *real* man. And he doesn't take strange women home when he's *supposed* to be with me!

TOMMY: Leila, I've never *once* taken a strange woman home!

(He grimaced.)

TOMMY: I took Chi.

LEILA: Exactly my point. *Dan*'s never done that!

TOMMY: He doesn't know Chi, does he?

LEILA: Stop being obtuse!

(She shook her fist at him.)

LEILA: What I'm saying is, Dan only ever takes *me* home!

TOMMY: Right...

(He grimaced.)

TOMMY: When? *I*'ve never seen him!

LEILA: Um... we got to his house!

TOMMY: Again. When? You've been here for breakfast every morning now for a year!

LEILA: That's doesn't mean I slept here!

TOMMY: Right...

(Leila glowered at Dan.)

LEILA: Tell him!

(Delighted that he'd finally be called upon to use his acting skills, Dan stepped forward.

He then proceeded to act. Literally. A stage actor by trade, he strode forwards then proceeded to ham it up like he was partaking in a poorly written drama.)

DAN: Tell him I shall, my fair Leila!

(He jumped down on one knee then cast a majestic arm out to the side like a god reaching for an apple.)

DAN: Our love is both strongth and true! And forever it shall remain! For never once shall I reach under the buttocks of a maiden not of my own and carry her forth into the bosom of my boudoir! My pillows are a sanctuary for nobody but my beloved! And lie upon them frequently we do!

LEILA: What?

TOMMY: Um... Leila... who is this bloke?

DAN: Who am I, he says with the deepest foreboding etched into his tongue. And well he might. For I am the stud that tooketh away his maiden. Not by force or by cunning, but by simply being the suitor he woeful neglected to be! Now begone, foolish

woodcrafter; any effort from thy self to reclaim her heart would be nugatory beyond the point of becoming otiose!

(Tommy and Leila both blinked at him with bewildered emptiness then turned to look at each other.)

LEILA: I think what he was saying was, you blew it. You've lost me. I've found another man! And if you ever want me back... well... you're gonna have a hell of a fight on your hands!

DAN: But not with me!

LEILA: Shut up, Dave!

DAN: It's Dan! Um... I do decree!

LEILA: Nobody cares!

DAN: Right...

LEILA: That's how it is, Tommy. Fight or die.

TOMMY: Yeah... or is that just what you *want* me think? For all I know, you might be angling for me to fight for you, just so you can tell everyone I'm an obsessive or a stalker! I'll look a right cunt, and you'll rub my nose in it forever! You'd love that!

LEILA: As if I would!

TOMMY: You absolutely would! In the last six months, you've made it abundantly clear on several occasions that you hate my guts! So right now, I wouldn't put anything past you!

LEILA: Wow! You really think that little of me?

TOMMY: No! *You* think that little of *me*!

(He ruffled his neck.)

TOMMY: Therefore, fighting for you would be a waste of time, wouldn't it?

LEILA: Tommy...

TOMMY: So, forget this nonsense, Leila. I'm done with this charade! I'm not a game player; I'm a carpenter! I'm going upstairs!

LEILA: Fine! You do that! I'm gonna stay down here and make out with my boyfriend!

DAN: Our tongues shall entwine like ivy around a pine trellis.

LEILA: With bells on!

TOMMY: Good for you! Have fun!

LEILA: I will! With my boyfriend!

TOMMY: Yeah, you do that!

(Getting more than a little irritated by Leila talking about having a new boyfriend, even though he knew it wasn't true, Tommy ruffled his neck then returned her lie in kind.)

TOMMY: And later on, I'll do the same with my girlfriend!

LEILA: You haven't got a girlfriend!

TOMMY: Yes, I have!

LEILA: Who?

TOMMY: Um...

(He nodded sternly then said the first name that came into his head.)

TOMMY: Chi!

LEILA: Chi?

(Tommy nodded then proceeded to embellish the lie even further. She'd spent months laying him low and he'd finally snapped.)

