

The Axnay Rejects

EPISODE TWENTY-TWO – THE DUEL IN THE CROWN

At The Axnay Elite's base, on what seemed like an ordinary weekday morning, champagne corks were flying and many a celebration could be heard. At last, they'd had a breakthrough. Several weeks after they'd first promised themselves that they'd find a way to get revenge on The Axnay Rejects, they'd finally come up with a plan. Ironically, they'd deliberately been keeping Velvet Vortex out of the loop in order to keep the plan from Chi, and yet she was the one who'd come up with it. Not about to let her teammates overlook that fact, she was the most vocal celebrator of all.

VORTEX: Well done, team! It took a while but we got there eventually!

(She beamed.)

VORTEX: Because of me!

SHADOW: Still fishing for kudos, are we?

VORTEX: Absolutely not, Artful, my good friend. I was just recapping the fact that we *all* worked so damned hard to find a way to destroy The Rejects.

(Countess Brilliance rolled her eyes.)

BRILLIANCE: Carry on, Velvet; we all know you weren't finished.

VORTEX: Oh, but I was!

(She shrugged.)

VORTEX: Or were you under the mistaken impression that I'd elaborate and point out the fact that it was *me* who came up with the plan?

BRILLIANCE: There it is!

VORTEX: There's what?

BRILLIANCE: You, fishing for recognition again!

VORTEX: No, I wasn't. I merely mentioned the thing that you erroneously *thought* I was going to say!

(Duke Thunder chuckled.)

THUNDER: You genuinely think we believe these outlandish lies of yours, don't you?

VORTEX: What lies?

THUNDER: I rest my case.

(He nodded.)

THUNDER: You're fun, Velvet.

MIGHTY: I'll second that! You're fun *and* you're a valuable asset. Thanks to you we at last have a plan.

VORTEX: Well, that's kind of you to say, but let's not get carried away. I only did what any *other* gorgeous, magic-casting heroine for the ages would have done.

MIGHTY: And we're grateful for it. Because now, we can make those infernal Axnay Rejects pay for...

(His mind then went completely blank.)

MIGHTY: Make them pay for...

THUNDER: Surely, you can't have forgotten already!

MIGHTY: Um...

THUNDER: Good god, man! We're getting them back for...

(He then froze to the spot. He was also lost for what to say next.)

THUNDER: Well, they must have done something.

BRILLIANCE: They did!

SHADOW: And what was it?

BRILLIANCE: Um... well...

(Vortex rolled her eyes.)

VORTEX: Does it matter? They're peasants! They deserve to be punished for that alone!

MIGHTY: True, but...

VORTEX: But seeing as you've all clearly forgotten already, we're going to get them back because every time we tried to make peace, they were arseholes about it.

SHADOW: Is that why?

VORTEX: Pretty much. Plus, they were horrible so and so's at the team of the year awards!

(At once, Brilliance, Shadow, Mighty and Thunder all looked enlightened.)

SHADOW: The bastards!

THUNDER: Rubbing our noses in defeat like that was not on!

VORTEX: Right?

(She folded her arms bitterly.)

VORTEX: Bastards! I'm glad that I, and I alone, found out how to get revenge on them!

BRILLIANCE: And she's off kudos hunting again.

VORTEX: I'm not!

BRILLIANCE: Yes, you are!

VORTEX: Lies!

(She sneered.)

VORTEX: Now stop accusing me of things like a bent copper desperate for an arrest! I promise, it won't end well for you!

BRILLIANCE: Whatever.

(She rolled her eyes.)

VORTEX: Seriously? An eye roll? That looked like a challenge!

BRILLIANCE: A challenge?

VORTEX: Yeah! You think I can't make this conversation end badly for you!

BRILLIANCE: Because you can't!

VORTEX: No?

(She adopted a cocky stance.)

VORTEX: Brilliance, you're meant to be our team rep. The smart one who knows the guild rulebook back to front, just in case we ever need to argue our case.

BRILLIANCE: So?

VORTEX: So had you read the handbook *properly*, you'd have known all about law twenty four; clause one! Wouldn't you?

(Brilliance shrank into herself a little.)

BRILLIANCE: Well...

VORTEX: No excuses. You would have! And you'd have realised that law twenty four; clause one was the answer to all our prayers! But no. We only found it because *I* happened to skim through the book last night. So, put that in your pipe and smoke those apples!

BRILLIANCE: That's not the phrase!

VORTEX: Who cares? The point is, that conversation ended badly for you, just like I predicted and now you feel silly, don't you?

BRILLIANCE: Shut up!

VORTEX: Ha! See!

THUNDER: Yes, well, never mind bickering, ladies! This should be a day of celebration; not inbreeding!

SHADOW: Infighting!

THUNDER: That too!

(He beamed with delirious joy.)

THUNDER: Today is the day we end those Rejects, and I, for one, would rather celebrate that fact than sit here bickering! At last, those peasants are going down!

(His word were greeted with a cheer from his entire team.)

A few miles outside of Axnay, at this time, The Axnay Rejects were already on their umpteenth battle of the morning. Sofia had an important appointment that afternoon, so they'd decided to get their shift out of the way early. So far, it had turned out to be a lucrative decision. Chamrots, a particularly savage breed of beast, were out in numbers. Having killed close to five hundred of them so far, they knew they were due to reap generous rewards. The Rejects were delighted to see them. Chamrots had been inaccurately rated by the assessors at the ministry of defence. For all their savagery they weren't much stronger than Empies, yet paid a rewards six times higher. Fighting them therefore, felt like money for old rope! Barely able to contain his glee about that fact, when yet another swarm of them started to descend on him and his teammates, Max virtually danced for joy.

MAX: More! This just gets better and better!

TOMMY: I'll say it does. Each one of them fuckers is worth a fortune!

(Leila glanced at him briefly then swiftly and deliberately turned her nose up at him.)

LEILA: Hmph!

(Paying her no heed, Tommy exhaled.)

TOMMY: Get charging then, Max. The sooner you charge, the sooner we start earning.

RICO: You mean the sooner he starts charging, the sooner we start earning and the sooner *you* start getting paid for fuck all!

TOMMY: Piss off you! I've been active in every single one of these fights!

RICO: Have you fuck!

SOFIA: He has. He's been slowing them down and disorientating them.

TOMMY: Yeah! So stick that in your...

MAX: You leave his arse alone, we've got work to do.

TOMMY: I was gonna say pipe, not arse!

MAX: And you can say it later!

(He furrowed his brow.)

MAX: I'm about to start my charge and I'd like to think my teammates might be alert enough to fight them with me. Or is that too much to ask?

TOMMY: Don't be a knob, Max. Just... start your fucking charge!

MAX: Thank you. I will.

(He nodded.)

MAX: Ready, Rico?

RICO: Like Tommy said, just start your fucking charge, mate!

MAX: I'll take that as a yes!

(With that, he took off like a rocket in the direction of the incoming Chamrots. As always, Rico was a few feet behind.)

MAX: I love these things, mate. I literally hear coins falling every time we kill one.

RICO: You do that too, huh?

MAX: Of course! Easy money, mate. I like easy money.

(He beamed.)

MAX: We should come out early more often if there's going to be this many every day!

RICO: There won't be. This is a particularly odd day for Chamrots. You usually only see one pack every few weeks or so, but today...

MAX: We're blessed!

(With that, he charged into the pack and lashed his sword across himself.)

MAX: Behold, the sweet sound of a waterfall of coins!

RICO: Next mind that shit, mate. Cast your shield or the next thing you'll hear is the raspy sting of Sofia's vile tongue.

MAX: Aw, fuck. These things are so shit, I hadn't even noticed I'd forgotten.

(He then cast his shield and lashed his blade once again. He did so to a soundtrack of Sofia in full flight.)

SOFIA: You're a twat, Max!

(Her flights had been much shorter lately. Since she'd got engaged to Rico, she was too happy to rant for long.)

MAX: Understood!

(Seconds later, Rico zoomed past, cutting his way through the pack.)

RICO: Hear them coins, Max? That's next week's food shop taken care of!

MAX: Love it! Steak every day?

RICO: I haven't quite got enough for that yet, mate, but once Leila's done her bit...

(Sure enough a powerful blast of lightning magic then crashed down onto the Chamrots, decimating their hoard even further.)

RICO: Now we can afford steak every day!

MAX: Lovely. It's a beautiful life, Rico. It really is!

(Standing in the back row, Sofia couldn't have agreed with Max more.)

SOFIA: This upcoming pay slip is going to be so healthy. And I need as much money as I can get right now.

LEILA: Because Rico keeps stealing from your handbag?

SOFIA: What? No! Where did you get that from?

LEILA: It just seemed like the logical explanation.

SOFIA: Why would...

(She furrowed her brow.)

SOFIA: *You* haven't been stealing from my handbag, have you?

LEILA: Not when it's fastened, no. I mean, don't be ridiculous! It wasn't me!

(Sofia scowled at her.)

SOFIA: I'm watching you.

LEILA: Um...

(She watched Rico make another pass then swiftly changed the subject.)

LEILA: So... this appointment of yours...

SOFIA: What about it?

LEILA: What's it for?

