

The Axnay Rejects

EPISODE TWENTY-FOUR – HE WHO PULLS THE STRINGS

Fresh from becoming Mr and Mrs Stanway, Rico and Sofia headed for the warrior's guild, hand in hand, and with hearts full of love. Their plan had always been to get married, have a celebratory drink at the guild then head off on their honeymoon. A three-pronged strategy to produce the perfect day. After much debacle, part one of their plan was now complete. The other two prongs, however, had been blunted by Chi. As soon as their wedding was over, she'd ordered every warrior back to the guild. She'd then sent out a fanfare to summon all the warriors who hadn't been at the wedding. She was in possession of urgent information and was desperate to share it with her subordinates at the first available opportunity. Mercifully, her troops had been quick to assemble. Just twenty minutes after Rico and Sofia had been declared man and wife, she found herself standing on her desk, making an announcement to one and all.

CHI: Thanks for coming so quickly, everyone. And at such short notice! We have an emergency situation here and I can't stress highly enough how urgent it is.

(Just then, a voice rose up from the doorway. The minister of defence had arrived.)

QUIMBY: Well, maybe you should try! If you *don't* stress how urgent it is, how are they going to know?

CHI: I know what I'm doing, Sir Harold!

QUIMBY: Then do it! With the correct amount of stressing the urgency!

CHI: I'm going to!

QUIMBY: Didn't sound like it.

(Chi furrowed her brow then looked to her warriors again.)

CHI: This mission is of the *utmost* urgency! Think of the most urgent thing ever and *double* that urgency! Okay?

QUIMBY: Why not triple it? Or quadruple it?

CHI: They get the point! Now can you be quiet while I brief my warriors?

QUIMBY: Absolutely. I'll only jump in if think you're not being urgent enough!

CHI: You...

(She sighed.)

CHI: Doesn't matter.

QUIMBY: It does if it's urgent.

CHI: Shut up!

QUIMBY: Right...

(Chi rolled her eyes.)

CHI: Warriors, there's a gentleman out there somewhere who goes by the name of Eucalyptus Alenzi!

MAX: Eucalyptus?

LEILA: Maybe his mother wanted a girl!

TOMMY: Either that or a pot plant!

CHI: Will you lot shut up? Silly name or not, the man is dangerous! Criminally so!

QUIMBY: Probably because his mother named him Eucalyptus! He must have got bullied on a daily basis at school. No wonder he turned to crime!

CHI: Um... minister?

QUIMBY: Yes, Chi?

CHI: Do you have any other worthless contributions to make? If not, would you mind allowing me to brief my warriors in peace?

QUIMBY: What? Oh. Yes. Go ahead!

CHI: Thank you.

(She nodded.)

CHI: As I was saying, he's dangerous. At Rico and Sofia's wedding earlier, he cast an illusion and managed to trick most of the congregation into believing he was a god.

SOFIA: That was not fun!

CHI: No. It wasn't. It was, however, a sign of what you'll be going up against. A master illusionist.

QUIMBY: What? An illusionist? That's not a beast!

CHI: I never said it was!

QUIMBY: Good, because it isn't. Casting illusions is a wizard skill.

CHI: Correct. He's a wizard.

QUIMBY: We don't kill wizards here, Chi. We kill beasts!

CHI: We do kill wizards when we find out that the wizard in question is the one who's been empowering the beasts!

(Everyone in attendance gasped in astonishment.)

CHI: He's the one who gave them heightened intelligence and enhanced their breeding.

LEILA: Meaning he's the one responsible for the entire infestation, right?

CHI: Correct!

(Leila grimaced at Sofia.)

LEILA: Blimey! You don't half pick 'em, don't you?

SOFIA: Hey! *He* picked *me*!

LEILA: Hmm...

SOFIA: He *did*!

CHI: Leila?

LEILA: Um... yes, Chi?

CHI: One more word out of you and you can stand outside until we're done!

QUIMBY: Hear, hear. Well said, Chi!

CHI: I mean it, Leila. One more word and you can stand outside with the minister of defence!

QUIMBY: What?

(Chi pointed to the door.)

CHI: I'm sorry, sir, but I really do have to ask you to leave!

QUIMBY: What? I'm your boss!

CHI: Yes, and you keep talking over my urgent briefing!

QUIMBY: No, I don't! I keep improving it!

CHI: Sir Harold...

QUIMBY: Stop it! No! I'm not going! I'll just remain quiet.

CHI: Right... make sure you do!

(She gave him distrusting, one-eyed scowl for a moment then looked to the warriors again.)

CHI: Now listen carefully, everyone. From what I read, this wizard...

RICO: Eucalyptus.

(Everyone sniggered.)

CHI: Yes, him. He's extremely bitter because wizards aren't considered true magic users! He feels insulted by that fact. That's why he started to manipulate the beast population. He's jealous that warriors find adulation and fortune while wizards are considered nothing but magicians, fit for a children's party. So much so, he's been boosting beast numbers and making them stronger in the hope that one day, warriors won't be able to beat them anymore. Then we'll all feel as inadequate as he does.

QUIMBY: How ridiculously petty! What is he, twelve?

(Chi pointed to the door again.)

CHI: Go! You can't say I didn't warn you!

QUIMBY: Chi...

CHI: Leave!

QUIMBY: No! I'm the bloody minister of defence?

CHI: I don't care who you bloody are! This is *my* guild and I say who stays and who doesn't!

QUIMBY: It's not *your* guild! It's the property of the government, of whom I'm an employee!

CHI: As am I! An employee who can read the black marble! Without me, you're screwed. So when I say I'm in charge, *I'm* in charge!

QUIMBY: Well...

CHI: Go! Stand outside! Don't worry! You won't be alone for long. I'm sure Leila's coiled spring of a jaw will rocket open any second now then she can wait with you!

LEILA: Coiled spring? That's bloody rude!

CHI: And there it is! Of you go, Leila. Keep the minister company in the alcove and your teammates can come and get you when and if they can be bothered!

LEILA: But...

CHI: Leave!

LEILA: Aw!

(With that, Leila upped and stormed out, grumbling all the way.)

LEILA: Stupid Chi! She never did like me!

QUIMBY: No, she's not a fan of me either, apparently.

(The two of them then headed outside. Delighted to see the back of them, Chi nodded.)

CHI: So yeah, that's his grievance. Wizards don't get enough respect!

(Sofia put her hand up.)

CHI: Yes?

SOFIA: Um... I'm not sure I understand what a wizard is!

CHI: Seriously?

SOFIA: Um... yeah. I know they do magic, but... why are they considered rubbish?

CHI: Because if they require an attacking spell, they use frequency magic to simulate elements. Their fire, for example, is drawn from the earth. True magic users, such as warrior magic-casters, however, have the magic within. It's quick, pure and efficient. (She shrugged.)

CHI: Whereas a wizard's elemental spell is clumsy and not always guaranteed. Takes a while to cast too.

(She sucked her teeth.)

CHI: But Alenzi's magic...

TOMMY: You mean Eucalyptus!

CHI: Out!!!

TOMMY: Fuck!

(Tommy then upped and headed for the exit. Not about to wait for him, Chi continued.)

CHI: As I was saying, Alenzi, unfortunately has more strings to his bow than mere failed elemental magic. He has illusions, like I said. And manipulation. That's going to make tracking him down and killing him extremely difficult. Dangerous too. The man is feeling extremely vengeful right now.

(She winced.)

CHI: He was bitter enough before, but having been thwarted in his bid to marry Sofia, he's bloody furious. I could see it his eyes.

(Max raised his hand.)

CHI: What?

MAX: I'm sure it's nothing we can't handle, Chi.

CHI: Well... let's hope so, huh?

(She clapped her hands together.)

CHI: Now, another thing I read was that he dwells in an old manor house at the back of Wallington Woods; the private estate. He's been living there this entire time, casting spells to boost the beasts, increasing their intelligence, speeding up their reproduction and worst of all, maximising their aggression. He's also the reason colossus beasts exist, so this is going to suck. That man, to a degree, has every beast under his command, *including* the seven remaining colossuses.

(She looked to Max.)

CHI: Still confident?

MAX: Am I fuck!

CHI: I didn't think so. But...

(She winced fearfully.)

CHI: Out there, but for the grace of the guild, go we!

Responding to Chi's urgent call to arms, within seconds of her concluding her speech, warriors poured out of the guild and dispersed in all directions. They only had one focus in mind. To collect their transport then head for Wallington Woods. The puppet master needed to be stopped. Warriors didn't always agree on everything, but on this one point, they were very much a unified force. Alenzi had control of colossus beasts and a vengeful grievance against the guild. As such, he was a danger to every single one of them. The sooner he was destroyed, therefore, the better.

Leading the way for The Axnay Rejects as they headed out of the guild was Rico. To him, this mission wasn't *just* for the protection of his guild-mates. It was personal. Alenzi had tried to come between himself and his beloved Sofia. It would be no exaggeration to say that he despised the man. As such, he'd bounded out of the door, yelled to where Tommy and Leila were chatting to the minister of defence then marched onwards. Max and Sofia had had to jog to catch up with him. He was so riled up at this moment, his nostrils were twitching. Hating to see him so wound up, Sofia desperately

wanted to calm him down. Unfortunately, Leila had taken exception to being yelled at, so she couldn't get a word in edgewise.

LEILA: I have a name, you know, Rico! And it's not "Oi"!

SOFIA: Yes, but more importantly...

LEILA: And there's such a word as please! Trying using it from time to time! It doesn't cost anything!

(She ruffled her neck.)

LEILA: Yelling "Oi, get your arses over here." Not on! Rude bastard!

SOFIA: Right? Terrible! But getting back to the point...

LEILA: Tommy and I were deeply offended, weren't we?

TOMMY: Not especially, no.

LEILA: Liar!

(She then glowered at him coldly, gifting Sofia the chance to speak up.)

SOFIA: Calm down, Rico! The three minutes we'll gain by walking this fast isn't going to make any difference!

RICO: It might!

SOFIA: It won't!

(She pouted.)

SOFIA: Plus, I don't want you fighting while you're angry, that's how mistakes get made!

RICO: No, Sofia, mistakes get made when people lose focus, or when Leila forgets her glasses.

LEILA: Excuse me?

RICO: Nobody has ever made a mistake because of being focussed! Like I am!

LEILA: Tommy, he insulted me!

TOMMY: I heard.

LEILA: Then do something about it!

TOMMY: Like what?

LEILA: Wow!

(She sneered.)

LEILA: You know, Rico...

SOFIA: Put a sock in it, Leila! This is important!

LEILA: Oh, you did not say that!

SOFIA: Yes, I did! It *needed* saying! My new husband is so angry he's seen red! That's the sort of anger can lead to fatal mistakes in battle! Which I think you'll find trumps you being grumpy because someone forgot to address you as your majesty!

LEILA: He said "Oi!"

SOFIA: Yes, because he's riled beyond words! And that's the problem!

(Rico looked to her sternly for a moment then sighed in defeat.)

RICO: Fine...

(He then slowed down and placed his arm around Sofia.)

RICO: You're right. Being that angry isn't healthy. Especially when we're heading into battle!

SOFIA: I know! Being angry can get you killed.

(She grimaced.)

SOFIA: If I didn't have healing, my angry rants would have got me killed years ago.

LEILA: By me!

SOFIA: Actually, I'd have been beaten to death long before I met you! But that's not the point! Being angry can cause fatal mistakes *and* it can give you a heart attack. I'd rather you didn't suffer from either of those, Rico. Especially on our wedding day!

TOMMY: Crikey! That'd be the worst wedding day ever!

LEILA: Actually, it'd be joint worst with her other wedding day. Didn't that other fella die an hour after marrying you?

SOFIA: Yes, but... this would be far worse.

(She shrugged.)

SOFIA: I actually *want* to be married this time!

RICO: And married you shall remain!

(He offered her a comforting smile.)

RICO: Sorry, Sofia. I really was overly riled up there. It's just that, that Alenzi bloke tried to take away the most precious thing in my life!

MAX: What's that?

RICO: Sofia, you cock!

MAX: Easy!

RICO: He tried to take away the love of my life, and now we hear he's so bitter about his failure, he's feeling vengeful! Almost like he's decided to be a complete and *utter* cunt because merely being a *complete* cunt didn't work! I won't lie to you! That's annoying!

SOFIA: Fair enough. But you're calmer now, right?

RICO: Thanks to you, I am, yes!

MAX: Are you though?

RICO: Yes!

MAX: You didn't sound very calm when you called me a cock!

RICO: Well...

MAX: Which comes hot off the back of calling me a bad friend, by the way!

RICO: Yeah...

(He shrugged.)

RICO: Sorry, mate. I only said that because, well... you were being such a bad friend!

MAX: How?

RICO: You held Sofia and I hostage! While trying to help that Alenzi fella gazump my wedding! I mean, call me old fashioned, but where I come from that's not the act of a trustworthy and dependable chum!

MAX: Mate...

(He scoffed.)

MAX: Like I was the only one!

RICO: You...

MAX: Rico! Alenzi conned me, okay? Made me face my mortality! I feared an eternity in the darkest recesses of hell if I defied him, so forgive me, but in that moment, my actions felt justified. And that's my last word on the matter! I shouldn't have to apologise, because...

RICO: Shit friends don't do that sort of thing?

MAX: You...

(He sighed.)

MAX: You're a cold man, you are!

(Sofia sighed.)

SOFIA: We're going to go into this battle with ill-feeling running throughout the team, aren't we? That really isn't good.

MAX: Now, now! There's no ill-feeling here, Sofia. Even if Rico is a cunt!

RICO: Wow.

MAX: What? It's true!

LEILA: No, it isn't!

MAX: Oh, look, Leila disagrees. How shocking.

LEILA: But you were wrong! There *is* some ill-feeling in the team.

(She glowered at Tommy.)

LEILA: I mean, for a start, I'm a bit miffed that my boyfriend here never stands up for me!

TOMMY: Whereas I'm a bit alarmed that you'd ask me to! Rico and Max both carry swords and have more muscles on their toes than I've got on my entire body! So for you to expect me to take them to task over ever minor insult is ridiculous! It's almost like you're trying to get me killed!