TOMMY: That's right! Chi! And for your information, taking her home that night was not an accident! She asked me to!

LEILA: What???

TOMMY: You heard! And I said yes! Fuck me, yes! You or Chi? It wasn't even a contest! I took her home and banged her all night! All night, Leila! All night! And we've been doing it three times a week ever since. How do you like those apples?

(Leila whimpered.)

LEILA: They're too sour!

TOMMY: They're the apples of truth, that's why! So do what you like, woman! I'm going to my room.

(He then stomped towards the door.)

TOMMY: Have fun with the terrible actor you hired!

(Dan gasped then dramatically hung his head.)

DAN: I hath been rumbled.

LEILA: Shut up, Derek!

DAN: It's Dave! Dan!

TOMMY: It's irrelevant! Now piss off!

(He then stormed up the stairs, growling under his breath.)

TOMMY: Stupid bloody Leila; playing games and fucking about. I want to know how she feels, for fuck sake. Does she want me or despise me; which is it?

(Just as he reached the top of the stairs, however, he heard a commotion from the floor below.)

LEILA: I'm gonna kill her!

DAN: Who? Leila? Where are you...

(The front door then slammed. Feeling a deep sense of foreboding, Tommy stopped, turned around then headed to the top of the stairs. Dan was down there putting his coat on.)

TOMMY: Um... Dan... is it?

DAN: Probably. I've been called so many things tonight, I'm not even sure myself.

TOMMY: Yeah, well, forget that... did Leila... um... is she going to...

DAN: She's going kill someone called Chi, mate. And that's not what I signed up for, so I'm going home.

(He then yanked open the door and headed outside. Left behind, Tommy stood there agape for a moment then his eyes bulged in terror.)

TOMMY: Fuck!!!

(With that, he zoomed down the stairs with the horrified look of a condemned man etched upon his brow.)

At the Axnay Volley stadium at this time, the deciding match between East Axnay and North Axnay had finally got underway. This bizarre mixture of volleyball and football was the town's favourite pastime and the stadium was full, as always. Something about watching five men stand either side of a volleyball net, trying to boot a football into the goal at the far end of their opponent's half, had captured their imagination like nothing else ever could. So far in this match, however, neither side had scored. Max was in fine form for East Axnay, but much to his annoyance, so was The Masked Braggart between

the opponent's posts. Unlike Max, however, he wasn't conducting himself with much in the way of dignity. Having just pulled off a fine save, he was gyrating his hips with both hands fixed behind his head. He was milking every second and the North Axnay fans were loving it.)

BRAGGART: Drink it in, bitches!!! You're watching the master in action!!!

(The North Axnay fans cheered raucously. The East Axnay players, however, were not impressed.)

MAX: I'm gonna run over there and slap that cunt in a minute.

(Those were the sentiments of most of East Axnay's supporters as well.)

STEVE: I'm half tempted to raid the pitch and punch that bloke!

ERIC: Join the fucking queue!

(There were some in the East Axnay end, however, who approved.)

TIKA: Target acquired, girls!

SAKI: Right? Confident, sexy...

ALYSSA: Gorgeous arse!

LISA: He's so our type.

AMIE: Head for the players entrance at full time, ladies. Rico's Girls, name change pending, are going fishing later! Miaow!

(Back on the pitch at this time, Max was once again being called into action. On the other side of the dividing net in the centre of the pitch, the ball had come down to the foot of a North Axnay player and he'd smashed it ferociously at Max's goal.)

MAX: Not on my watch, sonny boy!!!

(He then dived full stretch to his right. Much to his absolute dismay, however, the ball bypassed his fingertips and flew into the back of the net. North Axnay had taken a one-nil lead. Mercifully, the shot had come from beneath the central net. Had it gone over the net, it would have counted as two. Not taking an ounce of consolation from that fact, Max quickly made his feelings known.)