SOFIA: An appointment? To make sure I'm there at the correct time!

LEILA: I know that, you...

(Her brow darkened.)

LEILA: Hang on a minute. That was a dodge!

SOFIA: Liar!

LEILA: And that was just desperate! You don't want me to know what your appointment's for!

SOFIA: Um... don't be silly!

LEILA: Then what's it for?

SOFIA: Three o'clock!

LEILA: Seriously?

SOFIA: Oh, fine...

(She smiled.)

SOFIA: Ten past, but who's counting?

LEILA: Sofia! What sort of appointment is it?

(Tommy then chimed in from behind her.)

TOMMY: Leila! Rico's waiting for you to fire your magic!

(Leila quickly glanced at him then once again, turned her nose up at him.)

LEILA: Hmph!

SOFIA: Never mind making an exhibition of shunning Tommy, Leila, you've got work to do!

LEILA: Oh, fine!

(With that, she fired off an accurate blast of magic then turned to scowl at Sofia again.)

LEILA: Speak, woman! Who are you going to see? Dentist? Doctor?

SOFIA: Can't talk. I'm healing!

LEILA: You always talk and heal!

SOFIA: And I've literally just realised how irresponsible that was, so I've decided to quit.

LEILA: And you conveniently decided that just now, did you? While I was asking you a question?

SOFIA: Yes!

LEILA: Sofia!!!

SOFIA: Busy!

LEILA: Like that, is it? Fine! Then I'll just have to guess then! And when I guess, I'm very mean!

(She sneered.)

LEILA: Are you going to see a skin doctor about your stupid ugly face?

SOFIA: Don't be nasty!

LEILA: Then tell me!

SOFIA: No!

LEILA: Fine! Guess, number two! You're going to see a doctor because...

(Her jaw then dropped.)

LEILA: Because of all the sex you've been having with Rico! You're pregnant!

SOFIA: Don't be ridiculous!

LEILA: I'm not! You are, aren't you?

SOFIA: No!

LEILA: Yes, you are!

SOFIA: Why? Because you've decided?

LEILA: No. Because you can't keep your knickers on at night!

SOFIA: Yes, I can! I just don't want to!

(She nodded defiantly.)

SOFIA: I just happen to *like* being intimate with my fiancé. If that makes me a slut then sue me!

LEILA: It doesn't make you a slut; it makes you pregnant!

SOFIA: No, it doesn't!

LEILA: Yes, it does. That's why you have an appointment. To see the maternity doctor!

(She scoffed with amusement.)

LEILA: Either that or you're going to buy a wedding dress and don't want me to know, because you're afraid I'll go with you!

(Sofia just gulped and stared ahead. It was an innocent act that made her look as guilty as sin.)

LEILA: Oh, my god! You are, aren't you? You're excluding me from helping to plan the wedding!

SOFIA: No... um...

(She thought quickly then said the first thing that came into her head, in order to protect herself from Leila's bitterness going forwards.)

SOFIA: It's because I'm pregnant!

(She then palmed her forehead and mumbled to herself.)

SOFIA: Why would I tell her *that*?

(Leila stared at her silently for a moment then started to laugh.)

LEILA: You're gonna get really fat!

SOFIA: Right...

(She rolled her eyes.)

SOFIA: You're a good friend, Leila. Those were such supportive words. Why you thought anyone would exclude you from the wedding planning, I'll never know.

LEILA: Right? It was a bit out there, wasn't it?

(She smiled.)

LEILA: Sorry, I accused you of that! And congratulations on the pregnancy.

(Just then, a highly alarmed voice rose up from in front of them.)

RICO: What???

(He then promptly passed out.)

SOFIA: Rico!!!

(She swiftly jumped down to her knees and tended to his head.)

SOFIA: My poor Rico.

(Leila scoffed at her then looked to Max.)

LEILA: What are you two doing back here???

TOMMY: They came back, because while you two were nattering, the fight ended!

LEILA: Oh.

(She nodded.)

LEILA: Good. Who won?

MAX: What do you mean, who won? The beasts did, obviously! They ate me whole. Luckily, I've come back as a ghost to warn you; they're coming for you next!

LEILA: I see. Sarcasm... sad to see.

SOFIA: So was Rico passing out.

MAX: Yeah... it's fair to say, he could have taken your news better.

(He shrugged.)

MAX: Still... congratulations!

SOFIA: Um... thanks.

(She dropped her head into her palm. Having everyone think she was pregnant was definitely not part of the plan.)

SOFIA: How am I going to wriggle out of this one...

(She then looked enlightened and shrugged.)

SOFIA: Don't be hasty. I might not be pregnant. It's just a check. In fact... I'm probably not.

LEILA: Oh. Well... that's disappointing.

SOFIA: Because you want me to get fat?

LEILA: Hey; that's only part of it!

SOFIA: Lovely.

(Max then startled them both by clapping his hands together.)

MAX: Right then... find some more or bugger off home?

LEILA: Find more! We're raking it in right now.

MAX: I concur!

TOMMY: Whereas, I'd rather wait to see if Rico's okay. You know... because I'm *not* a cunt!

(He instantly received another deliberately audible snub from Leila.)

TOMMY: Are you gonna do that every time I speak?

(Much to his annoyance, she did it again.)

TOMMY: Right...

(He rolled his eyes then glanced down at Sofia.)

TOMMY: How's the patient?

SOFIA: He's been better! Look!

(She gestured to where he was spark out on the floor.)

TOMMY: I mean, he'll be okay, won't he? You healed him and everything?

SOFIA: Of course.

TOMMY: Right. That's all I was asking.

(Just then, Rico sat up in a panicked state and stared at Sofia with terrified eyes.)

RICO: You're pregnant? How??? We were so careful!

SOFIA: No, we weren't.

RICO: Well...

(Sofia then leant forwards and whispered in his ear.)

SOFIA: I only told Leila I was pregnant, so I could say I'm seeing a doctor this afternoon. It's the only way I could be certain she wouldn't invite herself to go wedding dress shopping with me.

(Rico looked enlightened.)

RICO: Ah, gotcha. That makes sense. Phew.

(He then climbed to his feet.)

RICO: Anyway, have we got time for another battle before Sofia goes off to the optician?

SOFIA: Obstetrician!

RICO: That too.

MAX: Mate, if you want to fight some more, then fight some more we shall.

(He chuckled.)

MAX: Daren't defy you, after all. You're a vengeful bugger, you are!

RICO: Am I?

MAX: Yeah. I stole your place in the volley team and you got me back royally.

(He grimaced.)

MAX: It's a bit worrying, to be honest. I'm half excepting you to seek bloody vengeance for stealing Emmy and Rico's Girls from you as well.

RICO: Why would I want to do that? Stealing *them* from me was its *own* vengeance. I got freedom and you got lumbered with a hoard of irritating sex maniacs. I already won that one.

(Tommy smirked.)

TOMMY: You two must be the only blokes I know who can find a negative to being lusted after by hoards of women.

MAX: Yes, well... it's not as awesome as it sounds.

RICO: It really isn't. I'm much happier now, thanks.

TOMMY: Sure. Until Sofia's baby starts wailing all night. You'll soon miss the single life then!

SOFIA: Hey! We don't even know if I'm having one yet!

(She winked at Rico stealthily then resumed.)

SOFIA: But if I was, why would it be *my* baby! Just mine! Like I got *myself* pregnant!

Rico was there at the conception too! It'd be *his* baby!

(She flinched.)

SOFIA: Ours!

LEILA: Boring!

SOFIA: Excuse me?

LEILA: Happy to. The rest of us are going to find some more Chumleys!

MAX: Chamrots!

LEILA: Whatever they're called!

(She exhaled.)

LEILA: One more fight like the last one, and I'll be able to buy that sword I've had my eye on.

(She then glowered at Tommy.)

LEILA: Then I'll just need to find someone to use it on.

(Offering him one more audible snub she then headed for the carriage. Left behind, Tommy could only sigh.)

TOMMY: She's relentless.

MAX: Yup. It was a huge mistake to piss her off, Tommy. You really fucked up there, my friend.

(He then headed away to the carriage, blissfully unaware that Tommy was scowling at him. The only reason he *hadn't* taken Leila back was because Max had recently slept

with her. In that sense, Max had ruined everything, and yet, there he was, merrily going about his day without a care in the world.)

TOMMY: What a cunt!

At the warrior's guild, a few hours later, The Axnay Elite were seated at a table, staring at the entrance doors. Every time someone came in, they'd swiftly sit up with excitement then sit down and groan again. They'd been doing it nonstop for two hours. They hadn't even bought a drink or ordered food. They'd just sat there and waited. The wait, however, was starting to try their nerves.

VORTEX: Stupid Rejects! When you *don't* want to see them, they always appear. But now we *want* them to appear... nothing! Not a single sign!

MIGHTY: Indeed. And it's starting to get irritating.

VORTEX: Not to mention boring. I'm gonna buy a drink!

BRILLIANCE: No!

VORTEX: No? Don't tell me no, woman!

BRILLIANCE: Velvet, we're going to need you sober for the fight.

VORTEX: And I will be! I only want one!

THUNDER: Which would be fine if it was anyone else, but you magic-casters... how do I put this?