(Leila blinked at him nonchalantly.)

LEILA: Right... I see...

(She smiled.)

LEILA: I think before we go any deeper into this relationship, we need to establish some ground rules!

TOMMY: Ground rules?

LEILA: Correct. Rule one: Always defend Leila's honour!

TOMMY: Well...

LEILA: Rule two: Never question Leila's decisions!

TOMMY: Leila...

LEILA: And rule three... um... that's pending. I'll let you know when I think of one!

TOMMY: Oh, will you now?

LEILA: Yes!

TOMMY: Fine. Now let me give you *my* ground rules!

LEILA: Actually, my rules were for *both* of us to live by. Couples rules, if you like.

TOMMY: Couples rules?

LEILA: That's right!

TOMMY: Rule one was to always defend Leila's honour! Not our honour as a couple!

LEILA: That's right. So next time Sofia gives me grief, it's down to both of us to hit her!

SOFIA: Um...

TOMMY: I'm not hitting Sofia, Leila! No! As for never questioning Leila's decisions...

LEILA: Hey! That's easy to follow. I never question them, so nor should you.

TOMMY: Leila...

(She sighed.)

TOMMY: Let's discuss it later.

LEILA: What for? I won't say anything different!

TOMMY: No, but *I* might, so let's leave it for now, okay?

LEILA: Fine. If our relationship is that meaningless to you...

TOMMY: It's not. As you'll find out when I throw you down later.

LEILA: I see. Good.

(She nodded.)

LEILA: Make sure you do!

TOMMY: I can assure you that I will.

LEILA: Excellent. Consider me temporarily pacified.

TOMMY: I will not.

LEILA: Good answer.

(Max looked to Tommy and shook his head.)

MAX: What the hell are you getting yourself into?

TOMMY: Butt out, you!

LEILA: Yeah! He knows what he's getting himself into, Max. My knickers! And that can do wonders when it comes to brightening up a man's day!

RICO: He knows!

(At once, Tommy, Max and Leila threw Rico a fiery glance.)

RICO: Right... I'm gonna go out on a limb here and suggest that maybe that was a little too soon.

SOFIA: Um... I think you might be right.

RICO: Oh, I'm definitely right, Sofia! Their eyes are burning a hole in my soul!

LEILA: Say that again, and you won't need angry mistakes or a heart attack to meet your maker, Rico. You'll be going there via twenty thousand volts of electricity.

(Sofia whispered in Rico's ear.)

LEILA: Stop telling him you'll heal him!!!

(Sofia gasped.)

SOFIA: How did she *know*???

LEILA: You...

(She shook her head.)

LEILA: Idiot, Rico.

(The five of them then headed onwards. They did so with many a scowl on their faces. The scowls were not set to last, however. After only five seconds, Max gave a stifled laugh.)

MAX: The things we get ourselves into, eh? I can't believe I held you two hostage because of a mortal fear of divine retribution. That sort of thing doesn't happen every day.

(Rico smirked.)

RICO: Nope. I feared a god was gonna steal my wife. That's not normal!

SOFIA: Nor is being told I'm a goddess.

TOMMY: It's been a weird old day.

LEILA: Actually, Tommy, that's the terrifying part. For us, that sort of craziness is starting to become routine.

(Tommy chuckled.)

TOMMY: God help us.

MAX: Sure. But only if it's a real god and not that Alenzi cunt.

RICO: Amen!

(They shared a chuckle for a moment then all five of them swiftly glowered to their right at the same time, almost as if they'd done so on command. Instinctively sensing hostility, they'd cast their necks to one side and sure enough, there they were. The Elite. Their

upper class nemeses. Heading back from a local park, they were glowering back at them hatefully.)

THUNDER: Look, everyone! Poor people!

VORTEX: Indeed! The smell is unbearable.

SHADOW: Quite! I thought for a moment that someone had left a sewer open!

RICO: Witty! Do you shit your own jokes or do you give your butler laxatives?

MIGHTY: What was that? I don't *spea*k idiot!

MAX: Because actions speak louder than words?

(The Rejects all chuckled. And only The Rejects.)

VORTEX: What are they giggling at?

SHADOW: Must be some kind of poor person in-joke.

THUNDER: Indeed!

MIGHTY: Actually, he was implying that I don't *spea*k idiotically, I *act* it!

(Duke Thunder glowered at him.)

THUNDER: We know that, you halfwit! It was a good joke! Why do you think we were pretending it was nonsense?

MIGHTY: Oh. Gotcha. Sorry.

(He flinched.)

MIGHTY: Allow me to rescue the situation.

(He scoffed at Rico.)

MIGHTY: Hey, Rico! Your girlfriend is quite the uggo!

(Countess Brilliance sighed.)

BRILLIANCE: That's just a cheap shot, Sir Mighty, we were meant to be outwitting them with our superior, educated humour!

MIGHTY: I know! That's why I called her an uggo rather than an ugly person. To add whimsy.

RICO: Wow. You're really bad at his banter lark, Mighty.

SOFIA: Really, really bad! Rico doesn't even *have* a girlfriend!

VORTEX: Why? Did he dump you for being a foul-mouthed, whimpering waste of space?

SOFIA: No.

(She beamed then pointed to the ring on her finger.)

SOFIA: He married me!

(She exhaled.)

SOFIA: I'm his wife now, not his girlfriend!

VORTEX: Good god, how drunk was he?

(She then heard a thud from behind her. Countess Brilliance had fainted. Caring very little for that fact, The Rejects just scoffed then continued on, anxious to go on with their mission. Left behind, The Elite all gathered around Brilliance.)

MIGHTY: Is she okay?

SHADOW: I don't know. Maybe the sun got to her or something.

(Brilliance then opened her eyes and whimpered.)

BRILLIANCE: How did that happen?

THUNDER: Too much exposure to the sun, probably.

BRILLIANCE: No... not that.

(She then burst into tears.)

BRILLIANCE: How the hell did someone like Sofia Nice find a husband before I did???

SHADOW: Actually, her name would be Sofia Stanway now.

VORTEX: How does that help?

SHADOW: I don't know, do I?

BRILLIANCE: It's not right! I'm rich, chaste, titled... my family own half this island. My hand is one of the most sought after in the land. When I came out as a debutante, it was predicted that I'd only be single for a matter of weeks. That was two years ago. And... and... Sofia fucking Nice has beaten me to it!

SHADOW: Sofia Stanway!

MIGHTY: Are you still here?

SHADOW: I was only saying.

BRILLIANCE: The world is broken, chaps. It's gone! Logic is no longer logical and rationality has turned irrational. The world is on its head! First those pesky Rejects won the team of the year contest! How did that even happen? Their frontline fighter's most powerful skills are on page five of the guild's skill book! Out of ten! How did we lose to *them*??? Twice! We even lost a duel with them and ended up having to move to bloody Ackfield! How? Why??? It makes no sense!!! And now this! Their bloody healer, probably the most vile woman in the world, has found a husband before I have! What's going on???

THUNDER: Well... I mean... let's be honest here, Countess. Look what she married!

BRILLIANCE: Yeah! The best looking man in Axnay! How is that fair?

THUNDER: Well... he may be the best looking man in Axnay, but you have to remember... he's a peasant.

VORTEX: She married low!

SHADOW: Indeed. She...

MIGHTY: Not you! We're trying to cheer her up!

SHADOW: I was only going to say, she married a man who's beneath you, Countess! Any fool can marry poorly.

THUNDER: Good point. When *you* get married, you'll marry well! That's the difference.

(Brilliance sat up slightly.)

BRILLIANCE: I'm being silly, aren't I?

VORTEX: Absolutely window-licking ridiculous.

BRILLIANCE: Right...

(She then climbed to her feet.)

BRILLIANCE: I was right about one thing though, wasn't I? This world really is upside down! We should never have lost to those second-rate paupers.

THUNDER: Indeed!

(He sighed.)

THUNDER: I have nightmares about it every day.

SHADOW: You have nightmares during the day?

THUNDER: Shut up! The point I'm making is, the countess is right. Things are back to front. They are.

(He sneered.)

THUNDER: And if we ever get the chance to redress the balance and make things right... we're bloody taking it.

In the garden of the large manor house in Wallington Woods, at this time, Alenzi was lighting a fire beneath a large cauldron. At his side was a large picnic table, upon which there was a spell book and several jars. Some jars contained potions, others contained pickled animal parts. He was very much a man on a mission. Since returning from Axnay, he'd been grafting in order to cast the biggest spell of his life. He'd done so with little encouragement from his elderly mother. Seated on a deckchair, some ten feet behind him, she could only shake her head disdainfully.

MOTHER: A cauldron? Really? I thought you were *long* past that sort of thing!

ALENZI: Not now, Mother. I'm concentrating.

MOTHER: On what?

ALENZI: The thing I'm not going to discuss with you *because* I'm concentrating.

(His mother rolled her eyes.)

MOTHER: Right. Something ridiculous, no doubt.

ALENZI: It's not ridiculous!

MOTHER: Then why do you need a bloody cauldron?

ALENZI: Because it's a tricky, high-level spell.

(His mother's glance couldn't have been more condescending.)

MOTHER: High-level? A cauldron is for making love potions and other silly toxins. Child's play! A *real* wizard commands the elements and casts spells with his mind. A *real* wizard...

ALENZI: I *am* a real wizard!

(He glowered over his shoulder at her.)

ALENZI: My control over the elements is excellent and my spell-casting is second to none. Why, only today I managed to convince a temple full of warriors that I was a god! No *ordinary* wizard can cast illusions that convincing!

MOTHER: They why go back to making daft shit like potions?

ALENZI: I'm not!

(He gave a frustrated sigh then turned to face his mother.)

ALENZI: If you must know, mother, I'm going to cast a focussed mind-control spell.

(His mother snarled at him.)

MOTHER: On whom?

ALENZI: Not you!

MOTHER: Better bloody not be!

ALENZI: It's not! I'm casting it on the beast population.

(He glanced skywards and nodded proudly.)

ALENZI: I've already boosted their breeding, their power, their intelligence and their aggression. And it's been a great success! The warrior's guild has never been so busy. But now I need more.

(He turned to face the cauldron and growled.)

ALENZI: I need every single one of those beasts focussed on doing my bidding!

MOTHER: I see...

(She leant over the side of her chair, picked up her knitting then resumed making herself some socks.)

ALENZI: The warrior's guild are onto me, you see?

(He sighed.)

ALENZI: I made the damned fool mistake of letting their leader read me! Of course, she pretended she'd only found out that I was faking being a god, but we both know that's a load of bollocks. One glimpse and that bitch can see it all.

(He nodded aggressively.)

ALENZI: Yes... she knows alright.

(He shrugged.)

ALENZI: Therefore she has to die. All those warriors do. And I'm going to be the one to kill them.

(His mother replied without even looking up. It was fair to say she'd already stopped listening.)

MOTHER: Good for you, dear.

ALENZI: Indeed! It has to be done, you see? Now I've been outed as public enemy number one, they'll *all* be coming for me! So it's either them or me! And I've decided it's going to be *them*!

MOTHER: If you say so, sweetie.

ALENZI: Starting with Rico and Sofia!

(He thumped the table in annoyance.)

ALENZI: That smug Rico bastard stole my woman! I had her right where I needed her, at the temple, already wearing her wedding dress, just waiting for me swoop in and trick her into marrying me against her will. No such luck! Foiled by that bloody Chi! Now Sofia's going to marry that bloody Rico instead! In fact she probably already has!

(He pouted.)

ALENZI: It's not fair! If *I* can't have her, nobody can! I mean, why should they be happy? It's not right! I can see them now, skipping through the tulips, hand in hand, giggling like loved up morons! It makes me sick! That should have been me! With Sofia, I mean; not Rico! He can fuck off! In fact they both can! I'm going to start my cull with them! And once they're dead, my army of minions can get on with the joyous task of killing the rest of those warrior annoyances!

MOTHER: Which is all very nice, dear, but you can keep the noise down? I'm trying to focus on my knitting!

ALENZI: Knitting? Who cares about knitting??? Weren't you listening? The warrior's guild are onto me, Mother! They'll be coming for me with angry snarls and murderous intentions! My life is in danger! So fuck your knitting!

MOTHER: I said keep the noise down!

ALENZI: Fine.

(He took a deep breath then spoke in a quieter tone.)

ALENZI: Just try to understand that I'm not making a silly potion. I'm casting fumes! Fumes that will spread across the countryside, manipulating every beast out there into doing my bidding!

(He smirked.)

ALENZI: Why, ten minutes from now, the fumes from this very cauldron will be wafting out there into the wilderness, altering the course of fate. Warriors will come for me; yes! Those warriors will die. All of them! Starting with that cunt Rico and the horrid woman who betrayed me. I'm sending the beasts after those two first!

(He nodded then turned and glanced at his mother.)

ALENZI: Think! The warriors who for so long have shunned wizardry, as if it's a second class pastime will be gone! And *I*, a wizard, shall remain. Victorious! And who knows? Wizards may even rise up to takeover! Someone has to, right? Why not wizards? You never know, I may be on the verge of ushering in the era of wizardry? Not bad for someone who was never going to amount to anything! Right, mother?

MOTHER: If you say so, dear!

(Alenzi glowered at her.)

ALENZI: You're not even listening!

MOTHER: Yes, I am. You said you'd never amount to anything!

ALENZI: No, I didn't!

MOTHER: Oh.

(She smiled then paused her knitting.)

MOTHER: Well, maybe you should have. Anything else would be a lie!

(She then resumed knitting, leaving Alenzi staring at her agape.)

ALENZI: You... you know, mother...

(He sighed.)

ALENZI: Forget it!

(He then resumed creating his spell with a sour expression his face.)

ALENZI: Stupid woman!

Back in Axnay at this time, The Elite were heading down a street near the town centre, rueing past misfortunes. Duke Thunder was particularly downbeat.

THUNDER: You know, sometimes I wonder if karma is just an agent acting on behalf of arseholes. It's certainly no bringer of fairness and justice, like people claim.

SHADOW: What?

VORTEX: He's babbling like a glue-sniffing poet with a weak vocabulary!

THUNDER: No, I'm not. I'm making an extremely valid point!