MAX: Bollocks!!!

(Upon landing, he grumpily upped then stomped into his goal to collect the ball.)

MAX: Lucky miskick!

(He then rolled the ball out of his net and sneered down to the other end of the pitch. To his disbelief, the opposing goalkeeper was swaying his hips from side to side and thumbing his nose at him.)

MAX: That complete...

(He growled.)

MAX: I'm gonna break every single one of them fingers when this is over!

(It was fair to say that, right now, Max was extremely riled. Axnay Volley was meant to be played in a gentlemanly spirit and mocking your opponent for conceding a goal was something players just didn't do. For this man to break that code was deeply infuriating.)

MAX: When I'm done, he's gonna need that fucking mask to hide his black eyes!

(He then shook his head and refocused on the game. His team were now in possession.)

MAX: That's it... now head it down... and... smack!

(Max's face instantly lit up. It had been an excellent set of moves, culminating in their best forward unleashing a true power blaster over the top of the central net.)

MAX: Keep that out, you masked wanker!!!

(Much to his absolute infuriation, the masked goalkeeper proceeded to do exactly that. With cat-like reflexes, he'd sprung into action, managing to tip the ball away to safety. He'd then landed in a laying down pose with one hand behind his head and other on his hip.)

MAX: You... you... you smug...

(His jaw then dropped. The Masked Braggart had given him a stern thumbs up as if to say, 'and that's how it done'.)

MAX: No! He did not fucking do that! He did *not* just give me a thumbs up!

(Right now, it was taking every ounce of restraint he had, not to charge across the court and set about the masked nuisance with his fists.)

MAX: Do not rise to it, Max. He's not worth getting sent off for. Don't rise to it.

(His brow furrowed.)

MAX: The fact he's just turned his back to wiggle his arse at you has no bearing on anything. Just focus on the game, mate.

(He then ruffled his neck indignantly before lowering himself down into his goalkeeping stance again. While he was in the process of doing so, however, the ball gently rolled past him and into his goal. Having not even seen it, Max couldn't even begin to understand why his own fans were suddenly booing him.)

MAX: What? What gives?

(His teammate stormed over to him.)

NICK: What gives? They took a quick restart, that's what. Chip then volley. Complete miskick. But thanks to *you* just standing there with your thumb up your arse, their embarrassingly lame shot just rolled into the back of our fucking goal!

MAX: What???

(Max spun around then flinched at the sight of the ball sitting there in the back of his net.)

MAX: How did that get there???

NICK: Wake up, Max! Pay attention! We're two fucking nil down now!

MAX: Yeah... fuck!

(He then hurried to get the ball, before rolling it out again. It was fair to say, he was now more angry that he'd *ever* been. Because of the opposing goalkeeper's antics, he'd been tricked into committing sport's cardinal sin. He'd taken his eye off the ball. Such an error was unforgivable enough when an outfield player did it, but when a goalkeeper did it, it was always costly. Having been led into that very nightmare, when he settled back into this goalkeeping stance again, Max was red with rage.)

MAX: He dies after this. He dies!

(He sneered.)

MAX: And he dies after a defeat! My back's up now. If they think they'll score again, they can fuck off. From now on, my goal is like my underpants! No fucker goes in there without my expression permission!

(He then dived low to his left and pulled off an excellent save. It was fair to say that conceding because his opponent had deliberately made him lose concentration had focused him more than ever. All of a sudden, his eyes were wide-open and he was bouncing on the ball of his feet, ready to spring right and left like a veteran champion duellist.)

MAX: Go on, boys. Make their fucking net bulge!

(He then looked on as his teammates messed up their turn. The resulting lame shot wasn't even worth describing. The shot that came back at them, however, very much was. Taking advantage of the weak, bobbled shot that had limped over the net, the North Axnay forward had pelted the ball on the volley with all his might. A sudden strike, hoping to take advantage of East Axnay's failure. Max, however, was equal to it. Having dived across to his right, he managed to parry the ball back to his teammate, setting him up for their next attack.)