SHADOW: She gets pissed just *thinking* about alcohol!

VORTEX: That's a scandalous lie! Okay, I might not have the threshold of Sir Mighty or some other brainless chunk of meat, but I'm not a *complete* lightweight.

MIGHTY: Brainless chunk of meat???

(He shook his fist at her.)

MIGHTY: What have I told you about quoting Sofia???

VORTEX: You told me not to.

MIGHTY: Then why...

VORTEX: Because I chose to ignore you. Sofia's putdowns are the best on the market and I'd be fool not to reuse them.

MIGHTY: Why, you rotten...

(Just then, the doors to the guild flew open and The Axnay Rejects marched inside. Looking decidedly gleeful, they all marched up to Chi's desk, excited to find out how much they'd earned. Watching them, Duke Thunder growled.)

THUNDER: They've finally arrived! The scum has floated to the surface. The ugly worm has finally poked its head...

BRILLIANCE: They're here. We get it. So, now what?

MIGHTY: Now we wait for the two stages of their arrival to be complete then we go and see Chi.

SHADOW: Two stages?

MIGHTY: That's right.

(He beamed.)

MIGHTY: There's stage one!

(He nodded to where Chi was scowling and pointing to a table in the bar. Moments later, Max, Rico, Leila and Tommy headed away from her, leaving Sofia behind.)

MIGHTY: They always go up there as a five, and Chi always sends four of them away again. Every time!

BRILLIANCE: It's like they can't be taught.

THUNDER: A peasant level education, I expect.

MIGHTY: Undoubtedly.

VORTEX: So, what's stage two?

MIGHTY: Obviously, it's Chi dealing with Sofia and handing out the credit notes.

(He gave her a sideways glance.)

MIGHTY: *You* didn't have a peasant level education too, did you?

VORTEX: How dare you?

MIGHTY: Bravely, that's how I dare. And may I say, revenge was sweet. Not bad for a brainless chunk of meat, you might say.

VORTEX: Seriously? Are you still bitter about that? That was forever ago!

MIGHTY: It was thirty seconds ago!

VORTEX: And you're still angry about it? Weak sauce, Mighty. Bearing a grudge just isn't healthy.

THUNDER: She's right.

BRILLIANCE: Uh-huh!

SHADOW: She's spot on!

MIGHTY: But it was thirty seconds ago!

VORTEX: And he's *still* grouching!

(Sir Mighty sighed in defeat.)

MIGHTY: Fine! I'll leave it then. As much as I hate to just let it go... you're right.

Grudges *are* for the weak.

(His teammates all nodded in agreement. Not one of them spotted the irony of them calling grudges weak despite the fact they'd been sitting there for hours, purely because they had a grudge against The Rejects.)

THUNDER: Shockingly weak.

(He then watched intently as Sofia allowed herself to be read, before heading back to Chi's desk to collect five credit slips. A few seconds later, she skipped back to her teammates looking decidedly joyous. In that moment, all five members of The Axnay Elite sprung to their feet then descended upon Chi's desk. Still putting her credit slip book away, she glanced up and furrowed her brow.)

CHI: What do you lot want?

(She held up a finger.)

CHI: Before you answer that, unless all five of you *need* to be here, four of you can bugger off.

THUNDER: Actually, Chi, according to the guild handbook, this does *indeed* require all five of us.

CHI: Oh?

(She sat back.)

CHI: Explain!

(Thunder nodded.)

THUNDER: Very well.

(He then stood tall, purely for dramatic effect.)

THUNDER: We wish to invoke regulation twenty three of the guild's code of laws.

CHI: I see.

(She shrugged.)

CHI: Go on then.

THUNDER: Oh. Well... that was easy.

CHI: Of course it was. Why should *I* care if you brought packed lunches with you?

THUNDER: Lunches?

CHI: Yes. Regulation twenty three gives you the right to bring your own food and eat it in the bar area!

THUNDER: Oh.

(Velvet Vortex rolled her eyes.)

VORTEX: Idiot! He meant regulation twenty four.

THUNDER: I did?

(He gasped.)

THUNDER: I did!

CHI: Hmm...

THUNDER: According to regulation twenty four, we have the right to challenge a rival team to a duel.

CHI: Well... yes...

THUNDER: We challenge The Axnay Rejects! The loser of said duel, under the *terms* of our challenge, will forfeit their place at this guild and accept a transfer to the guild in Ackfield!

CHI: Interesting!

THUNDER: Indeed. And that's why we're here, talking to you right now. As the head of this guild, *you* have to confirm then announce the duel.

(Chi peered around the Elites to where The Rejects were eating at a table.)

CHI: I can't! The Rejects are over there!

VORTEX: Yes, you can! And you must! Once the duel is called, *you* have to oversee it! I know that because I read the law-book thoroughly,

CHI: You may well have read it thoroughly, Velvet, but you clearly didn't understand it, did you?

VORTEX: What?

CHI: Once a duel is *agreed*, I have to oversee it. And I don't see The Rejects here, agreeing to it, do you?

SHADOW: Agreeing to it?

CHI: That's right! It's only a duel if your opponent *accepts* your challenge. If they don't, it's just a case of you bullying them.

(She furrowed her brow.)

CHI: Then going to jail!

(Somewhat put out, the Elites quickly huddled to confer.)

BRILLIANCE: Did you know that The Rejects had to agree to it?

VORTEX: No. I thought that if we proposed a duel, Chi would have to enforce it. Apparently, I was wrong.

MIGHTY: Shit. So we need to ask The Rejects, do we?

CHI: Yup. And the majority need to agree!

(Realising they'd huddled so close to Chi that she could hear every word, they quickly shuffled further away.)

MIGHTY: So... we need to talk to The Rejects then.

THUNDER: That won't end well.

SHADOW: Indeed. There's no way they'll agree to duel *us*. They'd get their arses handed to them on plate, and they know it.

VORTEX: Or do they?

SHADOW: Yes!

VORTEX: Or do they?

SHADOW: I refer you to the answer I gave only a few moments ago.

VORTEX: You're an idiot then, because that was the wrong answer. And seeing as you reiterated it, it's now doubly wrong.

(She nodded.)

VORTEX: Those idiot Rejects have egos. Overinflated, annoying egos. They think they're better than us.

THUNDER: Fools.

MIGHTY: Yes, but if what Velvet says is true, they'll be *useful* fools.

VORTEX: Exactly. Their egos won't allow them to refuse our challenge.

BRILLIANCE: Hmm... in that case, what are we waiting for? Let's go and poke their egos a bit.

THUNDER: Good idea.

(He then glanced over his shoulder at Chi.)

THUNDER: We'll be back in a minute.

CHI: I await your return with ice cold indifference.

THUNDER: Right...

(He looked to his teammates.)

THUNDER: Come!

(With that, the five of them marched over to where The Rejects were enjoying a post-hunt beverage and towered over their table, menacingly.)

THUNDER: Greetings, Rejects. And how's the guild's most overrated team doing on this fine day?

(Max just sipped his beer and raised his middle finger at him. The others ignored him completely.)

THUNDER: Hmm... not going to bite, eh? Well, let me rephrase. You lot are all poofs! (Everyone in the entire guild gasped in horror at him.)

HELEN: Homophobe!

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

HELEN: We support you, one hundred percent.

EDDIE: And we'll be reporting that cunt to the minister!

THUNDER: Me? But... I wasn't being homophobic to *Max*! I said they were *all* poofs! All five of them!

HELEN: Then we'll report you on five counts!

THUNDER: What??? No! I didn't mean anything by it. I just wanted to insult them all by calling them the most ghastly thing there is!

KEVIN: You think Max's lifestyle is ghastly? You're such a bigot!

THUNDER: No, I'm not. I...

(Max furrowed his brow then glanced up.)

MAX: Fuck sake. For the ten millionth time, I'm not a poof! I like women! Tasty ones!
And yes, I'm open to offers, ladies.

(All the women giggled like he'd made the world's funniest joke.)

MAX: That's a bit harsh.

(He sighed then looked to Thunder.)

MAX: Can you lot fuck off? You're blocking the sun from reaching our table.

SHADOW: You want us to fuck off? Fine. We can do that. But not until you've heard our proposal.

RICO: Nah. Bollocks to that. We'll just go to a different table.

BRILLIANCE: What for? We'll only follow you!

(Sofia sighed.)

SOFIA: Just hear them out, guys. The sooner we do that, the sooner they'll leave us alone.

TOMMY: She's right.

(Leila looked to Tommy, offered him a swift snub then nodded at Duke Thunder.)

LEILA: You may speak!

THUNDER: Excellent. I'm here because...

VORTEX: We challenge you to a duel.

THUNDER: Velvet!

VORTEX: What? We do!

RICO: A duel?

MAX: Like a sword fight? You can fuck right off.

TOMMY: Duel each other, if you want, but leave us out of it.

SOFIA: Right? What a silly suggestion.

LEILA: They're very silly people.

MIGHTY: Hey! Nobody even mentioned having a sword fight!

MAX: She offered us a duel!

VORTEX: In the context of the guild!

(The Rejects all stared at her blankly.)

VORTEX: Wow!

(She rolled her eyes.)