VORTEX: You're not! The glue is *making* you think that!

THUNDER: What glue???

(He glowered at Vortex.)

THUNDER: The point I making is this, Velvet! Life was good! Life was great, actually! Everything in our garden was rosy! Until *that* day!

SHADOW: What day?

THUNDER: The day we stopped our carriage just to taunt The Axnay Rejects! We could have just driven past, keeping our derision to ourselves, but no. We had to stop and taunt them out of the window.

VORTEX: Yup. That was fun!

THUNDER: It seemed so at the time, yes, but ever since that day, life has gone downhill!

VORTEX: Hmm...

MIGHTY: He's right. They stole our colossus that afternoon.

THUNDER: And in the aftermath, four of us ended up in jail!

SHADOW: And you got publicly spanked by your father!

THUNDER: I'm aware of that, you...

SHADOW: I'm just saying!

THUNDER: Well don't! The less I'm reminded of that...

(He shuddered.)

THUNDER: Let's change the subject!

VORTEX: From the humiliation of you being put over your father's knee in full view of everyone at the guild?

THUNDER: Yes! Shut up about it!

VORTEX: Yeah, alright; calm down!

THUNDER: I can't! I want to, but I can't! Everything's shit! And I really am starting to think that the day we mocked them, karma came down and took their case. Never mind the fact they're all cunts! It's given *them* everything and shit in our shoes every step of the way since.

BRILLIANCE: You're right. It's been awful. And that day was indeed the day where the downturn began.

(She shook her head.)

BRILLIANCE: But it has nothing to do with karma. Karma is a myth. It has everything to do with those pesky Rejects! They're our blight; not karma!

THUNDER: Well... whatever the reason, I'd kill for one last chance to slap their cocks from side to side then shove carrots up their arses, I really would!

MIGHTY: What?

VORTEX: Slap their...

THUNDER: Not literally! I was just reiterating what I said earlier. Given another chance to outshine them fuckers and show them who's really the best team in Axnay, I'd fucking grab it! With both hands!

(Just then, a familiar voice rose up in front of them.)

CHI: I'm glad you feel that way, Thunder. Because this could be your lucky day!

(At once, Brilliance, Thunder, Shadow, Mighty and Vortex glanced her way.)

SHADOW: Chi?

MIGHTY: Oh... hello, Chi.

VORTEX: Oh, look, it's Chi the turncoat.

BRILLIANCE: What brings you here, Chi?

CHI: What *brings* me here? I work here, remember?

(She gestured to the alcove where the warrior's guild was situated, just twenty metres away.)

CHI: As for calling me a turncoat, Velvet... what the hell are you on about?

VORTEX: You cast us out and sent us to Ackfield!

CHI: No, I didn't! You challenged The Rejects to a duel with a stipulation that the losers *have* to move to Ackfield. Then you lost! All *I* did was oversee it, like I'm legally obliged to!

VORTEX: Like the filthy, low-down turncoat that you are!

CHI: Right! Two things, Velvet. One... learn what the word 'turncoat' means! Two... show some bloody respect, or I *will* tear up your probation agreement!

(Vortex scoffed.)

VORTEX: No, you won't! You can't! You transferred us to the guild in Ackfield, purely out of spite, remember?

CHI: No, I transferred you there because you lost the challenge you put forward, *compelling* me to transfer you there!

VORTEX: Semantics!

(She scoffed.)

VORTEX: Irrelevant semantics at that! The point is, I work for the leader of the Ackfield guild now, not you! So there's nothing you can do to me!

(Chi just smiled then glanced to her assistant who'd been standing at her side the entire time.)

CHI: You tell her, Kiki. I can't be bothered.

KIKI: Okay. Your probation agreement lists Chi as your trusted custodian. Moving guilds didn't alter that! So she can send you back to jail at any time and for any reason. Or indeed, just for fun!

CHI: Eloquent put.

KIKI: Thank you.

CHI: So there it is, Velvet. Now wind your bloody neck in, or get ready to be reunited with Barbara and Lucy again. I'm sure they've kept the cell nice and warm for you.

(Tortured by the very thought of being sent back to jail, Vortex whimpered.)

VORTEX: Forgive me, your majesty! I erred foolishly and with dreadful arrogance, for which I repent wholeheartedly!

CHI: I had a feeling you might!

VORTEX: Then you are wise beyond...

THUNDER: Nope! Put a sock in Velvet! I've waited long enough!

VORTEX: Excuse me!

THUNDER: Chi said it was my lucky day and I was waiting for her to elaborate! A million years later, and I'm still waiting, because *you* can't keep your ridiculous gob shut!

VORTEX: A million years?

THUNDER: Shut it!

(He looked to Chi urgently.)

THUNDER: My lucky day? Enlighten me! Are you going to let us loose on the beasts, so we can outscore those dreadful Rejects and rub their noses in it? Or has there been a recount, and like we suspected, Kiki made a bollocks of counting the bounties at the recent award ceremony? It's the last one, isn't it? We were the *real* team of the year, Kiki just fucked up! Tell me it's that one!

(Chi furrowed her brow.)

CHI: It's not the last one, no!

THUNDER: Shit!

KIKI: And quite frankly, I'm offended! We should send Vortex back to jail!

VORTEX: Me??? Why??? I didn't say it!

KIKI: Guilt by association! He's *your* teammate!

CHI: Look, nobody's going back to jail!

(She shrugged.)

CHI: Except you five if you don't accept the orders I'm about to give you.

SHADOW: Orders? But we don't work for you anymore!

CHI: Actually, you kinda do! As a senior-ranking shag, I have jurisdiction over all teams at all times, *including* yourselves. Therefore, seeing as you're here, I'm commandeering you.

SHADOW: Commandeering us?

CHI: That's right.

MIGHTY: That seems...

THUNDER: Silence, fool!

MIGHTY: Excuse me?

THUNDER: Chi! Tell us what you need! You said today could be my lucky day!

Putting that in context, I can only assume you're telling me there's something going on and you need us to fight. Thus presenting us with an opportunity to destroy The Reject's bounty total and, once and for all, prove ourselves to be the greatest team in Axnay guild history!

CHI: You assume correctly!

THUNDER: We're in!

CHI: And that's the verdict of you all, is it?

THUNDER: Yup! It's unanimous! Five votes to nil in favour of joining you!

MIGHTY: Votes? What votes? I didn't...

VORTEX: We don't need to physically *do* it, dumb arse! We either accept her orders or go to jail!

MIGHTY: Then I withdraw my objection!

BRILLIANCE: We're in!

SHADOW: It is indeed unanimous!

CHI: Wise move. In that case, get your transport and head for Wallington Woods! Kill whatever beasts you come across and if you find a manor house, kill the male occupant! A chap by the name of Alenzi!

THUNDER: Chap? Like... a human?

CHI: Barely. He's a wizard!

THUNDER: Oh. Consider it done then. Those neo-magical wannabes are an embarrassment to the world of magic.

CHI: Even so. Be careful. He's an illusionist. So don't let his tricks fool you.

THUNDER: Ha! Like anyone can fool us! We're the Axnay Elite!

CHI: Ackfield Elite!

THUNDER: Hey! Cheap shot!

CHI: Whatever. You have your orders. Begone!

(The Elite shared a defiant glance.)

THUNDER: Ready?

MIGHTY: Bloody right, I am!

BRILLIANCE: Uh-huh!

VORTEX: Let's go and make The Rejects feel foolish!

SHADOW: In some considerable style!

THUNDER: Absolutely! Let's go!

(They then hurried away to collect their carriage. Watching them go, Chi could only sigh.)

CHI: That's how it is now, is it?

KIKI: What?

CHI: I send them on a quest and their motivation isn't lowering the beast population or making the world safer. It's not even about the money. They just want to outscore The Reject's then rub their noses in it.

KIKI: Yeah... that's about the shape of it.

CHI: Nobles are petty people, Kiki. Truly.

KIKI: That's not news, Chi.

CHI: Good point.

(The two of them crossed to the other side of the road where their carriage awaited them. Chi boarded first then Kiki climbed in after her. Almost immediately, the carriage started to head away.)

CHI: Right... off to battle we go. Not that we're going to do anything other than supervise.

KIKI: I'm not even going to do that. I'm only going along to observe *you* supervising.

CHI: All part of your education, Kiki. One day you'll have your own guild to supervise, after all.

KIKI: One day. I'm nowhere near *that* level yet though.

CHI: Oh, I don't know, love...

(She smiled.)

CHI: Anyway, the bar's closed and the guild's firmly locked up, is it?

KIKI: Yup.

CHI: And the closed sign...

KIKI: Hanging where everyone can see it.

CHI: Okay. Good.

(She grimaced.)

CHI: It's not often we close the guild, you know? In fact, it's exceedingly rare. But this really is a massive occasion. Eucalyptus Alenzi really is a threat. So much so, his death will be a enormous coup. It's far too big a deal, not to shut up shop and send everyone we can find.

KIKI: Hence The Elite!

CHI: Yeah. It was a massive stroke of luck seeing them there, actually. That Alenzi can control the beasts *and* he knows we're onto him. So, it won't just be Empies he sends to attack us! There'll be all sorts of *high-level* beasts as well.

(She shrugged.)

CHI: The Elite can defeat those things with ease. None of the others can. So, yeah, bit of a coup being able to rope them in. Especially while they're so enthusiastic. They could end up being game changers. As could Sofia.

KIKI: Oh?

CHI: Yeah. She's several classes above the rest of our healers. I mean, her skills are almost on another planet.

KIKI: I noticed. Whilst calculating the awards, her healing stats were insane. And not just because her teammates are rubbish. The last two times there was a major event, she managed to cast protections on *and* heal every bugger involved.

CHI: Exactly. We're gonna need her to do that again today, I feel. Enthusiastically! I can't help but feel that, the more fired up she is, the better her healing will be.

KIKI: Based on?

CHI: Pure assumption. I'm guessing a happy healer is a better healer. That's why I allowed her wedding to go ahead.

(Kiki gave her a sideways glance.)

KIKI: *Allowed* it to go ahead? Why would you *not* allow it to go ahead?

(She gasped.)

KIKI: You're not secretly in love with Rico, are you?

(She gasped again, this time even louder.)

KIKI: Tell me it's not Sofia you secretly love!

CHI: No! Don't be bloody ridiculous, woman! When I said I allowed it to go ahead, I meant, I *could* have called everybody back to the guild *before* they got hitched. I knew what Alenzi was up to by then. But I allowed their wedding to ahead *before* I called everyone back!

KIKI: Oh. Gotcha. Why?

CHI: Like I said. A happy healer is probably a better healer.

(She smiled.)

CHI: Hopefully, in her loved-up, newlywed state, she'll be more passionate, and heal with extra rigour and enthusiasm.

KIKI: Right...

(She grimaced.)

KIKI: But then again, she might be so happy and delirious, she can't concentrate.

CHI: What?

KIKI: Just saying.

CHI: Right...

(She grimaced.)

CHI: Shit. You'd better be wrong, Kiki. If she's off her game, people might get killed. And not just her teammates!

(She winced.)

CHI: *Good* people!

Just over an hour later, The Axnay rejects found themselves among a convoy of carriages heading for Wallington Woods. All fifty two teams had one, and all fifty two teams were present. Chi and Kiki's carriage brought up the rear. Snaking in a line for a good half a mile, the convoy made for quite the impressive sight. Many of those inside the carriages, failed to live up the convoy's impressive aura, however. Convinced that going up against the beast's puppet master was a suicide mission, Tika, Amie, Lisa, Alyssa and Saki of the team Rico's Girls, were in huddle, discussing the best way to appear present whilst actually hiding out of sight for the entire duration of the impending battle. Meanwhile, far too close to the front of the convoy for their liking, the new team, Red Diamonds, had reached a rare consensus. They all agreed that they'd probably die first. They also agreed that it wasn't fair. Their magic-caster, Denise, however felt it was even less fair on her, because she was the pretty one. The fear of death, it seemed was a common theme among quite a number of the lesser experienced teams. Inside The Rejects' carriage, however, the subject of death hadn't even come up. They were, in fact, oddly upbeat.

SOFIA: Silly wizard! Who does he think he is?

(She beamed.)

SOFIA: We're gonna whoop him in no time and be back in Axnay before nightfall!

RICO: *Long* before nightfall!

SOFIA: Long, long, long before nightfall. I'm gonna heal everybody so rigorously, they'll come back healthier than when they left! Martin Stevens might even come back with his brain repaired.

RICO: That'd be nice! He gets so embarrassed when he comes into the guild and wishes everybody a good toenail.

SOFIA: Yes, well, don't you worry about that! I'll make it happen. I'm gonna heal so thoroughly, everyone's going to think they're invincible.

(She nodded.)

SOFIA: If that doesn't motivate people to kill that horrible so-and-so quickly, nothing will! Heal, kill, finished! Then we can go home and start packing for our honeymoon.

LEILA: And there it is!

SOFIA: What is?

LEILA: The reason you're so fired up. You want to get back home quickly so you can bugger off on honeymoon.

SOFIA: I know. I just said as much.

LEILA: Hey. I'm not mocking! It's a good motivation! And I hope it works! I also want to get home quickly so Tommy can throw me down and perform all kinds of obscene acts upon my personage, like he promised.

TOMMY: Perform what now?

LEILA: You heard me!

TOMMY: Right...

LEILA: Do what needs to be done, Sofia! Heal like a tigress on a mission!

SOFIA: I will!

(She then threw a limp wrist forwards and miaowed sweetly,)

LEILA: What the hell was that?

SOFIA: Um... a tigress.

LEILA: Tigers don't miaow, they roar.

SOFIA: What?

LEILA: They roar! Like this!

(Leila then pounced towards her and performed her fiercest roar. Startled by it, Sofia jumped back and started to heal herself.)

SOFIA: Scary!

LEILA: Apparently so.

(She then offered her a friendly smile.)

LEILA: Thanks for cowering in terror for me, Sofia. It reminded me of the good old days when you were a nervous wreck, beholden to my every whim.

SOFIA: They were *not* the good old days!

LEILA: Oh, they were. I liked you then!

SOFIA: No, you didn't!

LEILA: No, but I liked you more then than I do now.