MAX: Yes! Let them have it, lads!

(Sadly for Max, however, not once during the rest of that first half did his teammates let anyone 'have it'. Instead, they went back to their team bench at half time without a single goal to their name. Max, however, couldn't chastise his teammates for their failure to score. It should, after all, have only been one-nil. The biggest mistake of the game was his and his alone. As Dave, the manager, was quick to point out.)

DAVE: Max! You're a cunt!

(He was a man of few words, but those words he *did* opt to use, very often made his feelings more than clear.)

Across Axnay at this time, Tommy was strolling out of the warrior's guild, a very relieved man indeed. After racing out of the house to find Leila before she could confront Chi, he'd found an empty street. She was nowhere to be seen. Fearing the worst, he'd then headed over to the guild, just praying she hadn't found a way of getting there without him seeing her. Mercifully, she hadn't. Chi hadn't seen her and nor had anyone else.

TOMMY: Thank fuck for that. If she'd told Chi what I said, my life wouldn't have been worth living.

(He puffed out with relief then headed out the alcove and into the main square beyond it.)

TOMMY: I wonder where she went then.

(With a shrug, he then proceeded to head back towards Whitley Street. He'd waited in the guild for a good while, ready to spring if she'd set foot in there, but now he was satisfied she must have gone elsewhere.)

TOMMY: Problem solved for now. Still... I'd better explain myself in the morning, because that *will* become an issue if I leave it.

(As he continued onwards, however, he heard a female grumbling from back near the guild.)

LEILA: I'll bloody show her! Stupid Chi, telling me lies and stealing my man!!!

(At once, Tommy froze on the spot before slowly turning around. Much to his abject horror, Leila was storming into the alcove en route to the guild.)

TOMMY: No!!!

(He then took off after her, only to fall flat on his face on the cobbles.)

TOMMY: This is not the time for clumsy-arsed fuckwittery, feet! After her!!!

(He then sprung upwards again and charged. He could only assume that Leila had sulked somewhere else in town first then had come at the guild from a different direction. Right now, however, *how* she got past him didn't matter. What mattered was that she had, and she was now heading for the guild doors, while he was still languishing around the corner.)

TOMMY: Why does fate hate me???

(Fates disliking of him, however, was the least of his worries. Leila was about to stir up a hornets nest that could well end up with the entire warrior community hating him forever. Fired up with anger and misinformation, she stormed into the guild, strode up to Chi's desk then violently slapped all the papers off her desk.)

LEILA: Bitch!!!

(Chi jumped to her feet furiously.)

CHI: Excuse me???

LEILA: Whore!!!

CHI: Whore??? Who the hell do you think you're talking to???

LEILA: That's such a lie!!!

CHI: What? I said, who do you think you're talking to!

LEILA: And the lies keep coming!!!

CHI: Leila...

(Leila pointed an accusing finger in her direction.)

LEILA: You!!!

CHI: What about me???

LEILA: I'm coming to that! You... you did it!

CHI: Did what?

LEILA: You had sex with Tommy!!!

(Everyone in attendance gasped in astonishment. Then, with truly terrible timing, Tommy came charging through the door. He instantly received an approving round of applause from several of the male warriors. Ignoring it, he raced up behind Leila in readiness to drag her away.)

CHI: I did what???

LEILA: Don't deny it! You had sex with Tommy!!!

(Tommy instantly screeched to a halt. Something told him that proceeding would be deeply foolish at the point, so he swiftly about turned and started to creep towards the door again.)

CHI: I did nothing of the sort!!!

LEILA: Liar! He told me everything!!!

CHI: Oh, he did, did he???

(Tommy's creeping become a sprint at this point. He felt very much like his life depended on it. Unfortunately, for him, he didn't get very far.)

CHI: Tommy!!! What have you been telling people???