VORTEX: Simple stuff, Retards!

LEILA: Rejects!

VORTEX: I say what I see. We have a contest and the one who makes the biggest bounty wins. The loser has to move to Ackfield.

(Rico scoffed.)

RICO: Why would we agree to that?

SHADOW: To get rid of *us*!

MAX: Which sounds great in theory, but you're *bound* to win.

TOMMY: At a canter!

VORTEX: Oh. Are we? So you admit we're better than you then?

MAX: Um...

VORTEX: That's good to see. You're finally willing to accept that *we* should have been the team of the year, and you're nothing but a bunch of lucky frauds.

RICO: Lucky frauds???

BRILLIANCE: You heard her. If you really believed you were better than us, you'd accept the challenge.

(Rico, Max, Tommy and Leila all scoffed extremely unconvincingly.)

LEILA: Rubbish!

TOMMY: We know we're better than you, that's why don't feel the need to accept. Champions don't accept challenges from the also-rans. It's beneath us.

MAX: Ooh, good one. What he said.

RICO: Yup. The answer's no, now run along and challenge someone more on your level. Like that new team.

THUNDER: The new team??? Now look here, you...

VORTEX: Don't bite, Thunder. They're mocking us to save face. Excuses hidden behind abuses.

BRILLIANCE: She's right. They're cowards. And now we've proven it!

SHADOW: Yup!

RICO: Fuck off! We're not cowards!

SOFIA: Don't rise to it, Rico. They want to duel us to get rid of us, and they'll say anything to annoy us into accepting. So rise above it. Ignore them. I know I am.

(She nodded.)

SOFIA: In fact, I'm going to go into my favourite meditative state and ignore them.

(She then closed her eyes, took a deep breath and slipped herself into a happy trance.)

VORTEX: What's she doing?

RICO: It's a skill she learned at her old temple...

(He shook his head.)

RICO: I mean, none of your business. Now bugger off.

MIGHTY: Not until to agree to accept our challenge.

MAX: Then you'll be here all night, won't you?

LEILA: Long after we've gone home!

VORTEX: Cowards!

LEILA: Fuck off!

THUNDER: Chickens!

MAX: We're not fucking chickens!

SHADOW: Lay any eggs this morning?

BRILLIANCE: Of course they did. It's what chickens do!

THUNDER: Bloody Chickens!

(He then proceeded to make chickens noise and simulate chicken wings with his arms.)

THUNDER: This is you lot!

(His four teammates then joined in.)

MIGHTY: They're a new breed of chicken too. The yellow-bellied pant crapper.

SHADOW: Right? I bet they need new sheets every morning, having crapped themselves because the cock crowed too loudly.

(They all chuckled as they continued to make an exhibition of themselves with their chicken impersonations.)

MAX: I won't lie, you lot, that's really fucking annoying.

LEILA: You're not kidding. Sofia's so lucky she can sleep through it!

RICO: She's not asleep. She's just... tuning them out.

(He sighed.)

RICO: I wish I could do that.

THUNDER: Yes, but you can't. You can't do *anything* without soiling yourselves. Fucking pansies.

MAX: Steady on, fuck face.

THUNDER: Why? What are you going to do? Peck me with your beak, chicken boy?

MAX: Mate... you're starting to piss me off now.

SHADOW: And what are *you* gonna do? Cluck at him?

(Watching as they kept the charade up with no sign of abating, Rico snarled.)

RICO: I'm gonna lose it in a minute!

BRILLIANCE: Lose what? Control of your bowels?

THUNDER: That'd be right. Chicken!

VORTEX: Chicken boy!

SHADOW: Chicken boys suits you actually. Fowl by name, fouls the bed by nature!

(By now, Max, Leila, Tommy and Rico's nostrils were flaring.)

LEILA: I'm gonna lash out in a minute!

VORTEX: You're gonna flap a wing at somebody?

LEILA: No, you...

(She snarled.)

LEILA: So annoying.

MIGHTY: Yes, well, you only have yourselves to blame. You can stop us any time you like. You just have to stop being chickens, that's all!

TOMMY: We're not chickens!

THUNDER: Agree to the duel then!

TOMMY: No!

THUNDER: Chicken!

MIGHTY: Agree to the duel!

RICO: Fuck off!

MIGHTY: Then we'll just have to keep on clucking!

LEILA: You...

VORTEX: Agree to the duel, Leila!

LEILA: Never!

THUNDER: Agree to it!

MAX: No!

SHADOW: Agree to it, chickens!

RICO: We're not...

BRILLIANCE: Chickens!

(Max growled then jumped to his feet.)

MAX: Fine! Just shut the fuck up!

THUNDER: You'll agree to the duel?

MAX: Yeah! And we'll win! Because you've pissed us off no end!

RICO: Yeah! And that's all the inspiration we need!

LEILA: You messed with the wrong chickens! I mean Rejects!

TOMMY: Um... guys...

MAX: Don't back down, Tommy. We can take these cunts in a duel any day!

TOMMY: Can we?

RICO: With the right motivation? Yes! And after that piss take; boy, am I motivated!

LEILA: We're gonna crush you like autumn leaves!

TOMMY: Yeah... I like the sound of that!

RICO: Let's have at it!!!

(With that, the four of them upped them marched towards the door. Sir Mighty, however, was quick to steal their thunder.)

MIGHTY: Where are you going? You need to tell Chi you've agreed first.

MAX: Fine!

(They then turned and marched towards Chi with an anger in their step. The Elite hurried after them. Upon reaching Chi's desk, Leila folded her arms bitterly.)

LEILA: Chi! We've decided to accept The Axnay Poofta's challenge!

VORTEX: We're The Elite!

LEILA: I say what I see!

VORTEX: Hmm... touché.

CHI: Wait, wait, wait! Am I hearing this? You've accepted their challenge?

MAX: Yes! And we're gonna flatten them!

CHI: Hmm... better get signing you up then. How does tomorrow at The Crown national park sound?

RICO: Fucking awesome!

CHI: Let's get it organised then!

(A short while later, just as the last signatory put their name on the duel form to confirm the agreement, Sofia lifted her head. She'd finally emerged from her trance. At once, her face dropped. Her four teammates were all at the front of the guild, embroiled in what she could quite clearly see was a bitter war of words with The Elite. In that moment, a dark sense of foreboding washed over her.)

SOFIA: Something terrible just happened, didn't it?

In the park at the centre of Axnay, at this time, Rico's former landlady, and self-declared nemesis of Max, Emmy was busy planting some seeds in a soon-to-be flowerbed. In her new role as assistant horticulturalist, she'd been charged with making a decorative flower display for all to enjoy. Having been given free reign to choose her own design patterns, she'd been sweating over the task for three days.

EMMY: This is exhausting.

(She wiped sweat from her brow then proceeded to bury the seeds she'd just planted.)

EMMY: That should do it. Just one more bit to go now and I'm done.

(With that, she dug her trowel into the earth, next to where she'd just buried the last group of seeds.)

EMMY: That's lovely. A lit bit more.

(Satisfied that she'd dug deep enough, she then sprinkled some seeds into the hole. She then covered it with soil again.)

EMMY: Lovely.

(Delighted with her efforts, she then climbed to her feet and stretched her aching back.)

EMMY: Damn, that's sore! Nothing a soak in a hot bath won't fix though.

(She exhaled.)

EMMY: And it'll all be worth it in a few months when the flowers start to bloom.

(Just then, her supervisor came over and offered her a warm smile.)

CHADLEY: How are we getting on, Emmy?

EMMY: I've just finished it.

CHADLEY: Really?

(He puffed out.)

CHADLEY: That was quick.

EMMY: What can I tell you? When I devote myself to something, I truly devote myself to something!

CHADLEY: Evidently.

(He bit his lip.)

CHADLEY: What design did you go with in the end? Nothing too elaborate, I hope. Or too sparse.

EMMY: Absolutely not, no. I utilised the space superbly, even if I do say so myself.

CHADLEY: Excellent. So... patterns, was it? Shapes? What kind of floral display can we expect to see when it comes through?

EMMY: Oh... you know. Patterns, shapes... some lettering.

CHADLEY: Lettering?

(He looked enlightened.)

CHADLEY: When I came past two days ago, I did notice you'd put an A and an X.

EMMY: You *noticed*? How?

CHADLEY: I could tell from the uneven earth. You've got better at smoothing the soil out since then, so I couldn't even begin to guess what the rest says.

EMMY: Right...

CHADLEY: That was such a lie. An A and an X? You wrote Axnay, didn't you?

(Emmy smiled warmly then lied through her teeth.)

EMMY: That's exactly what I did.

(She scoffed playfully.)

EMMY: You've ruined the surprise now!

CHADLEY: I'm sure I haven't. There's plenty more there that I can't make out.

(He nodded.)

CHADLEY: I approve. I do. I love your creativity, Emmy. The name of the town, mixed with shapes and patterns... I like it. And so will the townspeople, I'm sure.

EMMY: Here's hoping.

CHADLEY: They will. I'm sure.

(He then started to head away.)

CHADLEY: Keep up the good work, Emmy. I look forward to seeing how wonderfully the lettering comes out.

(Emmy watched him go then smiled to herself.)