(She exhaled.)

LEILA: It's was like having my own personal handmaiden, on call twenty four hours a day! And you didn't cost me a single corona. I miss that!

(She glowered at Rico.)

LEILA: Idiot! Making her feel loved like that! You ruined everything!

RICO: Oddly enough, Leila, I'm not going to apologise for that!

LEILA: Not man enough, huh?

RICO: No, you...

(He shook his head.)

RICO: I'm not even going to comment on that.

(He looked to Sofia.)

RICO: But I will comment on what you said.

SOFIA: Please don't. How was I to know tigers don't miaow?

RICO: Not that. I just want to say, I'm *also* looking forward to getting this over with and going on our honeymoon. It's all the inspiration I need to whoop this Alenzi cunt sideways!

LEILA: Awesome. Then the silly fuck face doesn't stand a chance. You two want to get this over so you can go on your undoubtedly lame honeymoon and Tommy and I can't wait to get back so he can throw me down and inflict unspeakable acts of naughtiness on me.

TOMMY: Wait, wait, wait... when you say unspeakable...

LEILA: Full permission to indulge yourself. Yes, even that!

(Tommy eyes lit up.)

TOMMY: Tell the driver to hurry up!

LEILA: He can't hurry up, we're stuck behind the carriage in front.

TOMMY: Tell him to veer off and take a short cut then!

LEILA: Wow. Calm down, will you?

TOMMY: No! You said "even that" and if it's the "even that" I'm thinking of, every second I have to wait is a second too long!

(Leila grimaced.)

LEILA: Wait... you're scaring me now! What "even that" did you have in mind.

TOMMY: Does it matter? I have full permission to indulge myself.

LEILA: Hmm... I did say that, didn't I?

TOMMY: Yes!

LEILA: Fine. But if it's too disgusting, I'm going to pretend I didn't like it!

TOMMY: And I'll pretend to care.

(Leila exhaled.)

LEILA: He totally gets me!

(She nodded.)

LEILA: So there it is. The four of us have all the motivation we need and Max is riled up and ready to go too for some reason. Look at the scowl on his face!

(Having been glowering out of the window all this time, Max turned to face her.)

MAX: What?

LEILA: I'm saying you look psyched up and ready for the fight.

MAX: Oh, I'm ready for a fight alright!

(He sneered at Rico and Sofia.)

MAX: Mostly with these two!

SOFIA: Um...

RICO: Excuse me?

MAX: Pair of cunts, the lot of you! I mean the pair of you!

(He puffed out with frustration.)

MAX: I mean, you're both cunts!

RICO: What brought that on?

MAX: You called me a bad friend!

RICO: Not this again! I thought you were over it!

MAX: I was...

(He ruffled his neck.)

MAX: But having given myself sufficient time to calm down and stew on it, I realise now that I was right! You're both wankers!

RICO: If you say so.

MAX: I *do* say so.

RICO: I know you do, but nobody cares! You were the one who was out of order, mate. Sofia and I just wanted to get married. Since when was that a crime?

MAX: Since you started being cunts about it!

RICO: When? What are you on about? We did no such thing?

MAX: No? No???

(He ruffled his neck.)

MAX: Let's look at this logically, shall we? I did you a favour and agreed to go to your wedding! In fact, I did you a double favour by agreeing to be your best man!

RICO: A favour? It's meant to be an honour!

MAX: Yeah, but let's not kid ourselves. I did you solid by agreeing to attend, despite my better judgment, and how did you repay me? By calling me a bad friend!

RICO: It wasn't personal, Max. I'd say the same thing to *anyone* who actively assisted in an attempt to sabotage my wedding!

MAX: Fear of divine retribution, Rico! I already explained that! So stop being a cunt about it.

RICO: Wow.

SOFIA: Right?

MAX: And besides, that's just the tip of the iceberg, mate!

RICO: Is that so?

MAX: Yes! Your stupid fucking wedding's caused no end of problems!

(He released an exasperated sigh.)

MAX: Having given up my valuable time off to endure your bloody wedding, where I received nothing but abuse for my efforts, I now find myself in a convoy of warrior carriages, heading off into mortal danger against a bloke so powerful, he can actually control our enemies!

RICO: And how's that our bloody fault?

MAX: How's it *your* fault??? We're only in this mess because your stupid wife turned him down; that's how!

(He looked to Sofia.)

MAX: I hope you're bloody happy. Sofia! All you had to do was oblige him! But no. You were so fixated on marrying for love, you've put us *all* in danger!

(He shook his head.)

MAX: It would have been so easy just to accept the other fella instead! You *could* have spared us all this nightmare if you'd done that! And it wouldn't have even been an inconvenience on your part! You'd still have got a husband out of it!

(He shook his head.)

MAX: Honestly, you are so selfish!

RICO: Right...

(He furrowed his brow.)

RICO: In light of that speech, I think it's only fitting that I upgrade you from a *bad* friend to a *terrible* friend!

SOFIA: Really? I'm starting to think the word *friend* has become redundant at this point.

MAX: Wow! Seriously? After all you've done to me, you're still going down *that* road??? Unbelievable! Un-fucking-believable! Some friend you've turned out to be! (He then glowered out of the window again. Watching him, Tommy could only puff out his cheeks and look to Leila.)

TOMMY: His self-awareness is so...

LEILA: I know!

(She grimaced uncomfortably.)

LEILA: And that's coming from me!

Some ninety minutes later, after what had been, for some, a torturous carriage ride, the warriors started to arrive on the meadow next to the Wallington Woods private estate. The most enthusiastic warriors in the convoy didn't even hesitate. They simply alighted their carriages and sprinted into the woods, eager to rack up a large bounty. The more anxious teams, on the other hand, remained by their carriages, making quite the event of their pre-battle preparations, such as spending five minutes tying up their shoe laces. Taking on the person who was essentially the beast king felt like a foolish undertaking with only one likely outcome. Death. Their lack of enthusiasm, therefore, couldn't be understated.

Upon arriving at the meadow at the very back of the convoy, it didn't take long for Chi and Kiki to understand the state of play. Some of those who'd arrived just before them were already charging into the woods, fired up and determined to start killing as soon as possible. At the same time, some of those who'd arrived first, still hadn't made their move. Knowing it was down to her to get everyone moving, Chi looked to Kiki then nodded.)

CHI: Okay. Watch and learn, Kiki. This is where a shag earns her money.

KIKI: Okay.

(With that, Chi paced up to where the team Rico's Girls were remonstrating with one of their Speed Blades, Tika.)

CHI: Ladies!

(Completely obviously to her presence, Rico's Girls continued their conversation.)

SAKI: We had a pact, Tika!

AMIE: A pact carved in stone!

ALYSSA: Written in letters ten feet high!

TIKA: No, we didn't!

ALYSSA: Well, no, but we did have a discussion! And we all agreed!

AMIE: Fully agreed! We even drunk a toast to the accord!

SAKI: Yeah! Anything to avoid a repeat of what happened when Alyssa broke the girl code and unilaterally abandoned Rico for Max!

ALYSSA: Um... I'm not proud of that...

SAKI: Nor should you be, but that's not the point! We made an agreement. If one of us switches to a new hero, we *all* switch to a new hero! No U-turns! When we choose a new man to hero-worship, we have to stick by our decision come what may!

LISA: No looking back!

SAKI: And definitely no *turning* back!

TIKA: I know that!

AMIE: Do you though? Do you?

TIKA: Yes!

SAKI: Then what was that just now?

TIKA: Well...

AMIE: You watched Rico charge off into the woods just now and yelled "Good luck, Rico; never forget I love you!"

(Tika blushed.)

TIKA: Um... slip of the tongue?

SAKI: Slip of the tongue?

AMIE: She wants to slip him the tongue!

ALYSSA: How old are you?

AMIE: Sorry.

TIKA: Look... girls... I slipped, okay? I'm scared, that's all. And Rico was the last guy we crushed on as a group that I actually liked.

SAKI: Right. Well... I guess you can be forgiven for acting out as a tough time like this, but, in future...

ALYSSA: Honour the girl code, yeah?

TIKA: Right. I'm sorry, girls.

AMIE: It's okay. Just...

(Chi's angry voice then rose up from behind them.)

CHI: Are you seriously *having* that fucking conversation???

(At once, the five of them spun to face her.)

CHI: You're grown women! Adults! Get a boyfriend each!!!

AMIE: Um...

CHI: Enough! I don't want to hear it!

(She rolled her eyes.)

CHI: Why haven't you set out yet?

ALYSSA: Um...

SAKI: You know how it is.

AMIE: Yeah.

LISA: We were like... I don't know.

CHI: Scared, right?

TIKA: Of course not!

CHI: Cool. Off you go then!

(Amie, Alyssa, Lisa, Tika and Saki just stared at her through wide eyes.)

CHI: I thought so. Look...

(She leant to one side then yelled down the side of the row of parked carriages.)

CHI: Red Diamonds!!! Come here!!!

(Moments later, the guild's newest team ambled towards them with fear in their eyes.)

MARTIN: Drainpipe?

(His shoulder's slumped.)

MARTIN: I meant haystack.

JAMES: He means yes.

CHI: I know.

(She nodded.)

CHI: Rico's Girls? Meet Red Diamonds. They're crapping themselves too.

ZACK: Well... I wouldn't say we were cra...

CHI: Crapping themselves!

ZACK: Right...

CHI: And that's fair enough. Red Diamonds, you guys are new and inexperienced. You were bound to be on edge! Rico's Girls, on the other hand, are seasoned fighters. They are, however, cautious. Tactically, they've *always* gone for high quantities of low level beasts.

(She glanced at Tika.)

CHI: Sadly, there's no guarantees of what you'll come up against in *this* fight, so it's okay to be worried.

TIKA: It's not so much that we're worried, Chi. It's...

AMIE: We're terrified.

TIKA: Yeah.

CHI: And that's why I'm proposing that the ten of you travel together. That way you'll have seven fighters and three healers. That should stand you in good stead.

MIMI: Three healers?

CHI: Yeah. Rico's Girls here have *two* healers!

MIMI: Awesome. I might get an intelligent conversation for once.

CHI: It's doubtful. Amie and Alyssa are the healers in question.

AMIE: Hey!

ALYSSA: No, that's fair.

CHI: Anyway, off you pop. Be careful, watch each other's back and more importantly, no slacking. If you work hard, kill hard and heal hard, you'll be absolutely fine, okay? (Her ten subordinates all shrugged nervously at her whilst trying to force accepting smiles.)

CHI: That's the spirit. Good luck. Oh, and... god speed.

(She then watched as the ten reluctant warriors headed for the woodland.)

CHI: And that's how it's done!

KIKI: Wow.

CHI: Wow?

KIKI: You were really motherly there.

CHI: Was I fuck. I even made a point of calling Amie and Alyssa unintelligent, just to *avoid* sounding motherly!

KIKI: You failed. You sounded really kind and caring there. And it worked.

CHI: I was *going* for kind and caring! What's that got to do with being motherly?

KIKI: Well... mums are...

CHI: Mine wasn't! Nothing I ever did was...

(She ruffled her neck.)

CHI: Doesn't matter.

KIKI: Right...

CHI: Anyway, we've got those two teams going, but we're going to need to repeat the process a few more times, it seems. There's at least a dozen teams who still haven't set out. So, I'll let *you* do you the talking next time. See how you get on.

KIKI: Okay. Not that I'm *good* at being motherly.

(Chi furrowed her brow.)

CHI: I get it! You're younger than me!

KIKI: Much younger!

CHI: Whatever! Just be big sisterly or something!

KIKI: Or not. The next team down the line are all older than me.

CHI: I see. Well... you figure it out. Just be reassuring without letting them forget that you're in charge.

KIKI: Oh. Okay. Now that I can do.

CHI: Let's test that theory, shall we? Come.

(Just then, an angry voice rose up from behind her.)

QUIMBY: Chiana, I want a word with you?

(Chi and Kiki about turned to see the minister of defence stomping towards them.)

CHI: Blimey. He looks livid.

KIKI: Yeah.

(She grimaced.)

KIKI: That's your real name, is it? Chiana?

CHI: Nope. Where he got that from, I'll never know.

(Quimby stomped up to her then threw his hands to his hips.)

QUIMBY: Where the hell did you bugger off to, woman???

CHI: Um... at the risk of being disrespectful, sir, I'd say X marks the spot.

QUIMBY: What?

CHI: Here! I buggered off *here*! Why do you ask?

QUIMBY: Because you buggered off without *me*!

CHI: Shouldn't I have?

QUIMBY: No!!!

CHI: I see.

(She smiled.)

CHI: Well, now you've found me, what can I do for you?

QUIMBY: What? Nothing!

CHI: Nothing?

QUIMBY: That's right. I'm only here to observe.

(He ruffled his neck.)

QUIMBY: I just didn't appreciate waiting for you to board your carriage, only for you to bugger off in it as soon as my back was turned!

CHI: That happened, did it?

QUIMBY: Yes! I watched you chat to those Elite chaps then some random tourist asked me for directions! And while I was distracted, you ditched me!!!

CHI: No, we didn't! We had no idea that you planned to come with us! Did we, Kiki?

KIKI: Nope. Not a clue!

QUIMBY: I'm sure you did!

CHI: No...

QUIMBY: Then you buggered off! Left me there! Idiots! I had to go home and saddle up my favourite horse!
(Kiki glanced to where he'd left his horse then bit her lip.)
KIKI: But your horse doesn't even *have* a saddle.
QUIMBY: That's not my favourite horse, what's why!
KIKI: What?
(Quimby fiddled with his ear.)
QUIMBY: There was a bit of a mix up, you see? I got distracted and mounted the wrong one by mistake. I came all the way here bareback. My nuts are killing me. But that's not that point! I'm not happy about this, Chi!
CHI: Oh, well...
QUIMBY: Now find me a seat!
CHI: We're working, Sir. Just sit in an empty carriage for now!
QUIMBY: Fine! Just... know I'm angry!
CHI: Understood, sir.
QUIMBY: Excellent.
(He then hobbled away, holding his groin.)
QUIMBY: Stupid horse.
KIKI: Right... well... that was... I mean, he's...
CHI: I believe the correct term is 'upper class twit', Kiki.
KIKI: That's the one.
(Chi smiled then started to lead Kiki away.)
CHI: Come on. Let's get the rest of the warriors on their way, shall we?
(She bit her lip.)
CHI: Our survival may well depend on it.