(Not about to stop and explain himself, Tommy bounded onwards towards the door. Just as he reached it, however, Garrett, the guild's biggest and angriest man bound through it, violently. Hit squarely in the face with it, Tommy staggered backwards and fell onto his backside.)

TOMMY: Fuck me! What the hell was that?

(He strained his eyes to regain his vision, then swiftly stood up. It proved to be yet another error on his part. Chi and Leila were both standing in front of him growling fiercely.)

TOMMY: Somebody please cast lightning magic at me!!! Please!!!

CHI: No casting magic in the guild!!!

TOMMY: Fuck!!!

CHI: Why have you been telling lies, Tommy???

LEILA: Why have you *both* been telling lies???

CHI: Both???

LEILA: Yes! *He* denied it for months! And you're *still* doing it! You're both liars!!!

CHI: Leila, you dumb bitch, I've never lied once. I did not sleep with that man!!!

(A disappointed voice then rose up from the corner.)

FRANK: Aw. That's disappointing. We made a false idol of that Tommy fella.

CHI: Shut up, Frank!

FRANK: Understood.

CHI: Tommy! You need to explain yourself!

LEILA: To a psychiatrist! But mostly to me!

CHI: But especially to me!!!

LEILA: You can explain yourself too, you pink haired...

CHI: I dare you to finish the sentence!

LEILA: Fine! You pink haired man stealer!!!

CHI: Oh.

(She shrugged modestly.)

CHI: I thought it was going to be far more vile than that.

LEILA: I won't lie. I was tempted to add more colour, but...

CHI: Never mind that! Tommy, please explain to Miss Winter here that you and I did not have sex! Ever!

(Tommy gulped.)

TOMMY: Um... yeah... see... that's kinda true actually...

LEILA: Then why tell me otherwise???

(Tommy furrowed his brow.)

TOMMY: Because you brought a fake boyfriend home, just to be a cock! A hired fucking actor, no less. And the sole purpose of that was to make me feel bad.

(He ruffled.)

TOMMY: Bloody telling me you were going to make out with him. Tongues slithering all about the place. That crushed me, Leila! So...

(He grimaced.)

TOMMY: I decided to return the favour and pretend *I* was seeing someone too.

CHI: And you chose *me* for that, did you? Thanks a fucking bunch!

TOMMY: Sorry, Chi, but I chose *you* to make it sound believable!

CHI: How is that believable? I'm way out of your league.

(She scoffed.)

CHI: You're so hard up, you ended up dating Leila here!

(Leila glared at her in astonishment.)

LEILA: Hey! I'm a catch! I got the most votes of any contestant in the last Miss Axnay pageant! What did *you* get? Wrinkles, that's what!

CHI: Why, you...

TOMMY: Um... point being... no, Leila, I did not sleep with Chi. I just wanted to hurt you like you hurt me.

(He furrowed his brow.)

TOMMY: Despite the fact you're a massive cunt, I like you, woman! I've regretted taking Chi home by mistake that time, ever since it happened. We had something good, you and me.

(He sighed.)

TOMMY: I was ready to get on my knees and grovel for forgiveness, but you never gave me a chance. You went straight into your Tommy's dead routine and gave me hell for six months.

CHI: And yet, somehow, you still like her?

TOMMY: Yes!

CHI: Wow. What a bell end.

(She then headed away.)

CHI: Sort out your issue, you two, then see me, Leila! I've got some lovely fines for you!

LEILA: Me? What did I do?

(Everyone fell about laughing.)

LEILA: Right... it was the name calling, wasn't it?

CHI: And the fake accusations.

LEILA: Shit.

(She then looked to Tommy.)

LEILA: Seriously? You liked me all this time and never said anything?

TOMMY: I tried to. You cut me off and told Sofia to tell me to shut up.

LEILA: Yeah... she can be kinda rude like that. You should have ignored her!

TOMMY: You told her to...

(He gave an exasperated sigh.)