EMMY: The lettering will be perfect. Dead straight and easy to read. You certainly won't have any issues with *my* craftsmanship, Chadley.

(A devilish smile then washed onto her brow.)

EMMY: The fact it'll spell out 'Max Carter is a cunt' however, may well give you cause for concern.

(She then headed away, giggling to herself as she removed her gardening gloves.)

That evening, at the Axnay Reject's base, Sofia was sitting on the sofa, scowling at her teammates. She was normally so placid, she struck fear into nobody, but on this particular evening, Leila, Max and Tommy had taken refuge on the other sofa. It didn't help. The sofa's faced each other and they'd very much lined themselves up to be scowled at. Rico had opted to lay on the rug. He had initially tried to sit next to Sofia. Not about to stand for it, however, she'd kicked him off again. It made for an extremely uncomfortable atmosphere.

MAX: Right, so... about tomorrow...

SOFIA: You absolutely ridiculous lump of country bumpkin lard!

MAX: Lard?

(He grimaced.)

MAX: Did she say fucking lard?

SOFIA: What are you? Deaf as well as unfathomably stupid?

MAX: Why are you picking on *me*???

SOFIA: You spoke!

MAX: Yes, well... that's a bit harsh if you ask me! I'm allowed to speak in my own home!

SOFIA: Soon to be *former* home!

RICO: Babe...

SOFIA: Don't babe me, you rubbish boyfriend in shit pyjamas!

RICO: Eh? I'm not even wearing pyjamas!

SOFIA: We're getting married soon! The ceremony is already planned! Right here in Axnay! But now, because your brain and your testicles have turned out to be exactly the same size, we're going to have to commute to our own fucking wedding!

LEILA: Wow. You're so negative!

SOFIA: Leila, butt out! Listening to your thoughts on the matter is about as appealing as eating a turnip and custard trifle that's several weeks past its sell-by-date!

LEILA: Why, you horrible...

SOFIA: Shut up! You four silly cunts have ruined everything! Ackfield, for fuck sake! Ackfield! One of the biggest shitholes in the country!

TOMMY: It can't be as bad as the place we went to up north!

SOFIA: That's why I said one of, you wood-carving fuckwit!

(She rolled her eyes.)

SOFIA: I don't want to live in Ackfield, but because of you ridiculous twat-badgers, I don't have a choice, do I?

MAX: Hey! That's only if we lose!

SOFIA: If? If??? They're not called The Elites for nothing, you know? They're called The Elites, because... well... they chose that particular name... but that's not the point! They *are* elite! They're the best there is! So unless we manage to somehow kill a bloody colossus tomorrow, we're right royally fucked! What the hell were you thinking?

(Everyone mumbled incoherently.)

SOFIA: I said what were you thinking!!! I need to know!

MAX: Well... we thought we could win.

RICO: And to a degree... we still do.

SOFIA: And what makes you believe such a ludicrous thing???

RICO: The fact that... you know...

(He groaned in defeat.)

RICO: Who am I kidding? They taunted us relentlessly and we bit!

LEILA: Anything to make them stop!

MAX: They got right under our skin!

SOFIA: They were *trying* to!

MAX: I know! I fucking know.

(He hung his head.)

MAX: They played us like a freshly tuned piano.

TOMMY: And then some! We all lost our temper and... subsequently our marbles. We don't stand a fucking chance!

SOFIA: I know!!!

(She sneered.)

SOFIA: Tomorrow we're going to have to trawl all the way over to The Crown national park, hunt relentlessly for eight hours then go back to the guild just to be humiliated.

They can kill more in eight hours than we could kill in three days!

(She shook her head.)

SOFIA: You know Chi has to read the results out loud, right? I can see it now. The Rejects, 500 kills. The Elites, 5000 kills. And *they* won't have even broken a sweat!

RICO: Yeah, it's not ideal, is it?

SOFIA: Not ideal??? Not ideal??? Rico, after the results are read out, Chi will hand us a transfer slip to the Ackfield warrior guild, then send us packing! No more nice house! We'll have to buy something in Ackfield! And their idea of a nice house is something with a fucking roof on it!

LEILA: I think you're exaggerating slightly there, Sofia!

SOFIA: Yeah? Well, I think you were probably quite pretty sixty years ago, but there's nobody alive from back then to confirm it!

LEILA: That's too fucking mean!

SOFIA: I know! So is me encasing you in a healing bubble then leaving you in it while I slowly drain out the oxygen!

LEILA: You wouldn't!

SOFIA: I might! I haven't decided yet! I'll decide once we get to Ackfield and move into our new half-condemned shack! Idiots!!!

(She then upped and stormed out of the room.)

SOFIA: I'm going to bed! Rico?

RICO: Babe?

SOFIA: You can sleep in the fireplace! With the fire still lit!

(She then stomped her way up the stairs, leaving her four teammates grimacing at each other uncomfortably.)

TOMMY: So... maybe agreeing to that duel was a mistake.

(He instantly received three condescending glances from his teammates.)

TOMMY: Yeah...

The following morning, when The Axnay Rejects' carriage arrived at The Crown national park where the duel was due to take place, four of the inhabitants couldn't evacuate the carriage fast enough. Sleeping on it hadn't mellowed Sofia's stance even

for a moment. She was still utterly livid. As a result, Max, Rico, Leila and Tommy had spent the entire trip crammed together on one side of the carriage while Sofia growled at them from the other one. It had been a long and uncomfortable journey. Arriving, however, didn't bring them any respite from hostility. There to greet them, The Elite were at their mocking best.

THUNDER: Ah, you came then!

SHADOW: Ambitious!

MIGHTY: Indeed. We thought you'd realise you'd fucked up then bugger off to Ackfield on your own accord.

BRILLIANCE: That would have been the *sensible* approach.

THUNDER: But thankfully, you opted out of that, giving us one last change to taunt you, before you go.

(He nodded.)

THUNDER: Vortex? Begin!

VORTEX: Happy to. Leila, you're a...

(Her feet then left the ground and she flew backwards on the end of Leila's fist. Having been stewing all night about how The Elite had wound them up until they agreed to the duel, she'd been primed and ready for a fight at the merest excuse. Vortex had simply provided her with one. And Leila wasn't the only one who'd been teetering on the brink of a violent episode. Shadow's attempts to rush in and protect Vortex from Leila, instantly provoked an angry reaction from Tommy. Having barked at him to leave her alone, he'd then set about him with his fists. It was a pattern that spread within seconds. Every time someone stepped forwards with a view to ending the violence, they got thumped. As a result, within seconds, Sir Mighty and Max were slugging it out, Rico and Thunder were battering one another, Shadow and Tommy were exchanging blows and Leila and Vortex were going to town on one another. The only ones not involved were the two healers.)

BRILLIANCE: Well... that was unexpected.

SOFIA: Was it?

BRILLIANCE: Well... no. You are common thugs, after all.

SOFIA: Is that so?

BRILLIANCE: Absolutely. Well... *you're* not. *Your* violence tends to be verbal.

(She shrugged.)

BRILLIANCE: Which come to think of it, is another trait of the everyday common oik, so yes. I guess you are.

SOFIA: Right...

(Sofia then smiled at her warmly.)

BRILLIANCE: Stop that. I don't like that smile.

(She flinched.)

BRILLIANCE: Wait... did you just remove all my magical and physical protections?

SOFIA: I don't know, Countess. Let's find out!

(She then charged at her and set about slapping her relentlessly. Not about to just stand there and let Sofia hit her, Brilliance swiftly covered her head and cried like a little girl. It was not an impressive sight.)

BRILLIANCE: You're a big mean bully!!! I hate you!!!

(With four fights and whatever Sofia was doing to Brilliance going on before her, Chi could only roll her eyes. Charged with overseeing the duel, and ensuring that nobody got hurt was entirely her responsibility. Reluctantly deciding to honour that commitment, she sighed ruefully, climbed out of the deckchair she'd brought with her, then paced into the melee.)

CHI: If anyone is still fighting by the time I count to five, they're going directly to jail! One!

(Fists continued to fly)

CHI: Two!

(All around her the battles continued relentlessly.)

CHI: Three!

(As if nobody had even heard her, the punches kept flying.)

CHI: Four!!!

(As if by magic, the fighting then stopped. All ten warriors stood tall and, as if the violence had never taken place, looked to Chi attentively. Brilliance and Sofia did, however, stealthily throw out heals to their teammates.)

CHI: Seriously? You wanted to fight so badly that, when I said I was going to count to five, you took it to mean you could batter each other until I said four?

MAX: That's how I understood it, ma'am.

CHI: Right...

MAX: Though I'd be remiss if I didn't point out that nobody *wanted* to fight badly, The Elites just don't know any other way of doing it.

(Rico, Tommy and Leila all sniggered then quickly simmered down again, defeated by Chi's scowl.)

CHI: Right then... let me make something clear before I carry on. From hereon, any warrior who takes it upon themselves to physically or magically assault a member of another team *will* be going to jail!

(Leila sneered at Vortex and pointed at her own chin.)

LEILA: Go on, give it your best shot!

CHI: Enough!

(She rolled her eyes.)

CHI: A duel. An eight hour warrior contest to see who lands the biggest bounty in that time. A contest where...