Half an hour later, having sprinted into the woods first to make sure they'd have the pick of the beasts at their disposal, The Elite were starting to get somewhat irritated. So far, they'd come across nothing but Empies. To warriors of their stature, killing such creatures was like squashing snails. Killing Empies wasn't even a challenge. They'd need to be facing at least a thousand of them to even bother taking their hands out of their pockets. To make matters worse, the Empies were treating The Elite with the same level of disdain. They kept attempting to bypass them as if they weren't even worth fighting. Not about to let them get away with such an indignity, Velvet Vortex simply kept blowing them up as they passed with a miffed expression on her face.

VORTEX: As much as I enjoy pretending these pathetic creatures are Leila Winter and blowing them to smithereens, this is a joke! What's the bounty on these things?

THUNDER: I have no idea, Velvet. We've never lowered ourselves to attack them before.

MIGHTY: It's probably not even enough to buy a pint of milk!

VORTEX: Right? Where are all the things *worth* killing?

BRILLIANCE: That's what I want to know.

SHADOW: Maybe we need to venture deeper into the woods!

VORTEX: Good idea. I'll just shoot whatever Empies I see as we walk.

BRILLIANCE: Or you could just ignore them. They're not worth anything, Velvet!

VORTEX: I'm not just going to ignore them, Countess! They're being rude!

SHADOW: Rude?

VORTEX: You heard me! They trying to charge on through like we're not worthy of their time and effort!

BRILLIANCE: That's so back to front!

VORTEX: Exactly!

THUNDER: Look, does it matter? Empies are shit! Let them have their moment! Who cares? Let's just go somewhere else and...

(An Emphy then raced past in front of him, not even bothering to acknowledge him.)

THUNDER: Well that's just rude!

VORTEX: See?

THUNDER: I *do* see. Kill it, Velvet!

VORTEX: I already did!

THUNDER: Good!

(He snarled.)

THUNDER: As shit as they are, those little fuckers are well known for savaging every bugger they see! For them to consider *us* unworthy...

(He growled.)

THUNDER: Disrespectful little cunts! They're worse than them fucking Rejects!

BRILLIANCE: Nobody's worse than The Rejects!

THUNDER: I stand corrected!

(He ruffled his neck.)

THUNDER: Still... they're very annoying.

SHADOW: Yes, well... let's be annoyed at them on the move, shall we?

THUNDER: Agreed.

(They then headed onwards deeper into the woods. All the while, Vortex kept blasting her magic at every group of Empies she saw.)

VORTEX: Insolent fiends!

BRILLIANCE: That they are. And it's starting to worry me, chaps. We came here to humiliate The Rejects with our sky-high bounty, but right now, all we've got to our name are the Empies that Velvet is killing!

THUNDER: Maddening, isn't it?

SHADOW: It is, yes. But then again...

(He scoffed.)

SHADOW: It still might be enough to win. It takes Rico's Girls minutes to kill a hundred Empies. And I doubt The Rejects are any better. Yet here's our Velvet obliterating dozens at a time with nonchalant flicks of her wrists, just for the sake of it.

MIGHTY: Yes, but I won't be happy with winning just because Velvet killed more Empies. I want to our score to *embarrass* the rest of teams! Nay, disgrace them! I'm talking about scoring millions compare to their tens of thousands! I want to crucify them,

THUNDER: And we will! Just as soon as we find something worth fighting.

VELVET: Right?

(She grimaced.)

VELVET: I just hope those higher level beasts don't try to bypass us too. Because this is getting ridiculous now! All beasts, even Empies, usually see humans as a ready-made,

gift wrapped snack! These cunts, on the other hand, are just zooming from east to west as if they have somewhere else they'd rather be!

MIGHTY: Yes, and it's...

(He then paused in mid-sentence and glanced up into the treetops.)

BRILLIANCE: And it's what?

MIGHTY: It's not a coincidence!

VELVET: What isn't?

MIGHTY: These cunts zooming across us from east to west. Clearly they *do* have somewhere else they'd rather be!

THUNDER: Hmm... are you saying they're gathering somewhere?

MIGHTY: Well... I don't know about gathering, but look!

(He pointed to where some Empies were racing across the woodland behind him.)

MIGHTY: They're all heading in the same direction, ignoring what they'd normally consider their pray!

BRILLIANCE: Yeah... that feels... organised!

SHADOW: Controlled.

THUNDER: You're right!

(He bit his lip.)

THUNDER: What the hell's going on?

BRILLIANCE: I have no idea, but it's tempting to follow them and find out.

VELVET: Is it fuck. The last thing we want is to end up at an Empty convention. We're *meant* to be killing high level things! And finding a manor house. We're not going to achieve either goal by going on a wild Empty chase.

THUNDER: She's right, you know?

BRILLIANCE: I guess.

MIGHTY: Let's keep going then.

SHADOW: Indeed.

(They then headed onwards. As they did so, Countess Brilliance glanced at where yet more Empies were scuttling past then bit her lip.)

BRILLIANCE: It is curious though.

(She shrugged.)

BRILLIANCE: I wonder where they're going.

Less than half a mile away at this time, The Axnay Rejects were hard at work!

Extremely hard at work! A short while after entering the woods, they'd been attacked by a group of Empies and the fight was still on-going, twenty minutes later. It wasn't that they'd struggled to defeat the Empies. In fact, they'd defeated them in double quick time. Before the fight had even finished, however, they'd been swarmed upon by a hoard of Calibras. That hoard of Calibras had then been joined by a second one. Midway through defeating the second hoard, they'd then be swarmed upon by a throng of Empies over three hundred strong. They were barely managing to whittle the enemy numbers down, before even more would appear. Needless to say, their tempers were getting more than a little frayed.

MAX: This is fucking relentless!

(Rico then zoomed through the pack, determinedly striking down as many as possible.)

RICO: You're not fucking kidding, mate!

(He reached the end of his run then gasped in dismay.)

RICO: Fuck sake! There's another massive hoard coming and there's a couple of Oxhores in there!

MAX: Oxhores??? Fuck!!!

(Leila blasted as many Empies as she possibly could then snarled bitterly.)

LEILA: Go, Rico!

RICO: I'm going!!!

(As Rico commenced his next sortie, Leila glanced to Sofia urgently.)

LEILA: Oxhores, Sofia!

SOFIA: I know!

LEILA: What are we gonna do?

SOFIA: Fight them!

(Leila blinked at her nonchalantly.)

LEILA: Seriously?

SOFIA: Yes! What else can we do? Beasts give you two choices, fight them or lay down and die! And I don't fancy the second one!

LEILA: Right... well... stop being so calm, it's annoying!

(She then blasted her magic in anger. It was a superb shot that almost wiped out the entire, current enemy hoard. Unfortunately, she almost wiped out Rico as well.)

RICO: Careful!!!

LEILA: Oh, shut up! I missed you by miles!

RICO: Inches!!!

SOFIA: Not even that!!!

(Throwing out heals to Max and Rico as they engaged with the next pack of angry fiends, Sofia then made her feelings known.)

SOFIA: You're fucking unbelievable, you are, Leila! We met you over a year ago and you're still the same incompetent, blind buffoon you were then!

LEILA: Why, you...

SOFIA: Honest to god, Leila, did you even take magic lessons, or did you enrol at the guild straight out of clown school? A trained chimp could cast magic more accurately than you! It's like going to battle with a bow and arrow that only fires backwards!

You're fucking useless and the enemy are only too bloody glad you're on our side!!!

LEILA: I'm gonna beat you up when this is over, woman!

SOFIA: You're gonna attack me? Thanks for the heads up! I'll tell Rico to duck!

LEILA: You...

SOFIA: Take your fucking shot, Leila!!!

LEILA: Fine!!!

(She then turned towards the fight and blasted Max with ten thousand volts. Mercifully, Sofia always cast protections from Leila's magic on Max and Rico before a fight.

Therefore, despite being slightly disorientated for a moment, he was okay to fight on!

LEILA: That was your fault! You flustered me!!!

SOFIA: Everyone gets flustered, Leila. You don't see Max and Rico accidentally chopping each other's legs off though, do you? And you never see Tommy get so flustered that he accidentally puts his hands in the wrong pockets!

TOMMY: Hey! That's not fair, I've been using all kinds of slowing and distracting spells! In fact, I've never been so busy!

(He shrugged.)

TOMMY: It just so happens that I don't *need* to take my hands out of my pockets to cast those things!

SOFIA: If you did, you wouldn't bother casting them!

(Tommy furrowed his brow then yelled to Max and Rico.)

TOMMY: Hurry up, you two!!! Sofia's adrenaline's spiked and this is not a pleasant place to be!

RICO: We're going as fast as we can, you cunt!

SOFIA: No, you're not! You're standing there like a gormless chimpanzee who can't find his banana!

RICO: I'm waiting for Leila to cast her... oh, here we go!

(He then zoomed across the battle.)

MAX: Fuck me, Rico. I hope her adrenaline doesn't stay that high for long. She's a right cunt when she's primed!

SOFIA: Hey! Less of that!

(She sneered coldly.)

SOFIA: Bad friend!

MAX: Okay... now I'm *really* angry!

(It may not have been Sofia's intention to inspire Max into a fit of rage, but doing so instantly brought dividends. Outraged, he managed to slash his sword so violently, he caught one of the Oxhores' main arteries with the tip of his blade. These were beasts way beyond the level of the beasts his team usually fought and having taken one down so soon was quite the result.)

RICO: That's the way, mate!

MAX: Fuck off!

RICO: Right...

MAX: I'm not your, mate, I'm a bad friend, remember? Sofia just said so! Again!

RICO: Ignore her, mate, she's in the middle of an adrenaline spike, and you know...

SOFIA: Ignore me??? Fucking ignore me??? Just this afternoon, you promised to love and cherish me 'til death us do part!!!

RICO: The holy man *made* me say that!!!

(He flinched.)

RICO: Bad answer!

SOFIA: Oh, well that's just great, that is! We've only been married for a few hours and you've already become a massive disappointment!

RICO: Don't be like that! I meant, I *do* love and cherish you! But I also recognise when you're on one!

SOFIA: Shit husband says what now?

RICO: I give up!

SOFIA: Yeah, me too! I want a divorce!

(Zooming through the pack again, Rico rolled his eyes.)

RICO: She's going to be horrified at herself for saying that.

SOFIA: No, I won't!

MAX: She'll be happy she realised early on that she married a cunt!

RICO: Fuck off! What is this? Pick on Rico day?
(Just then, Tommy called over them.)
TOMMY: Guys, hurry this up if you can!!! What looks like an army of five hundred mixed beasts is heading our way!!!
MAX: Five hundred???
(Leila cast her magic then winced.)
LEILA: They're chasing after Rico's Girls and that new team!!!
RICO: Can they even handle that many???
LEILA: Um... no.
(She flinched.)
LEILA: And they won't have to either! The beasts just charged straight past them like they weren't even interested!
SOFIA: And they're heading for us instead!!!
TOMMY: How is that fair???
MAX: Are you fucking serious? Beasts don't bypass warriors, they savage them!
TOMMY: Well they did today, for fuck sake!
LEILA: That's just mean!!! Why are they picking on us???
RICO: Because they're cunts!
LEILA: I'll say! Right now, it feels like the entire beast population has singled *us* out for special treatment!
(Upon absorbing her words, Sofia gulped.)
SOFIA: Shit! Fuck! Fuck, fucky, fuck, fuck!!!
(She then stepped up her healing with horror in her eyes.)
SOFIA: They *are* singling us out!!!
RICO: What? Why???
SOFIA: Because Alenzi is making them do it, obviously!!! He's pissed off about being rejected!
(In that moment, a heightened sense of alarm swept through the camp.)
LEILA: Every single beast in the woods against *us*???
TOMMY: How the fuck are we meant to beat that???
MAX: Fuck knows!
(He growled.)
MAX: Now do you get it, Sofia??? You should have just married *him* instead!!!
SOFIA: Say that one more time and I *will* stop healing you!!!
MAX: Feel free, love! With every single beast in the entire Axnay area bearing down on us, we're as good as fucking dead anyway!!!

Having opted to shadow two of the lesser enthusiastic teams as they set about their cull, Chi and Kiki very soon found themselves reaching the stream that ran through the centre of the estate. Delighted to see it, she decreed that this would be a good time to take a break. The two teams offered her nothing by the way of an argument. This left Chi free to discuss her observations with Kiki.
CHI: They've fought nothing. Nothing, Kiki.
KIKI: I know. How do they even make a living?
CHI: Empies, I'm guessing.

KIKI: Yeah... but not if they don't engage.

CHI: Well... no, but it's not like they've *had* to, is it?

KIKI: What do you mean?

CHI: Beasts have seen us. Including a juicy pack of Empies that would have been easy pickings, even for these guys. But no... the beasts didn't engage.

KIKI: That's not normal, is it?

CHI: No, and it's starting to trouble me. If that's a pattern that's being repeated elsewhere it can only mean one thing.

(Just then, Alvin from the Axnay Tigers raced up to her with four teammates in tow.)

ALVIN: Chi!!!

(Chi glanced at him and raised a questioning eyebrow.)

CHI: Alvin? Why aren't you out there fighting?

ALVIN: We have been. Or at least we've been *trying* to. Something weird's happening.

CHI: Oh?

ALVIN: Nothing's engaging us! We've killed a few things, but they've been running away from us at the time. It doesn't make sense. And it's not just us. We bumped into Salva from The Axnay Annihilators and he said the same thing.

(Chi instantly winced with foreboding.)

CHI: Fuck! That confirms it then.

KIKI: Confirms what?

CHI: The obvious!

(Kiki scratched her head nervously.)

KIKI: Um... which obvious in particular... Chi?

(Chi looked through her coldly.)

CHI: Seriously?

KIKI: Well...

CHI: Beasts are not focussed creatures, Kiki! They'll attack anything normally! But they're not engaging today! We've seen it with our own two eyes! *And* we've just heard similar from Alvin here!