TOMMY: Doesn't matter. That's how it is. I didn't appreciate that actor prank, Leila. You either like me or you don't. You should have just said so either way.

LEILA: Well...

(She blushed.)

LEILA: I wanted to, but... pride. I felt betrayed when you took Chi home.

TOMMY: Yes, but you weren't betrayed. As was made clear to you at the time.

LEILA: Um... I suppose.

(She offered him a weak smile.)

LEILA: Truth is, I do still like you. I was just hoping you'd prove you like me back, by fighting for me. Taking me in your arms and saying, "Shut up, Leila", then throwing me down on the bed.

TOMMY: That was never going to happen though, was it? That's rape.

LEILA: Not in my fantasy!

TOMMY: Perhaps not. But I thought you hated me. And if you take a woman who *hates* you and throw her on the bed, the chances are, the police *will* cart you away. So that was never gonna happen.

LEILA: Well... yeah...

(She fluttered her eyelashes at him.)

LEILA: But... I guess... now you know I don't mind... maybe when we get home...

TOMMY: Nope.

(Leila flinched.)

LEILA: What do you mean, no???

TOMMY: I don't want to. Not anymore. You're soiled goods.

LEILA: Excuse me???

TOMMY: Max!!!

LEILA: Max?

TOMMY: Yes; Max! The unapologetic taker of women who dwells in our house!

LEILA: What about him?

TOMMY: You two doinked!

LEILA: It's a lie!

TOMMY: It's a truth!

LEILA: Okay... but it's an uncomfortable truth. Me and alcohol don't mix!

TOMMY: Doesn't matter. I don't want to date someone who's been intimate with my housemate. I just don't. That's too much awkwardness for me!

LEILA: That's ridiculous.

TOMMY: Is it?

LEILA: Yes! I was so drunk I can barely remember it. So there's nothing to feel awkward about. I'm pretty sure I fell asleep halfway through it, actually.

TOMMY: I see.

(He ruffled his neck.)

TOMMY: So... you don't remember enough to like... compare performances, so to speak?

LEILA: Other than to say I preferred you? No.

TOMMY: I see.

(He nodded.)

TOMMY: In that case, I'll think about it!

(He then about turned and headed for the door.)

LEILA: What??? Think about it??? No way! No man leaves *me* hanging like that!!!

It's now or never, sonny boy! State your claim or leave the game!

TOMMY: Patience, woman. I'll let you know in due course, okay?

LEILA: Outrageous! I'm not having that!

(Tommy just smiled at her then left the guild.)

LEILA: Hey! You come back here, mister!!!

(Just as she started to head for the door, however, Chi called over to her.)

CHI: He can wait, Leila. Come and get your fines!

LEILA: Fine me tomorrow!

CHI: Come and get your fines or go to jail!

(Leila froze.)

LEILA: Shit.

(She sighed.)

LEILA: Fine. You win.

(She then trudged towards Chi's desk.)

LEILA: But if Tommy thinks he's heard the end of this, he's sorely mistaken! Trying to leave me hanging??? Unforgivable. Bastard. As far as I'm concerned, from now on, he's dead to me.

CHI: Right. So, in other words, you're back to exactly where you were this morning,

LEILA: Correct!

CHI: I see.

(She smiled.)

CHI: Leila? You're an idiot!

Back at the Axnay Arena at this time, the second half was well underway. Having spent most of his half-time break focusing on techniques to remain calm in a crisis, Max was nowhere near as angry as he had been in the first half. He was, in fact, decidedly angrier. The masked braggart was so over the top with his antics, it'd only taken him sixty seconds to get under Max's skin again. He done so by escalating his behaviour. He was no longer simply showing off to the crowd and throwing in the odd disrespectful gesture. He was now openly mocking him. Right after he'd made his first save of the half, he'd performed a dance that involved kicking his legs out to the side alternately while pumping his hands up and down in the middle, like a hoedown. He'd done so while facing directly at Max. In that moment, Max's preparedness had flown straight out of the window.