(She sighed with frustration.)

CHI: I can't be bothered to explain it. You get the gist. Just piss off and get on with it. Come back here in eight hours time. Go on! I'm starting it right now!

(With a gasp, The Elite all turned tail and fled into the trees to the right of where they'd stopped. They weren't about to waste a single second. Reacting to their urgency, The Rejects then charged off after them. Within seconds, Chi was left in peace. Not sad about that fact, she exhaled then headed back towards her deckchair.)

CHI: Hmm...

(She sat down then beamed with delight.)

CHI: I won't have to tolerate a single moron for the next eight hours. That *never* happens at the guild!

(She then sat back and closed her eyes.)

(A short while later, looking decidedly pleased with themselves, The Axnay Elite marched forth in a line, chatting smugly. To say they were confident of an easy victory would be quite the understatement. Not only did they possess superior skills, but they were also privileged to information that The Rejects weren't. That information being, the whereabouts of a colossus and the method required for killing it. It was a fact that Duke Thunder gained particular amusement from.)

THUNDER: Honestly, you couldn't script it better. I can't wait to see their faces after they slave all afternoon, only to find out that we've killed a colossus.

MIGHTY: Absolutely. Their faces will be a picture.

VORTEX: I might even invite an artist friend of mine with a photographic memory to come and paint them for me.

MIGHTY: You should definitely do that.

(He nodded.)

MIGHTY: And well done for not slipping up and telling The Rejects about the colossus, by the way.

VORTEX: Why would I? You swore me to secrecy!

MIGHTY: Yes, but when you argue with that Leila person, you tend to say whatever's on your mind, so well done for keeping a lid on it.

BRILLIANCE: Indeed. It would have been a tragedy if The Rejects found out we have a colossus lined up. They wouldn't have turned up. They'd have left for Ackfield this morning and not looked back!

SHADOW: Depriving us of the joy of getting to see their tortured faces this evening when Chi rings the bell to signify that a colossus has died.

THUNDER: What a horrid thought.

(They all shuddered.)

MIGHTY: Right! Anyway... You brought the meat did you, Shadow?

(Shadow patted the bag at his side.)

SHADOW: I did indeed. And I figured, what with its acute sense of smell we could lay the trail of meat from about a mile away from the tar pit. About one hundred paces between each piece.

BRILLIANCE: And you're confident it'll follow the trail right into the tar pit, are you?

SHADOW: I've done my calculations, Countess. I'm one hundred percent certain.

(He beamed.)

SHADOW: Just as I'm one hundred percent certain it's weak against fire. I love being a technician. Knowledge really is power.

VORTEX: And glory in this case. Victory over The Rejects.

SHADOW: That too, yes. So worry not. It will follow the trail, it will walk into the tar and Velvet will be able to decimate it with fire!

THUNDER: Bravo!

(He grimaced.)

THUNDER: But more to the point, you're also certain it won't smell the meat until you remove it from that bag, right?

SHADOW: Again, yes. It can't smell meat through leather.

VORTEX: That's... well... I want to say reassuring, but that's a weird thing to know. How can you possibly?

SHADOW: It's related to the primates from Horiza Forest. The people who live there keep their food in leather containers because they know they can't smell it.

(They all looked enlightened.)

MIGHTY: Ah. See... that makes sense.

SHADOW: Of course.

VORTEX: And it's glorious!

(She exhaled.)

VORTEX: I can't wait to wave that bitch Leila off tonight.

(She beamed then hurried on.)

VORTEX: Come! The sooner we get the ball rolling the better!!!

In another part of the woodland, a short while later, The Axnay Rejects were busy doing battle. It was a battle that frustrated them greatly. The Crown National Park was reputed to be home to many a mid-level beast with a lucrative bounty. They'd need to defeat such creatures if they were to stand any chance of winning. Unfortunately, they'd been ambushed by a swarm of Calibras, low-level beasts, marginally above Empies. It was most certainly not what was required.

RICO: Cutting through!!!

(Bashing back the head of the pack with his blade, Max furrowed his brow.)

MAX: Good! Be quick about it! There are proper beasts out there and we can't afford to be wasting our time with these cunts.

RICO: Yeah, but what choice did they give us?

(Having zoomed to the other end of the pack to let Leila take her turn, he shrugged matter-of-factly.)

RICO: If beasts charge at us, we have to kill them! We can't exactly waft them away, shout 'not you' then expect them to trudge away again in embarrassment!

MAX: I know that! I was just saying it would have been nice if something *worth* killing had turned up instead!

RICO: Well... yeah.

(He watched as Leila desecrated a swathe of enemies with her magic then charged again.)

RICO: You're not wrong. To stand any chance of winning this thing, we need them Elite cunts to get the shit beasts, not us!

(Watching on, Tommy shook his head then looked at Leila.)

TOMMY: Rico made a good point there. This contest could actually go down to who was luckiest with ambushes. If the Elites waste half their time killing unwanted Empies and Calibras while we luck our way into all the better enemies, we've got a chance.

(Leila scoffed at him then made an audible snubbing sound.)

TOMMY: Can you stop doing that now, Leila? It's getting really annoying.

SOFIA: Idiot!

TOMMY: Excuse me?

SOFIA: Telling her it's annoying is just going to make her do it more.

(Leila then made an exhibition of snubbing him again, just to signify that Sofia was right.)

TOMMY: Great.

SOFIA: Oh, and by the way, your point was rubbish!

TOMMY: No, it wasn't!

SOFIA: Yes, it was! Velvet Vortex is a highly adept, level fifty magic-caster with perfect aim and execution. She can wipe out packs of Empies on her own with a single casting. To The Elites getting swarmed by *them* barely constitutes an event. It's like casually scratching an itch! The only ones who'll suffer from being attacked by low level creatures is us, because *our* magic caster is a mid-level whinging twat-bag with all the aiming skills of a six year old, shooting from a spinning roundabout!

(Having been just about to fire off the magic energy she'd pooled in her hands, Leila shot a fierce glance in Sofia's direction.)

LEILA: Fuck off, you trembling, blonde bed-wetter! My aim's been exceptional lately.

SOFIA: Has it? Where did that last blast go then?

LEILA: Last blast?

(Suddenly realising that she no longer had any magic energy stored up to fire, she grimaced uncomfortably.)

LEILA: Did I...

TOMMY: Glower at Sofia so hard, you accidentally sent a lightning blast high into the trees way over in the distance? Yes, you did!

(Leila glowered at him then performed a trio of three forceful snubs before sneering at Sofia again.)

LEILA: That was your fault! Why would you be a cunt to me when I was about to shoot???

SOFIA: I don't know, Leila. Why would *you* ruin my life by making me move to Ackfield without even asking me? The world is *full* of mysteries!

LEILA: Hey! We already explained that! They wound us up!

SOFIA: They called you names! Names, woman! Sticks and stones, for fuck sake! You *could* have just ignored them! You *could* have given them a slap! Either one would have done! But no, rather than taking the *obvious* steps, you silly fuckers, opted to make us all emigrate to a shithole hundreds of miles away!

(Leila scoffed.)

LEILA: Are you ever gonna let that go?

SOFIA: No!!!

(Just then, Rico and Max cried out in fired up voices. The battle was over and they were anxious to move onto the next one.)

MAX: Done!

RICO: Let's move on, guys!

MAX: Quick! We need more enemies!!!

(Sofia marched forwards.)

SOFIA: Let's hurry up then. But don't worry, Max. You'll never be entirely without enemies! You've made an enemy of me for life! Twat!

MAX: What did *I* do???

LEILA: Don't open that door, Max!!! She's looking for any excuse!

MAX: Right. Gotcha. Rounded on *you*, did she?

LEILA: Why do you think I fired off that stray blast?

RICO: Incompetence?

LEILA: Fuck off, you!

(She marched on, growling under her breath. The others followed suit.)

TOMMY: Hopefully the next pack we find will carry a hefty bounty. We really can't afford to waste time on low-paying shit.

MAX: Exactly what I was saying a minute ago.

(He sighed.)

MAX: If we *keep* getting shit enemies, that's it. We're done. Leila might as well blast off a few more random lightning bolts and set fire to the forest. Dying in a forest fire would at least save us the trouble of moving house.

(They then continued on; praying for an upturn in fortunes.)

Just across the woodland, some time later, Artful Shadow yanked another clump of meat from his bag then cast it to the forest floor. He did so with excitement etched all over his face.

SHADOW: Just two more to go, chaps. We're almost there.

(He then continued on with his teammates in tow.)

VORTEX: Good. Laying that meat seems to have taken forever.

THUNDER: Yes, well, it was never going to be a quick task, was it?

VORTEX: I don't see why not.

THUNDER: Because it's quite a long trail, Velvet. It had to be. The longer the trail, the more chance there is of the beast picking up its scent and following it.

VORTEX: I see.

(She grimaced.)

VORTEX: But what if it picks up the scent of trail in the centre and follows it the other way? Away from the tar pits?

THUNDER: Well, I'd imagine if there's meat in two directions, it'll follow it one way then come back to follow it the other way when its done.