ALVIN: That's me!

CHI: Bugger off!

ALVIN: Right...

CHI: Their failure to engage our warriors can only mean one thing, Kiki. The beasts are skipping past with a specific destination in mind!

KIKI: Oh!

CHI: Yes, oh!

(She winced.)

CHI: That can only mean Alenzi has got full control of them already.

KIKI: Right... and he's sending them where?

(She then placed her hand over her mouth and gasped.)

KIKI: Oh, shit! He's sent them after Sofia, hasn't he?

CHI: That'd be my guess, yeah. Sofia or Rico! It stood out a mile when I read him that his crush on Sofia was pretty bloody major. As was his hatred for Rico.

KIKI: Oh, boy...

(Chi then looked to Alvin urgently.)

CHI: Follow the beasts, Alvin.

ALVIN: What? On my own?

CHI: Take your team, obviously! And tell any other teams you find to do the same! And once you get where they're heading, help The Axnay Rejects fight them off!

ALVIN: Okay... I'm not sure I get it, but... whatever you need!

(He then called out to his teammates and they headed off in pursuit of a group of Empies. Left behind, Chi looked to Kiki urgently.)

CHI: We need to take these guys over there too! The Rejects are gonna need all the help they can get.

KIKI: Agreed! Let's...

(She then watched a twenty-foot-tall colossus beast lumber past. Under normal conditions, it wouldn't have hesitated to stomp them into the dirt. Fully focussed on where it was going, however, it completely ignored them.)

KIKI: Um... Chi...

CHI: I see it.

KIKI: It just wandered past like we weren't even here!

CHI: I'm aware.

(Kiki bit her lip.)

KIKI: That can only mean one thing, right? All the remaining colossuses... like, all seven of them are...

(Chi gave her a deeply disturbed glance.)

CHI: Homing in on The Rejects?

(She gulped.)

CHI: Yes, yes they are!

A short distance away, at this time, The Rejects' nightmare battle, continued to intensify. Max was being swarmed upon by what could only be described as a sea of beasts! Thanks to his Pulse skill drawing the beast's aggression, hundreds of them were trying to batter him at once. Needless to say, he wasn't a happy man. Mercifully, he had Sofia. To this point, she'd worked absolute miracles. Casting heals, boosts and protections constantly, she'd somehow kept him alive and on his feet. It wasn't lost on her, however, that one slightly mistimed spell would almost certainly cost Max his life.

SOFIA: I'm not happy!

MAX: I'm not exactly having a picnic by the seaside either!!! I've never seen so many fucking beasts! And they're all trying to hit *me*!!!

(He snarled then lashed his sword across himself.)

MAX: Which doesn't seem fair really! It's you and Rico that Alenzi's pissed off at!

(He then furrowed his brow.)

MAX: Which begs the question, why the fuck *are* they trying to hit me???

LEILA: You have Pulse, numb nuts!

(She rolled her eyes.)

LEILA: That should have been obvious!!!

(Charging through the pack of beasts as powerfully as he could, Rico called out.)

RICO: Are you saying Pulse is more potent than some all powerful wizard's spell?

LEILA: Um... yes?

(Tommy sneered.)

TOMMY: My Sense skill tells me they're very much focussed on Sofia and Rico still, but your Pulse is temporarily drawing them to *you* instead!

MAX: Really?

(He mused to himself as he flailed his sword.)

MAX: So if I stop casting it, they'll fuck off and leave me alone?

SOFIA: You *can't* stop casting it, you idiot! It's involuntary!

MAX: Fuck!!!

RICO: Fuck? What do you mean, fuck? If you were to bugger off and leave us to it, Sofia and I would be done for!

(He zoomed through the beasts, snarling as he did so.)

RICO: I can't believe you'd even *consider* doing that!

MAX: Why not? Sounds like something I'd do! I'm a bad friend, remember?

RICO: I do, yes. Because you keep giving us frequent reminders!

MAX: You cunt!!!

(Leila fired off a powerful blast of magic then looked to Tommy urgently.)

LEILA: Do something!

TOMMY: I am!

LEILA: Yes, but do something useful instead!

TOMMY: Leila, I'm giving it everything I've got! Unfortunately, I'm a low to mid level novice and high level beasts don't give a fuck about my efforts! I can't slow them down or distract them for love nor money!

SOFIA: Just do your best, Tommy! Nobody expected much from you anyway!

TOMMY: You cheeky...

SOFIA: Rico! Run through them smoother! And Leila?

LEILA: What?

SOFIA: Your clothes are rubbish!

LEILA: Why, you horrible...

SOFIA: Focus on the fight!

LEILA: Oh, I will! Because as soon as this is over you and I are gonna fight to the death!

RICO: What a ridiculous exaggeration!

MAX: A bit like calling your sword skills "sword skills"! Cut through closer to the front, you cunt! I'm getting swarmed again!

RICO: I am cutting through the front! There's just so many of them it's making very little difference!

(Leila's eyes lit up.)

LEILA: No, but that might!

MAX: What might?

LEILA: There are four more teams charging over!

(Sofia gulped.)

SOFIA: Yes, but there's also well in excess of a thousand more beasts with them!

RICO: With them? They came together???

MAX: Are you saying they're on the beast's side???

LEILA: No, you tit! They're attacking the beasts, but the beasts aren't fighting back! They so focussed on Rico and Sofia, every other warrior is getting a free pass!

(She then glanced skywards and bit her lip as she mused to herself.)

LEILA: Hmm...

SOFIA: Don't even fucking think about it!

LEILA: What?

SOFIA: If you fuck off and abandon us, Leila, I swear...

LEILA: Oh, as if I would!

TOMMY: I would. And I'm seriously tempted to!

MAX: I wish I could!

RICO: Cheers, guys! Sofia and I are touched by your kindness!

LEILA: Oh, like we'd actually do it.

(She then looked to Tommy enquiringly. Tommy cautiously nodded. Then two of them then proceeded to creep away.)

SOFIA: If you abandon us now, Chi will send you two to jail forever!!!

(Tommy and Leila froze on the spot.)

TOMMY: Um...

LEILA: Actually, she's right there. Desertion from battle is a serious offence and Chi really hates me. She'd give me a life sentence in the maximum security wing!

(She then crept back and resumed taking part in the fight. Tommy, on the other hand, stood there and weighed up his options.)

TOMMY: Hmm... jail... deadly battle... jail... deadly battle...

LEILA: Full permission to indulge yourself, remember?

TOMMY: Right. Deadly battle it is then.

(He then hurriedly rejoined the fight.)

TOMMY: How it's looking at the front there, Max?

MAX: Do I need to dignify that with an answer??? I've got hundreds of big, angry beasts towering over me! I haven't seen daylight for half an hour!

LEILA: Don't worry, Max! If it's light you want...

SOFIA: Don't electrocute him!!!

LEILA: I wasn't going to!!!

(She then blasted her magic into the middle of the pack of demons. It was a blast so powerful and precise, the tip of her lightning bolt chopped an Oxhore in half.)

LEILA: Holy fuck!!!

MAX: Nice! I won't lie, Leila! That helped!

(His brow then furrowed over.)

MAX: And I'm swamped again!!!

SOFIA: Leila?

LEILA: Insult me again, Sofia, and I swear...

SOFIA: Great shot. If you can match that intensity more often, we might be in with a shout.

LEILA: What? You... complimented me!

SOFIA: Of course, I did! Facts are facts! It's was a good shot and it needed saying!

(She nodded.)

SOFIA: Don't get me wrong, I still think you're the worst human being ever to walk the face of the planet, but credit where credit's due; you did well there!

LEILA: Seriously? You're horrible! It's just one mean comment after another with you! It's almost like you get paid by the insult and you're saving up to buy a boat!

SOFIA: Yeah.

(She shrugged.)

SOFIA: My affliction is a bitch, but what are you gonna do?

LEILA: Punch your lights out!!!

SOFIA: Save your fantasies until after the fight, please!

LEILA: You...

TOMMY: Less of that, you two! Step it up!

SOFIA: What he said! Pay attention, Leila. The paid spectator has spoken!

TOMMY: Paid spectator???

(He held out his palms.)

TOMMY: Nope! Not biting! We need to focus, for fuck sake! More warriors are coming to help out, but for every new team that arrives there's another multitude of beasts!

(Leila unleashed yet another lightning casting then sucked her teeth.)

LEILA: Are the other teams making a difference though?

(Zooming through in the wake of Leila's casting, Rico called out.)

RICO: They're thinning the herd at the back a bit, but that's about all!

MAX: It something though, right?

RICO: Not really, no! This swarm is getting bigger and bigger by the second! And I'm not making any difference whatsoever!

(He gave an exasperated sigh.)

RICO: And I'm starting to feel like a pub landlord throwing one drunken punter out of the lounge bar, only for ten more to walk into the bloody saloon!

LEILA: Meaning?

SOFIA: He kills twenty then a hundred more turn up!

LEILA: Yeah... I can relate!

(She pouted.)

LEILA: I'm not gonna lie, Sofia, I'm scared! There's too many of them! Far too many! And right now, I'm losing hope to the point where the idea of deserting and going to prison forever doesn't seem so bad after all!

TOMMY: Let's do that then!

SOFIA: Fine! Go on then! You do that! Abandon us! See if we care!

MAX: Shut up, Sofia!!! Don't do it, Leila!!! We care! We care!!!

RICO: More than you'll ever know!!!

LEILA: Right...

(She sighed.)

LEILA: Sorry, guys. I just can't do this. It feels like death is inevitable and...

SOFIA: We don't need a speech, just go if you're going.

LEILA: Well... okay.

SOFIA: Bye! And don't worry, I'll let Velvet Vortex know what prison you end up in, so she can pop by and mock you every day.

(Leila froze on the spot.)

LEILA: Right...

(She sneered.)

LEILA: She'd love that, wouldn't she? She'd love nothing more than for me to be banged up in jail while she frolics about in the meadow like an excitable goat with a terrible hairdo! Well, she can forget it! I'm back in!!!

(She proceeded to unleash several successive lightning blasts.)

LEILA: I'm back and I'm meaner than ever!!!

(Dancing around with terror in his eyes as he tried to avoid her lighting spells, Rico looked utterly mortified.)

RICO: Stop it!!! Fuck off!!! Leila!!!

SOFIA: Pack it in, Leila!!! Rico's in there!!!

LEILA: What?

(She paused.)

LEILA: Oh. Right. Sorry. Got carried away.

TOMMY: So... Leila...

(He sighed.)

TOMMY: I guess we're staying then.

LEILA: I'll make it worth your while later.

TOMMY: Sure...

(He glanced to the hoard that Max was still somehow keeping at bay.)

TOMMY: If there *is* a later. There are thousands of the fuckers and they're still coming!

MAX: Then we'll just have to keep on going!

SOFIA: No matter how desperate it gets!

RICO: Just think before you cast, Leila!

LEILA: What's that meant to mean?

RICO: You just missed me! Twice!

LEILA: That wasn't me!

RICO: Wow.

SOFIA: Nothing changes, does it?

LEILA: What's that meant to mean?

MAX: It means shut up and fight! I mean, is anyone even killing these things??? This hoard is getting bigger!

TOMMY: There's about eighty warriors at the back and us five this side!

MAX: Then how come it's not making any difference???

TOMMY: Because there's thousands of beasts!

MAX: Right...

(He winced.)

MAX: That's not even an exaggeration, is it?

TOMMY: Sadly... no.

MAX: Fuck!

LEILA: It's really not looking good!

(Her jaw then dropped and her arms slumped to the side.)

LEILA: And it just got a whole lot worse!

(Sure enough, a colossus beast was stamping its way towards them having just cast a tree out of the ground. In that moment, all hope vanished from Tommy and Leila's eyes.

Scared witless, they just proceeded to back away from the fight, trembling all over.

Staring at it as it advanced, Sofia instantly went weak at the knees. She continued to heal with as much gusto as before, but try as she might, she couldn't fight off the sinking feeling in her heart. Taking down a colossus beast was a nigh-on an impossible task; hence the ridiculously high bounty on them. For one to arrive in the middle of a battle they were already struggling with, therefore, was mortifying.)

SOFIA: That's... that's... that's really bad.

MAX: Don't be defeatist, Sofia!

RICO: Yeah! If we're gonna get through this, we need to believe in ourselves!

(He then ended his latest zoom and performed a double take towards the back of the pack.)

RICO: Oh, fuck me! That's the last thing we need!

(Unable to see the approaching colossus, Max furrowed his brow.)

MAX: Don't you fucking start!

(He sneered.)

MAX: Knuckle down, double your efforts and fight with everything you've got! Be positive! Believe!!! Do that and we might just about be able to get out this mess alive!!!

(At this point, the shadow of the colossus, loomed over him. At once, he lowered his sword and stared up at it with horrified eyes.)

MAX: Right... I see what you mean.

(Allowing Sofia's magic to spare him from the battering he was taking from the beasts, he gulped then called over his shoulder.)

MAX: Guys? I'm starting to think a positive attitude isn't going to help!

(He then watched as the colossus flattened the beasts in front of him.)

MAX: Why am I still here??? Why haven't I run away???

(He gulped.)

MAX: Yup! Frozen with fear! That's not a good sign! Oh, boy...

(At this point, the beast drew back its foot. Knowing exactly what was coming, Max groaned in despair.)

MAX: Not again!

(The beast then booted him high and far across the woods. Like it had merely kicked a pinecone, he shot over the trees, sneering with annoyance.)

MAX: Every fucking time!!!

(Well aware that Sofia would have at least encased him a protective shell and that he'd undoubtedly land safely, he then allowed himself a rueful smile.)

MAX: At least I'm away from the fight, I guess.

(He then sighed sorrowfully.)

MAX: But still... why is it always me who gets the shit end of the stick?

(Little did Max know, however, Rico and Sofia would have traded places with him in an instant. Without Max there to attract the beasts' anger onto himself, they'd reverted to their original focus. The focus of Alenzi's spell. Killing them both horribly. As such, Rico was zooming back and forth, using his immense speed to avoid them while he tried to get to Sofia. He didn't stand a chance. There were so many of them, his path to her was blocked from every angle.)