MAX: Yeah... you're fucking dead, son!!!

(Responding to Max's threat with predictable mirth, the masked braggart kissed his hand theatrically then bent over and wiggled his backside, smacking it with the hand he'd kissed. An open invitation for Max to kiss his posterior.)

MAX: Kiss it? I'll fucking kick it, mate! From one side of Axnay to the...

(The ball then rocketed into his face, having been volleyed with spectacular venom by a North Axnay outfield player. Max had been so distracted, he hadn't even seen it coming. As a result, he was so dazed, he toppled backwards like a felled tree. The pained 'ooh' from the crowd was heartfelt. The ball was hit with such a force, the average man would have been out cold. Max, however, was not the average man. Despite being dazed for a moment, he swiftly managed to jump to his feet and growl bitterly.)

MAX: Which one of you fuckers did that? Come on! Own up! Who's responsible???

(Once again, his own teammate was on hand to offer him a friendly reminder.)

NICK: You are!!!

MAX: Excuse me???

NICK: Focus on the fucking ball! If you'd been doing that, you'd have seen the bloody thing coming!

MAX: Yeah...well... that's... right...

(Nick shook his head.)

NICK: Just be grateful. You got lucky that time.

MAX: Lucky? The ball nearly took my head off!

NICK: Yeah, but it didn't go in the back of our net!

MAX: Right...

(He nodded.)

MAX: So it was a good save then?

NICK: Well...

MAX: No, no... it was!

(He ruffled his neck.)

MAX: I meant to do that!

NICK: Max... just... focus on the game. We need to pull back the deficit! This is important!

MAX: I know!

(He nodded.)

MAX: Why do you think I deliberately saved it with my face?

(Not about to argue with him, Nick just rolled his eyes then got back into position. As he did so, Max took one last glance at the masked braggart. Much to his annoyance, he was doing an exaggerated laughing mime and pointing at him.)

MAX: That fucking... no! Stop. Ignore that cunt and get on with the game.

(As it turned out, he'd given himself some good advice. Ignoring the masked braggart was definitely the way forward. He paid him no heed for the next ten minutes, during which time, East Axnay finally managed to pull a goal back. At last there was hope!

Opting to focus on that hope rather than using the moment for petty revenge, he offered his opposing number no more than a rude hand gesture then refocussed on the game.)

MAX: Come on, lads! This is our entire season we're playing for now! Fight for that fucking trophy with everything you've got!!!

(Mocking him, The Masked Braggart bent forwards and mimicked a crying action. Max was so focused, however, he didn't see it.)

MAX: Okay, lads, that's it... block it!!!

(Despite his on-pitching coaching, however, the North Axnay forward managed to strike a powerful shot towards his neck. Unfazed, Max simply fisted it back into play.)

MAX: Get under it! Come on! Nice!!! Good parry! Perfect!!!

(He then watched on with hope in his eyes as the ball flew towards the top corner of North Axnay's net. The equalising goal looked very much a certainty.)

MAX: Surely!!!

(Alas, it was not to be. At the last second, The Masked Braggart managed to fingertip the ball away with a desperate dive. To Max, his ability to make such saves, made the man ten times more annoying. He was so good, he didn't *need* to behave like a pantomime villain. He could be a fan favourite, a sporting legend, just by being himself. He simply couldn't fathom why the man needed to make such an exhibition of himself. It was something he'd been pondering for a while now. In this very moment, however, his mind was very much focused on the game. East Axnay seemed to have found their rhythm at last and it felt very much like an equalising goal was only moments away. Sadly, that moment never arrived. Just when Max was psyched to the maximum, the referee blew the whistle for full time.)

MAX: No!!! Fuck off!!! Ref!!!

(He then sunk to his knees, as did all his teammates. Their two-one defeat had handed the title to North Axnay.)