SHADOW: Indeed. Meaning at some point, it *will* come to the tar pit. Where we'll be waiting to incinerate the fucker.

VORTEX: But if it doesn't?

BRILLIANCE: Why are you being so bloody negative, woman?

VORTEX: I'm not being negative, I'm being thorough. Covering all angles. Because if you're wrong and we end up losing this challenge because of it, *we'll* have to move to Ackfield. And be seen off by a smug Leila!

(She shuddered from head to toe.)

VORTEX: I'd rather die than let that happen.

MIGHTY: You worry too much, Velvet. Even if, on the ridiculous off chance that the colossus doesn't show up, we'll still win at a canter. We've had ten fights on our way here. All of them against packs of Oxhores; high level beasts with an extremely high bounty. We wiped each pack out in minutes. If those Rejects come up against a pack of *those* buggers, they'll take an hour to kill them, at least. So, essentially, we've *already* made more money than they could possibly dream of.

SHADOW: He's right. Everything is stacked in our favour. Colossus or no colossus; the duel is already won.

VORTEX: Fair comment.

MIGHTY: It's more than fair, Velvet; it's accurate! This is about talent! And our opponents don't have any.

BRILLIANCE: Yup! The ten packs of Oxhores we've already killed while simply walking up here, have already *guaranteed* our victory. The colossus will just be a bonus to rub their poor person noses in!

VORTEX: I see.

(She beamed.)

VORTEX: That brings joy to my heart, that does.

SHADOW: Mine too.

(With that, he threw down another chunk of meat then nodded to his teammates.)

SHADOW: Okay. One more to go. The tar pit is just through the trees ahead of us. I'll go and place the last piece of meat at the side of it and you lot get ready. Especially you, Velvet. Your inferno magic is the key, don't forget!

VORTEX: Of course I'm not gonna bloody forget! What sort of simple-minded buffoon do you take me for?

SHADOW: Um... I wasn't actually suggesting you *might* forget, Velvet. I was just saying.

VORTEX: Well, don't! Go and lay that meat then we'll go and crouch in a bush for a bit.

SHADOW: Now that I can do.

(With that, he raced on ahead. His teammates watched him go for a moment then began to converse.)

THUNDER: So... when the scores are read out later, shall we do an organised victory dance, or just our own, personal favourite, smug gestures?

MIGHTY: I don't really mind, as long it involves smugly waving them off!

BRILLIANCE: Absolutely. Waving is a must. As is making L-shapes with our fingers and placing them on our foreheads.

VORTEX: Personally, I'm going to opt for commiserating with Leila in a way that screams insincerity and taking the piss, yet looks for all intents and purposes like I'm being nice. She's gonna hate that!

THUNDER: Hmm... I like that. Congratulating them on a sterling effort, whilst quite obviously laughing at their misery at the same time, will be maddening.

BRILLIANCE: Yup. We should definitely do that.

THUNDER: *Then* do a smug victory dance!

VORTEX: Of course!

(Just then, Shadow came hurrying back excitedly.)

SHADOW: Velvet! Come quickly!

VORTEX: What?

SHADOW: You're not gonna believe this. The colossus is already there, taking a fucking nap in the tar pit!

THUNDER: What?

SHADOW: I know!

(He beamed.)

SHADOW: It's served itself up on a platter for us!

BRILLIANCE: Wow. The stars are definitely aligning in our favour right now.

VORTEX: Clearly they hate The Rejects as much as we do!

MIGHTY: Indeed. Now get going. Set fire to the bugger, Vortex. From head to toe!

VORTEX: Yup! I'll also set alight to the tar around it. That thing's toast!

(She nodded.)

VORTEX: The rest of you, just... be alert. If it's on fire, it'll panic and flee probably. Make sure it doesn't charge into *you*!

(With that, she charged off through the trees with an excited smile on her face. Moments later, she arrived at the side of the tar pit. Sure enough, the colossus was laying there, right in the middle of the tar.)

VORTEX: Big mistake, you silly creature! But, thanks.

(With that, she focussed hard, allowing the maximum amount of fiery magic to gather in her palm. She then released without delay. Crouching and thrusting her arm out full stretch, she sent a white jet of flame into the tar. Such was its size and span, it engulfed the beast in seconds. Delighted with the power of her blast, she then turned tail and fled.)

VORTEX: There's no way it's surviving *that*!

(Sure enough, a few minutes later, when The Elite came back to the tar pit to check on the result of her handiwork, they found nothing but the burnt out remains of a once proud creature.)

BRILLIANCE: I'm going to go out on a limb and say it's well and truly dead.

THUNDER: Because half of it has melted?

BRILLIANCE: That, and the fact its just laying there in the burning tar!

SHADOW: I can confirm that diagnosis, Countess. Having scanned the bugger, I'm not getting any kind of result. Therefore it can only be dead.

MIGHTY: And tonight, the bell at the guild will ring in our honour.

VORTEX: Yup. The mighty Velvet Vortex has killed a colossus!

THUNDER: The mighty *Axnay Elite* have killed a colossus! This was a *team* effort!

VORTEX: Was it though?

BRILLIANCE: No, actually. It wasn't *any* kind of effort. The daft bugger, despite being weak against fire took a nap in the tar pit. That new team full of level ones could have defeated it!

THUNDER: Yes, but... let's not phrase it like that when we tell the story.

BRILLIANCE: Of course not.

MIGHTY: Right...

(He nodded.)

MIGHTY: Now what? Seeing as we've got this contest so deep inside the bag, it'll need a ladder to get out, how will we spend the rest of the day? Napping under trees? Or killing more and more beasts, just to rub The Reject's noses in it that little bit further? (The five of them shared an empty glance for a moment then quickly declared their intentions.)

VORTEX: Kill!

BRILLIANCE: Rub their noses in it!

SHADOW: The more kills, the better!

THUNDER: Let's obliterate them!

(Sir Mighty could only nod; impressed by what he was hearing.)

MIGHTY: Spoken like true Elites. Come on, chaps. Let's wipe the floor with little fuckers.

(They then headed away, positively glowing with delight.)

That evening, shortly after their eight hours were up, The Axnay Rejects staggered out of the woods. Exhausted to the point where they could barely even stand, they tripped and stumbled over to where Chi and The Axnay Elite were waiting then collapsed like a succession of potato sacks. They then lay there, staring at the sky, panting for breath. Highly amused by what he was seeing, Duke Thunder paced over to them then stared down at Rico.

THUNDER: Rough day?

RICO: You...

(He panted for breath.)

RICO: You...

THUNDER: Me what?

RICO: You can fuck off, mate.

THUNDER: I see. How crass.

MIGHTY: Are you surprised?

THUNDER: No, I... don't suppose I am. Disappointed, maybe.

CHI: Yes, well, that's enough taunting for one day. Elites?

BRILLIANCE: Yes?

CHI: Get in your carriage and fuck off back to Axnay!

VELVET: Charming!

CHI: Excuse me?

VELVET: I said, yes, ma'am!

CHI: I thought so. See, you have no reason to be here anymore. The contest is over and you're fit to leave, so do so. I won't have you hanging around just to taunt these five losers, no matter how gargantuan your victory is going to be! There's been enough bad feeling for one day. Now go!

(Reluctantly, The Elite all turned then headed off towards their carriage, mumbling as they went. Chi watched them board the vehicle and set off, then turned and glanced down at where Max was struggling was prop himself up.)

MAX: Bollocks.

CHI: Bollocks?

MAX: It went badly, Chi!

(Leila then whimpered from the ground.)

LEILA: All day we did battle and never found anything stronger than Calibras to fight.

RICO: Apparently the odds of that happening are ridiculously small.

CHI: And yet somehow you lot managed it. Why does that not surprise me?

SOFIA: It was bad... but... maybe The Elite didn't fare any better!

CHI: That's the straw you're going to clutch at, is it, Sofia?

SOFIA: I don't know. Should I?

CHI: That's up to you, love, but personally I wouldn't bother. The Elite killed at last thirty packs of Oxhorses and a colossus!

(A dark and doomed silence then engulfed the field. Having defeat confirmed was painful; even though it had always been a forgone conclusion.)

LEILA: Fuck!

TOMMY: Shit!

MAX: Bollocks!

RICO: What a load of wank.

(He sighed.)

RICO: I don't want to move to fucking Ackfield!

SOFIA: Then why agree to the fucking duel???

(Rico whimpered.)

RICO: I was weak!

MAX: No, Rico; you were a twat! We all were. They used our hatred of them to wind us up like a bunch of brainless cuckoo clocks!

TOMMY: Cunts! Us *and* them!

RICO: Right? Everything's fucked!

(He looked to Sofia and sighed.)

RICO: Sorry, babe.

SOFIA: Knob!

RICO: Fair comment. It's not the *best* way to start our time together as man and wife, is it? Having to commute to our own fucking wedding!

(Sofia furrowed her brow.)

SOFIA: If there's even going to *be* a wedding.

RICO: Don't be like that, Sofia!

SOFIA: Why shouldn't I be? Marriage is meant to be a commitment to support each other 'til death us do part. Not a commitment to doom us before we even start!

RICO: Well... yeah, but... in my defence... I... *have* no defence!

SOFIA: Twat!