RICO: Run, Sofia!!! Fucking run!!!

(Sofia, however, had gone to pieces. Her legs had ceased to function and she was rooted to the spot in terror. A colossus and several hundred beasts were charging right at her, determined to tear her limb from limb. All the healing in the world wasn't going to save her from such an onslaught. She could be stamped into the ground or have her heart ripped out at any moment. Instant death. The one thing no healer could fix, and it was coming her way any second now. Well aware that she might have frozen, Rico called out to her from where he was desperately trying to evade the swarm of murderous beasts on his tail.)

RICO: Fucking run, Sofia!!!

(Overcome by fear, Sofia didn't even hear him. Her time was up and she knew it. The beasts were almost upon her. Her demise was imminent. The beasts at the front were already starting their lunge. Scared witless, all she could do was scream then cover her face. Death was upon her.)

SOFIA: Rico!!!

(Just then, her entire body jolted and she fired off a pulse of energy so powerful, it knocked all the beasts back at good fifteen feet, flooring every single one of them. It had been an entirely involuntary act on her part. Utterly perplexed by the bizarre occurrence, she could only stand there wondering what in blue blazes had just happened. The beasts had been millimetres from her face one moment then floored the next. Before she could even begin to rationalise it, however, her body jolted again.)

SOFIA: Eek!

(Once again, the beasts were blasted backwards away from her.)

SOFIA: What's going on?

(Her body then proceeded to fire off thirty more blasts at one second intervals; knocking the beasts back further and further. With each one, Sofia shrieked, whimpered and groaned. What her body was doing, she had no idea. It was a sense of bewilderment that was shared with all those around her. Only the beasts were affected by it.)

LEILA: Um... Tommy...

TOMMY: I know. I see it too.

SOFIA: Ooh... Eek... this is... oh, my god...

(Her body then released a pulse so powerful, it sent everybody flying; warriors and beasts alike. At the same time, Sofia collapsed to her knees then thrust her palms awkwardly between her thighs and toppled over sideways.)

SOFIA: I had an orgasm!

(Blushing like a summer rose, she then sat up and gasped at the sight before her.

Inexplicably, every single beast in their presence, well over a thousand in all, had started fighting each other. Just a short moment ago, they'd been hell bent on obliterating *her*, and yet, in the weirdest blinking of an eye, they'd turned on each other instead.)

SOFIA: What the...?

(Baffled by what she was witnessing, Leila climbed to her feet then ambled over to her with a bewildered expression on her face.)

LEILA: Sofia?

SOFIA: Um... what's going on?

LEILA: So...

(She scratched her head.)

LEILA: From what I can tell... you got so excited about dying, you had an orgasm. Now all the beasts are so aroused, they've started fighting over you!

(Sofia furrowed her brow.)

SOFIA: Don't be ridiculous

TOMMY: She's not! That's *exactly* what happened.

SOFIA: No... I did something.

(She winced.)

SOFIA: I felt something rising up inside me.

LEILA: Yeah. An orgasm. You literally said so.

SOFIA: It was magic!
LEILA: Most orgasms are, sweetie.
SOFIA: No, you... listen to me.
(She looked to the battling beasts then bit her lip.)
SOFIA: I released something.
LEILA: Vaginal fluid?
SOFIA: A spell!!!
LEILA: Hmm...
SOFIA: I did! Look...
(She pointed to where the beasts were fighting.)
SOFIA: I think... I did that.
(She climbed to her feet then whimpered.)
SOFIA: A second ago, everything was trying to kill *us*! Now they're fighting each other!
I *must* have cast a spell without knowing it.
LEILA: Either that or *Alenzi's* spell simply wore off.
SOFIA: If that was the case, the beasts would still be trying to attack *us*. It's what they do! Instead, they're fighting each other!
LEILA: I see.
(She gave her a suspicious glance.)
LEILA: And you plan to take the credit, right? Sneaky!
SOFIA: Leila...
(Just then, Rico zoomed over to her and threw his arms around her.)
RICO: Sofia!!!
SOFIA: Rico! My Rico!!!
(They hugged for dear life then Rico stepped back in astonishment.)
RICO: What did you do?
LEILA: She had an orgasm!
RICO: I'm talking to my wife!
(He grimaced.)
RICO: Seriously, what did you do?
SOFIA: Um...
(She pointed to where the colossus was stamping some Empies in the dirt.)
SOFIA: That!
(She scratched behind her ear.)
SOFIA: Whatever *that* is. I can't explain it... I just know it was me.
RICO: Oh.
(Leila scoffed.)
LEILA: Don't be ridiculous, it seems bloody obvious to me that you had a kinky pre-death orgasm and these randy little beasts got all excited. Now they're...
(Just then, Tika and Saki from Rico's Girls came charging towards them, growling at Leila.)
TIKA: I'm gonna kill you, Leila!!!
SAKI: Not if I kill her first!
TIKA: You wont though! Because I'm gonna kill *you* an' all!!!
(They then proceeded to beat the living daylights out of one another.)
SOFIA: Um... okay...

TOMMY: What the fuck's that all about?

LEILA: I don't know...

(She snarled.)

LEILA: I just know I want in!!!

(She then charged over there and leapt onto the pair of them!!

LEILA: Die bitches!!!

(Watching on with his jaw on the floor, Rico could only scratch his head.)

RICO: Why are they... doing that?

TOMMY: Because... I don't know... women's issues? Nope. Forget I said that.

RICO: Gladly.

SOFIA: Um... Rico? Something weird is going on!

(Rico glanced at where a second colossus beast was racing onto the scene, primed and ready to beast the living daylights out of the one already present, then raised a baffled eyebrow.)

RICO: Yeah... you're not kidding, babe!

Within ten minutes of Sofia experiencing her bizarre orgasmic episode, Wallington Woods was awash with beast corpses. When beasts fought, they fought to kill, and they made no exception when fighting each other. The warriors there were also having something of a field day. With the beasts so heavily focussed on killing one another, the warriors had been able to attack them without any danger of them fighting back. Oxhorses had been murdering each other, Empies had been destroying each other and six of the seven remaining colossus beasts had turned up to have something of a battle royale. Able to pick off those beasts on the verge of death, even the weaker warriors had managed to kill off high-level creatures they'd never dare challenge otherwise.

Amongst all the chaos, Leila was busy having a pitch battle with all five Rico's Girls. The six of them were pulling hair, scratching and biting one another in what could only be described as a very girly, no holds barred catfight. Bearing witness to the carnage, Chi and Kiki were standing beneath a tree with their jaws on the floor. They'd expected to find a myriad of beasts rampaging at the Axnay Rejects. What they were watching was something very different entirely.

KIKI: What... what the fuck am I looking at here, Chi? I mean... what am I watching?

CHI: Well, Kiki, *I'm* watching the local beast population wage war on itself. But then again, I might be hallucinating! You?

KIKI: Yeah... you're not hallucinating, Chi.

CHI: Hmm...

(She then glanced across the meadow and spotted Max staggering towards Rico, Sofia and Tommy.)

CHI: Interesting. The Rejects are unscathed, look. Maybe they weren't the targets of the attack after all.

KIKI: Good point.

(She sucked her teeth.)

KIKI: But, what the fuck is going on with Leila and Rico's Girls? They're bitch fighting the crap out of each other!

CHI: Yeah... that's... let's just say we have a lot of idiots in our guild and leave it at that, Kiki!

(Blissfully unaware that Chi and Kiki had been observing him, Max staggered over to Rico then threw his sword on the floor in a temper.)

MAX: I hate this warrior life! I'm retiring!

SOFIA: You're not allowed to retire!

MAX: Let me air my frustrations!!!

SOFIA: Right...

(She blushed.)

SOFIA: Sorry!

MAX: Yeah, you *be* sorry!

(He glanced at where the beasts were all brutalising one another then furrowed his brow.)

MAX: Don't get me wrong, I'm glad they've stopped trying to murder us. I really am. In fact, it fills me with festive delight. But... why did something that shit have to happen to us in the first place? It's *not* what we signed up for. We signed up to fight what we *know* we can kill then go home and get paid. A battle to the death against the entire beast population was *not* on my wish list! I'd never have *joined* the guild if I thought something like that might happen.

RICO: I doubt any of us would.

TOMMY: Well, you're not wrong.

(He shook his head.)

TOMMY: I only signed up to stop my mum from nagging. Had I known a fight like that was possible, I'd have stayed at home and put up with the whinging little twat.

SOFIA: Horrible, wasn't it?

TOMMY: Yes!

(Sofia hung her head and whimpered.)

SOFIA: And so was I. I didn't mean all those mean things I said.

MAX: Yeah... so you always tell us. But come tomorrow, you'll be pulling even more evil observations out of your arse.

RICO: No, she won't. We'll be on our honeymoon tomorrow!

MAX: Fine. Not tomorrow then, but next time we fight, you can bet your arse there'll be yet more vulgar words.

SOFIA: Well... if it helps, I can tell you in advance that I won't mean *them* either.

MAX: No, it *does not* help.

(He then released a conceding sigh.)

MAX: But today... today you can be forgiven.

(He gave a stifled laugh.)

MAX: Because today, I was even more vile than *you* are. That shit I said about the fight being all your fault, and how you should have married fuck face Alenzi instead... that was pretty harsh. I apologise.

(Sofia was astonished.)

SOFIA: Wow. Really?

MAX: Well, don't look so surprised, Sofia.

(He nodded.)

MAX: I've *always* been the sort of bloke who recognises his misdoings and humbly apologises accordingly.

RICO: Yeah... except for when you gazumped my accommodation, stole my women, took away my hobby, gleefully boned the woman Tommy was trying to reconcile with then tried to sabotage my wedding, I suppose you are.

(He rolled his eyes.)

MAX: Fuck off, you. Your right to give me shit is revoked! Sofia's forgiven, but as far as I'm concerned, *you're* still a cunt. Going around telling everyone I'm a bad friend!

RICO: I didn't go *anywhere*, you tit; I said so to your face!

MAX: Which doesn't make you any less of a cunt in my eyes.

(He ruffled his neck.)

MAX: In fact, in terms of being a cunt, you're second only to old Eucalyptus Alenzi!

RICO: Whatever you say, Max.

MAX: That is what I say. You, my friend, are a cunt!

RICO: Right... well... I don't care what you think.

(He gestured to where their fellow warriors were joyfully attacking every beast in the vicinity with no danger of reprisals.)

RICO: There's money to be made over there, maybe we should think about joining in.

SOFIA: Good idea.

TOMMY: Definitely.

(Just then, Chi appeared in front of them wearing a furrowed brow.)

CHI: Taking a tea break, are we?

RICO: Excuse me?

CHI: I sent half the bloody guild over here to find you earlier. I thought you needed help. And now I find you're the only ones not fighting anything.

SOFIA: Um... we were just about to.

MAX: Not that we owe the guild anything! It was just us five verse the entire beast population earlier!

CHI: It was?

MAX: Yes!

CHI: I see. Then my hunch was right.

(She grimaced.)

CHI: How the hell did you survive then?

SOFIA: Um... well... something happened.

TOMMY: She squealed in ecstasy, had an orgasm then fell over. Next thing we knew, the beasts were fighting each other instead.

CHI: If I wanted a stupid, sarcastic answer, Tommy, I'd have bloody well asked for one!

TOMMY: I wasn't being sarcastic! That's literally what happened!

SOFIA: No, it wasn't! It just looked that way to you!

(She pouted at Chi.)

SOFIA: Max got booted over the treetops again and it left us all defenceless. Next thing I knew, hundreds of demons charged at me, desperate to eat my face.

(She scratched her neck.)

SOFIA: Then I felt this weird sensation gush through me and magic came out.

TOMMY: It was an orgasm!

SOFIA: Shut up!

(She whimpered.)

SOFIA: That... did happen... but it came with the spell. All the beast flew backwards then got up and started fighting each other instead. It was really weird. Then, Leila, got into a fight with Rico's Girls for no apparent reason. It was all very... I don't know *what* it was.

(She looked into Chi's eyes.)

SOFIA: I don't understand it, Chi. I did it, but... I don't know how.

CHI: Right...

(She bit her lip.)

CHI: I believe you, love.

(She shrugged.)

CHI: And with any luck, maybe the black marble can shed some light on it.

SOFIA: That'd be nice. I'd love to know what happened, I really would.

CHI: Me too, Sofia. Me too.

(She then gestured to the woodland before her. The bodies of dead beasts were piling up before their very eyes, but even more were arriving just to batter their peers.)

CHI: Go on. Earn yourselves a nice little bounty.

MAX: Yeah...

(He nodded.)

MAX: Don't mind if I do.

A brief while later, at the old manor house, deeper inside the woodland, Alenzi was having the time of his life. Convinced he'd struck a major blow for wizard-kind, he was standing over his cauldron, fanning the fumes with a delighted, evil glint in his eyes.

ALENZI: Suffer, fools! Suffer.

(He tipped his head back and laughed.)

ALENZI: It's too beautiful for words! For centuries, those damned warriors have mocked our kind. They've looked down on us! Sneered at us! They've treated us like dirt and laughed in our faces! Well who's laughing now? Me! That's who!

(He exhaled.)

ALENZI: Revenge is a beautiful thing!

(He then sighed with regret.)

ALENZI: Though it didn't have to be this way; you know that, right, Sofia? All you had to do was accept me and all this could have been avoided. Was that really so difficult?

(He sneered.)

ALENZI: Apparently so. Well, fuck you, woman! I hope you died screaming. And I hope they ate Rico in front of you first! Rejecting me like that... rude!

(He then took a breath to calm himself.)

ALENZI: Don't get all maudlin now, Eucalyptus; this is meant to be a happy occasion. A celebration.

(He beamed.)

ALENZI: Because this very afternoon, those warriors would have charged out of Axnay and into the wilderness with orders to strike me down. Well, so much for that! They'd have been swarmed upon by beasts like locusts swarming on a field of corn. Ravaged and destroyed. And long may it continue!

(He then wafted at the cauldron again, as if pushing the fumes with his hands would speed up their journey.)

ALENZI: Go! Spread far and wide, my beautiful fumes. Infect the mind of every beast you find. Go! Waft my pretty fumes! Help me smite my enemies, one and all!!!