MAX: Fuck sake! The title was in the bag. And we only needed a draw today! Where did it all go so wrong???

(He then remembered conceding the second goal. A goal that had eventually decided the match. A goal that was entirely his own fault for focusing on the other team's goalkeeper rather than the ball.)

MAX: Right... shit. It's was *my*...

(His brow then furrowed over.)

MAX: It was that masked wanker's fault!

(With that, he took off like a rocket to the other end of the pitch, where the North Axnay players were celebrating their title winning victory.)

MAX: If only I'd done this *before* kick off!!!

(With that, he bundled his way through two of Axnay's outfield players then launched into The Masked Braggart. With his fists flying, he set about his face like a berserker on a mission. His attack was so brutal, the rest of the players fled, just in case they were next.)

MAX: Making a cunt out of me!!! Not on!!! Well now it's payback time!!!

(As he continued to pummel him, however, he very quickly started to feel somewhat ill at ease. Something wasn't quite right. He was battering this man with all his might, yet The Masked Braggart was just standing there with his hands on his hips, barely even flinching. Within seconds, Max felt a deep sense of foreboding. He'd seen a similar scenario before, every time Leila tried to batter Sofia.)

MAX: Tell me it's not true...

(He then scoured the front row of the crowd with his eyes. Sure enough, Sofia was waving back at him, grinning a cheeky grin.)

MAX: Fuck. If *she's* in on it, that means...

(He then yanked the braggart's mask off.)

RICO: Alright, mate?

MAX: You complete cunt!

RICO: Easy!

MAX: What the fuck are you doing? You're meant to be a puritan!

RICO: And I was!

MAX: Then what's all this masked braggart shit about? And why the fuck were you acting like a cunt all game???

RICO: Because, like you said, I *was* a puritan.

(His brow furrowed.)

RICO: Then some cunt stole my place on the team, ably assisted by a coach who just as much as a cunt as he is!

MAX: Mate...

RICO: No! Fuck off. I lost my love of the game at that point. It's no fun following a sport where those taking part are all wankers, so I gave up.

(He nodded.)

RICO: Then you told me North Axnay needed a new goalkeeper if they were to stand any chance of stopping you from winning the league. So I applied.

MAX: Just to stop me winning???

RICO: Yes! East Axnay won it last year, because of *my* superb goalkeeping! And yet, *you* got a winner's medal despite only playing the last six games of the season and I got fuck all!

(He nodded.)

RICO: So this year, I decided to steal the title back!

MAX: You complete...

RICO: It was a long shot, of course. I needed your team to lose a few to have any chance of winning, but luckily you did. Which led us to today.

(He exhaled.)

RICO: And now I've finally got the medal you stole from me!

MAX: Right.

(He grimaced.)

MAX: You're very childish! And was all that mocking and shithousing necessary? And what's with that mask?

(Rico shrugged.)

RICO: Like I said, winning this season was a long shot. Chances were, my plan would fail. So I used a disguise. If you'd won the league, I would have skulked away and you'd never have been any the wiser about my involvement.

(He exhaled.)

RICO: But... seeing as you *didn't* win...

(He then started to perform a cocky victory dancing, ably assisted by Sofia, healing him as she performed a cheeky jig of her own from the stands.)

MAX: Rico?

RICO: Yes, runner-up?

MAX: You're very childish!

RICO: I can afford to be. I'm a winner!

MAX: Right...

(He then about turned and headed for the changing rooms. As he did so, one thought popped into his mind. Rico had played the long game and had been well-rewarded. In that sense, he *deserved* to feel smug. Accepting that fact, Max nodded. A smile then crept on his lips. He'd always felt a bit guilty about stealing his place on the team. As much as he liked to pretend it was all perfectly innocent, it had never sat well with him. To that end, as he headed down the players tunnel, he couldn't help but glance to the ceiling and make his feelings know.)

MAX: Well, played, Rico, my old son. Well played.

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