MAX: Give it a rest, will you, Sofia. Give the bloke a break! Rico makes you happy, remember?

SOFIA: Not anymore he doesn't! Now he makes me move to Ackfield!

LEILA: And that's a deal breaker for you, is it? Now you've got to move to Ackfield, he can piss off. The man who brought you out of your shell? He can bugger off, and *you* can go back to being a meek little mouse who's too afraid to speak?

SOFIA: No, actually. I can speak very well when I'm angry, so for the next five years at least, I'll be anything *but* meek!

MAX: You expect to be angry about it for that long?

SOFIA: That was a conservative estimate!

(She then climbed to her feet and staggered towards the carriage.)

SOFIA: Let's go home and pack!

CHI: Actually, you have to go back to the guild!

RICO: What the fuck for?

CHI: The results.

(She shrugged.)

CHI: It's all there in the contest agreement you signed. You must attend the result reading and applaud the winner. Breaking that agreement means jail time.

RICO: Oh, for fuck sake!

SOFIA: Stop whining! Like I said, we need to go home and pack!

CHI: No, you need to go back to the guild, or you'll be sent to jail.

SOFIA: I choose jail! Going back to the guild will result in being sent to Ackfield.

CHI: So will going to jail! You'll get sent to Ackfield upon your release!

SOFIA: Aw... fuck sake, Rico!

RICO: Sorry, babe!

SOFIA: Just shut up and get a move on.
(She sighed.)
SOFIA: We've got a humiliation at the guild to attend!

At the warrior's guild that evening, The Axnay Rejects found themselves enduring a dark and dismal hell like no other. The Elite had arrived first, announced their victory then informed everyone that they'd killed a colossus. There'd been much in the way of celebration. The Elite had then bought everyone drinks to help them celebrate. Consequently, The Rejects found themselves awaiting the results of the duel, surrounded by people cheering and singing their opponent's name. It felt like the final insult. They were about to be transferred to Ackfield, so this would be their last night at the guild. Spending it surrounded by friends and colleagues who were cheering about their defeat was not how they'd have chosen to go out. It was a moment that couldn't pass quickly enough.

Upon arriving back at the guild, shortly after The Rejects, Chi had read Leila and Vortex to ascertain the results of the duel. She'd then double checked them by reading Max and Shadow. Leila and Max had gone along with it with the optimum reluctance. They just wanted the whole sorry nightmare to be over. Mercifully, their hell would soon be at an end.

Satisfied with what she'd discovered via the black marble, Chi scrambled onto her desk. This could only mean one thing. The results were about to be announced. At once, everyone stood up and chanted 'Elite' over and over again. At the same time, Kiki hovered next to the bell, looking forward to ringing it and declaring a free bar, in celebration of a dead colossus. The atmosphere was extremely jubilant.

RICO: Mate...

MAX: What?

RICO: I know they're celebrating the free bar and everything...

MAX: But it *feels* like they're celebrating the fact we're being transferred. I know!

THUNDER: Maybe they are! I know I certainly will.

VORTEX: And I already started!

LEILA: Oh, fuck off!

(Just then, Chi spoke up from her desktop and the guild fell silent.)

CHI: Okay, everyone. Here's the situation. We had a duel today between the Axnay Rejects and The Axnay Elite. I shall now announce the results.

(As a series of cries of 'Elite' rose up from the crowd, Chi furrowed her brow.)

CHI: Silence!

(Her wish was wisely granted.)

CHI: That's better! Okay... here we go then.

(At once, all five members of The Elite turned to face The Rejects and grinned at them with open mouths and comedically wide-eyes. About to be dignified in victory, they were not. Mercifully, this time, The Rejects had the common sense to look down and avoid them, rather than coming out fighting and risking jail.)

CHI: All figures have been checked and doubled checked. The grand bounty totals are...

BRILLIANCE: Very different numbers.

(The Elite giggled as Chi continued.)

CHI: The Axnay Elite... eight-hundred and thirty-two thousand, five hundred and eighty coronas!

THUNDER: Ha! Wait... what?

CHI: The Axnay Rejects... thirty million, one hundred thousand and sixty coronas!

(At once silence descended. Nothing stirred except the sounds of The Rejects feet as they trudged towards the door.)

CHI: And seeing as The Rejects total included a colossus... you know the drill, Kiki!

(Kiki immediately rung the ball causing a stampede of excited warriors to charge for the bar.)

CHI: Pissheads!

THUNDER: Um... Chi, you seem to have read that backwards! We killed the bloody colossus!

VORTEX: More specifically, me!

CHI: Actually, no. You...

(She then spotted The Rejects heading for the door and furrowed her brow.)

CHI: Get your arses back here, you silly Rejects, you won!!!

(In that moment, Max, Rico, Leila, Sofia and Tommy all paused and gave each other sideways glances.)

RICO: Wait, did she just say...

(They then turned and watched as The Elites protested vehemently.)

VELVET: It was me! I should know; I was there when I did it. It didn't even put up a fight!

CHI: Well it wouldn't, would it? It was dead!

VELVET: What???

CHI: You shot a dead colossus! A dead colossus that died when Leila clumsily fired off a rogue lightning blast, just as it was passing through the tar pit! She hit it right on the nose and knocked it out.

(She shrugged.)

CHI: It fell over then face first then died from inhaling tar fumes while it was unconscious. You silly fuckers arrived ten minutes later.

(Upon hearing this, Leila's face lit up then she marched straight over to Velvet Vortex.)

LEILA: Wanna buy a suitcase? I hear they're really handy when you're going on long trips.

(She beamed.)

LEILA: To places like Ackfield!

VORTEX: Nope. I'm not having that! I'm going to beat you up now!

CHI: Instant jail time!

VORTEX: Chi!!!

(She then burst into tears.)

VORTEX: You're mean!

CHI: Yes, well, you don't have to worry about that anymore.

(She handed the whimpering Duke Thunder five envelopes.)

CHI: You need to worry about the guild leader in Ackfield. Those are your transfer forms. Bye!

MIGHTY: How can you be so callous? It's like you *want* us to leave!

CHI: I do! You just lost, and you're gonna sulk about it all night, so obviously, I'd rather you did it elsewhere!

RICO: Whereas I'd rather they stayed where we can taunt them.

THUNDER: Nope! Fuck that! We're leaving!

SOFIA: For Ackfield?

THUNDER: You...

(He shuddered with rage then marched for the exit followed by his four furious and dismayed teammates.)

VORTEX: Stupid Leila! How is she so bloody jammy?

(Leila scoffed.)

LEILA: Jammy? I skilfully and deliberately killed a colossus all by myself and she still won't acknowledge my talent.

CHI: Skilfully? It was an accident!

LEILA: Don't tell fibs, Chi. It's unbecoming!

(She then marched off to the bar practically dancing with excitement.)

LEILA: Free alcohol, team!!!

(At once, Max and Tommy arrived at her side. Left behind, Sofia could only blush at Rico.)

SOFIA: Um... after everything I said today, you probably want that engagement ring back now, don't you?

RICO: After you called me a twat for being such a twat? No! In fact, if I *ever* look like doing something so twat-tastic ever again, I *insist* that you pick me up on it!

SOFIA: Now that I can do.

(They then shared a loving smile before heading off to the bar.)

CHI: Morons... the lot of them.

(She then watched on as The Rejects gathered at the bar, then afforded herself a smile.)

CHI: But they're never dull.

(Blissfully unaware that they were being watched, Tommy and Max grabbed a pint from the bar then grimaced at one another.)

MAX: Wait! I *think* this is my one. I'm not sure.

TOMMY: Yeah... I'm not entirely sure either, they arrived on the bar at the same time, and I didn't see who fetched what!

MAX: Yes, and it's worrying. You drink that weird stuff.

TOMMY: Brown ale isn't weird!

MAX: Well, you say that...

(He bit his lip.)

MAX: How can we tell which was which?

(Tommy shrugged.)

TOMMY: Tell you what, just to make sure you get what you want, why don't you have both?

MAX: I don't want both. Yours is shit.

TOMMY: Take it anyway. Have what's yours then help yourself to what's mine. It's the Max way, isn't it?

MAX: Eh? What the fuck are you on about?

RICO: Probably your lack of self-awareness and boundaries.

MAX: What lack of self-awareness?

LEILA: Blimey; *that* case rested itself quickly!

MAX: Whatever, you lot talk in riddles.

(He then headed away with both his own pint and Tommy's.)

SOFIA: He actually took it.

TOMMY: Of course he did.

(He shook his head then shrugged.)

TOMMY: Who cares? The bar is free and we've got all night. I'm thinking a bottle of whisky to celebrate with might be in order.

RICO: Ah, yes. To celebrate our brilliant victory over The Elite.

SOFIA: Our gloriously accidental...

LEILA: Deliberate!!!

SOFIA: Um... okay. At toast to our honoured victory!

(They then stood there, grimacing with embarrassment. None of them had a drink yet.)

LEILA: Maybe we should try that again in a minute.

RICO: Right?

(They then stood there giggling. Partly they giggled because of the mistake, but mostly they were giggling with a mix of relief at not having to move to Ackfield and joy at having despatched their hated nemesis.)

LEILA: Good times.

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