(He was then unceremoniously splatted into the turf by a passing colossus on its way to the fight. He didn't even see it coming. One minute he was full of vitality and excitement, and the next, he was just a squashed mess of blood and bones on the manor house lawn. Barely able to act surprised, his elderly mother paused her knitting then shook her head at his remains.)

MOTHER: I told you you wouldn't amount to anything!

(She then resumed knitting, humming a merry tune to herself as she did so.)

Some ten minutes later, as Alenzi's mother sat in her armchair, cheerfully finishing the pair of socks she'd been working on, a whispering sound emanated from behind some trees. Baffled by it, she glanced up and furrowed her brow.

MOTHER: Who's there?

(She lifted herself slightly to peer across the woodland then shrugged.)

MOTHER: Probably a squirrel.

(She then resumed knitting. Two seconds later, however, Velvet Vortex, Duke Thunder and Sir Mighty raced from behind some trees then charged towards her aggressively.)

THUNDER: Don't move!

MIGHTY: Put your hands above your head!

VORTEX: Keep perfectly still and stand up!

(Alenzi's mother gave them a condescending glance.)

MOTHER: How can I put my hands above my head without moving? You two idiots completely and utterly contradicted each other there!

(She rolled her eyes.)

MOTHER: As for you, young lady... keep perfectly still *and* stand up? That's the most ludicrous thing I've ever heard!

(She gestured to Thunder and Mighty.)

MOTHER: Now, I can understand why *two* people might not be in sync with one another, but you... you're at odds with yourself! Clearly, you're not the brains of the outfit, are you?

VORTEX: Cheeky witch! I'm gonna shoot her!

THUNDER: No, Velvet! Behave yourself, woman!

(He then glowered at Alenzi's mother sternly.)

THUNDER: You there... put your hands where we can see them!

(Mother rolled her eyes then held out her palms.)

MOTHER: Happy?

THUNDER: No, but... it'll do.

(He sneered.)

THUNDER: Now keep perfectly still and tell us where Alonso is! And no funny business, wizard!

MOTHER: Alonso? There's no Alonso here, son! You must mean Alenzi, my son!

THUNDER: Um...

VORTEX: Alenzi, that's right.

THUNDER: Are you sure?

(Sir Mighty nodded.)

MIGHTY: I'm pretty sure Chi said Alenzi, yes.

THUNDER: I see.

(He sneered at Alenzi's mother.)

THUNDER: Where is he?

(Alenzi's mother nodded him head towards the splattered pile of blood and bones on the grass.)

THUNDER: What? That's...

MOTHER: A complete waste of nine months of my life? Yup! That he was.

MIGHTY: Hmm...

(He called over his shoulder.)

MIGHTY: Shadow?

(Shadow peered from behind a tree.)

SHADOW: Is it safe to come out now?

MIGHTY: Never mind that, just come and sense these bones.

SHADOW: Excuse me? Never mind my safety??? What sort of...

THUNDER: You're fine! We have the witch covered!

MOTHER: Wizard, actually. Not that I've ever practiced the craft! I was too busy churning out disappointing children. Actually, maybe that's not fair on Shana, my second eldest, she turned out okay. The rest, however...

(She blew a raspberry then showed them a thumbs down.)

MIGHTY: We don't need your life story, woman. We just need Shadow to sense...

SHADOW: I'm doing it!!!

(He rolled his eyes.)

SHADOW: It was a chap called Alenzi, the one Chi sent us to find.

(Alenzi's mother smiled.)

MOTHER: And now you have. So be a dear; scrape him up with a shovel and take him with you. I don't want him.

THUNDER: Nor do we. We came here to kill him.

MOTHER: Oh. Too late!

(She chuckled.)

MOTHER: One of the beasts he thought he was controlling already beat you to it.

Honestly, you couldn't make it up. He was giving it the big one, declaring himself the greatest thing ever to happen to wizardry then splat! Whoopsie!

(She burst out laughing.)

MOTHER: What a wally!

(She forced her laughter away then smiled.)

MOTHER: Anyway, if we're done here, can I get on with my knitting? I want to get this finished before dinner time, you see? I'm making a hotpot!

(Just then, Countess Brilliance's voice rose up from a table a few feet away.)

BRILLIANCE: What's this?

(She held up a book.)

THUNDER: Countess, we told you to remain hidden until we were sure it was safe.

BRILLIANCE: I know. And Shadow said Alenzi was dead, so I came out. And found this book. A spell book.

(Alenzi's mother smiled.)

MOTHER: That old thing? It's been in the family for centuries that thing.

BRILLIANCE: And what sort of spells...

MOTHER: Wizard spells, I expect. I don't know. I've never read it.

(She smiled.)

MOTHER: I tell you what, why don't you take it home with you?

BRILLIANCE: Can I?

MOTHER: If it'll get you off my bloody lawn, yes!

BRILLIANCE: Deal.

(She smiled at her teammates.)

BRILLIANCE: Come on, chaps. Alenzi is dead, so we've no further reason for being here!

SHADOW: Or maybe we do.

(He then held out his palm and sensed Alenzi's mother.)

SHADOW: Scratch that. I thought she might be dangerous, but... she's got less magic power than Tommy Brightlingsea fella and that's quite the statement.

THUNDER: Indeed.

(He nodded to Alenzi's mother.)

THUNDER: We bid you farewell.

MOTHER: How lovely. You're all so very polite.

(She smiled.)

MOTHER: Come back and visit any time you like. I'll make you a nice cottage pie.

SHADOW: Sure. We'd love to.

MOTHER: You won't though.

SHADOW: Obviously.

VORTEX: Bye!

MOTHER: Bye-bye.

(The Elite then headed away together. Brilliance, brought up the rear with her nose in the spell book she'd found.)

MIGHTY: No wonder that Alenzi turned to crime. With a mother like her...

VORTEX: She seemed fine to me. Better than *my* mum. Actually, that's not fair. I shouldn't judge my mum harshly like that. I don't even know her. The nanny raised me.

SHADOW: Quite.

(He shook his head.)

SHADOW: Anyway, that's another door slamming in our faces. We came here to fight high level beasts and we got Empies. We also came to kill Alenzi... we got nothing.

We'll never beat The Rejects at this rate.

THUNDER: Yes, well...

(He sighed.)

THUNDER: Fate hasn't been a friend of ours lately, has it? What *can* go wrong, has gone wrong.

BRILLIANCE: Actually...

(She glanced up from her book.)

BRILLIANCE: This *could* turn out to be the greatest day of our lives.

(Vortex's face lit up.)

VORTEX: Leila Winter's dead???

BRILLIANCE: No, you idiot!

VORTEX: Aw.

BRILLIANCE: Why would you even *think* that I meant that? Leila isn't even here! How would I know if she was dead or not?

VORTEX: Alright; calm down. You said it was the greatest day of our lives and that was the greatest thing I could think of.

BRILLIANCE: You're ridiculous.

VORTEX: So is your hairstyle.

THUNDER: Enough of that silliness! What were you referring to Countess?

BRILLIANCE: What?

(She flinched.)

BRILLIANCE: Oh. This book.

(She beamed with delight.)

BRILLIANCE: The answer to a three hundred year old mystery is right here on page one! And it's the sort of thing you get *recognition* for finding! We could well go down in history.

SHADOW: Oh? Do tell.

BRILLIANCE: Okay...

Elsewhere in the woodlands, at this time, the chaos continued. Beasts were savaging beasts with a primal rage that had seldom been seen before. It was almost as if they'd lost all their instinct to survive. Even if they were being pummelled to the point where death seemed inevitable, they continued to battle. They were like berserkers, fuelled by pure rage. They were giving it everything they had, almost as if they were fighting to protect something personal. The fighting was so ferocious, in fact, that four of the colossus beasts in attendance had been already met their end, having been brutalised by the other ones. Now only three remained; the two that had been present since the fight began and the one that had arrived late, having squashed Alenzi into the floor. The three of them were now going at it, hammer and tongs. Like the lesser beasts around them, they were only interested in killing each other. Killing warriors didn't even enter the equation. They only had murderous eyes for each other.

Naturally, with the current situation being what it was, the warriors couldn't believe their luck. Killing had never been so easy. The beasts were so focussed on murdering each other, they didn't even fight back. For one warrior in particular, the situation was extremely therapeutic. Having come to within inches of losing his life to a pack of Empies, to be able to butcher so many in a perfectly safe environment was liberating beyond words. Cruising through weary beasts with his blade, his face was the very picture of joy.

MARTIN: Take that, you bucket of sandwiches!!!

(Having mowed down a dozen Empies, he then charged towards a trio of Calibras.)

MARTIN: Feel my wrath!!!

(Delighting in how easily he'd killed them, he then thrust his arms into the air and made a declaration of joy to the heavens.)

MARTIN: I've never felt so blancmange!!!

(Sitting on the grass, a safe distance from the battle, Kiki looked to Chi.)

KIKI: I'm so happy for Martin, you know? Today will do him the power of good.

CHI: Well, it certainly won't have done his confidence any harm.

KIKI: Right?

(She grimaced.)

KIKI: It's just a shame he has a female magic-caster in his team, really. She'll crush his soul again in two seconds flat.

CHI: I doubt she'll wait that that long, Kiki.

(She sighed then glanced towards Leila.)

CHI: Female magic-casters really are a vile concoction of all things vulgar and unpleasant. Especially *that* idiot.

(She then rolled her eyes at the sight of Leila banging Tika and Alyssa's heads together.)

LEILA: Nobody messes with the Winter Warrior!

(She was then bundled to the floor by an irate Lisa.)

LISA: Die, bitch!!!

LEILA: You're gonna regret that!!!

(Saki then stepped on her hand during an attempt to kick Amie up the backside.)

LEILA: Ow!!!

(Her head then jolted sideways. Lisa had a firm grip on her hair and was yanking it with all her might.)

LEILA: Get off!!! That really hurts!

LISA: Feel my rage!!!

LEILA: No! *You* feel this!!!

(She then swung her elbow and whacked Lisa on the cheek.)

LISA: My face! My gorgeous face!!!

LEILA: You don't *have* a gorgeous face!

(She then jumped to her feet, before leaping in the air to attempt an elbow drop. Seeing it coming a mile away, Lisa rolled out from beneath her then jumped to her feet.)

LISA: Too slow!!!

(She was then slugged over the head by Amie.)

LISA: Mean!!!!

AMIE: That's what you get!

LEILA: Hey! I was fighting *her*!

(She then jumped to her feet and fainted as if to run towards Amie. Rather than doing so, however, she leapt sideways and shoulder-barged Alyssa.)

LEILA: Ha!

(Unfortunately, Tika had been in the process of throwing a punch at Alyssa.

Consequently, Alyssa flew to safety and Leila took the full force of the punch to her chin.)

LEILA: Why!!!

(She then tumbled to the ground where she was immediately leapt on by Saki.)

SAKI: I should have murdered you years ago!!!

LEILA: Bring in on, bitch!!!

(Watching the six of them go to town on one another, Kiki grimaced uneasily.)

KIKI: Um... why are they doing that?

CHI: I don't bloody know, do I?

KIKI: Yeah, but...

(She bit her lip.)

KIKI: Shouldn't you break it up?

CHI: I should, yes.

(She sighed.)

CHI: But, you know what? I can't be bothered! They're grown women, Kiki! I shouldn't have to intervene every five minutes to tell them not to do ridiculously stupid things. I just shouldn't.

(She sighed.)

CHI: And yet... sometimes it feels like that's what my life's become, you know? Being the head shag is like being the warden of an idiot sanctuary. And right now... fuck it... I'm just gonna let the idiots be idiots. I've had enough.

KIKI: I see.

(She winced.)

KIKI: Maybe you need a holiday!

CHI: No, Kiki, I need to bloody retire!

(Just then, there was a loud thud that caused the ground to shake. At once, Chi and Kiki looked up then smiled the wildest of smiles.)

CHI: Holy fuck! Two more colossuses just hit the deck.

KIKI: Fuck me. There's only one left.

CHI: Right? And it's seen better days. It's limping, look.

KIKI: The others did a right number on it, didn't they?

CHI: Yeah... and it still won.

KIKI: Good point.

CHI: I tell you what, Kiki, if these warriors had any sense, they'd go after it while it's weak...

(She then hung her head and sighed.)

CHI: If these warriors had any sense? I said that like it was plausible.

(Kiki rubbed her back reassuringly.)

KIKI: You never know. One of them might...

(She flinched.)

KIKI: Actually, five of them might! Look!

(Chi glanced up, just in time to see The Elite charge onto the scene. Wasting no time whatsoever, they instantly set about the weakened colossus with blades and magic.)

CHI: Well, well... they're finally going to bag one.

(A smile then returned to her face. Duke Thunder had just run his blade through the beast's torso and it had been too weak to even take a swipe at him.)

THUNDER: I don't know what's wrong with this thing, chaps, but I can't say I'm upset about it!

VORTEX: Hey!!! Less nattering, more attacking!!!

MIGHTY: Calm down, Velvet!

VORTEX: No, I won't bloody calm down! You *know* what our luck's been like lately. We'll be one hit away from killing the fucking thing then a bloody Reject will appear,

trip over and head-butt its foot by mistake and somehow claim the final blow! We need to kill this fucker quickly!

(Fearing she might well be right, Sir Mighty and Duke Thunder instantly let loose on the beast with gay abandon. They frantically thrashed their blades through it like madmen on a mission. At the same time, Vortex peppered its face with as much magic as she could muster. Matching her for determination, Shadow stood firm and cast one weakening spell on it after another. For her part, Countess Brilliance braced herself in readiness to cast a protective bubble, just in case the beast fell to the ground on top of one of her teammates. As a result of their formidable, determined actions, the inevitable happened in under a minute. Unable to take any more of their onslaught, the colossus collapsed. It had breathed its last. Unsurprisingly, The Elite were ecstatic.)

VORTEX: I did it!!!

SHADOW: We truly did!!! Wait... *you*?

VORTEX: I'm so awesome!!!

SHADOW: You...

THUNDER: Don't bother, Artful. It's not like it's a *surprise* that she's claiming all the credit.

MIGHTY: Indeed. And I say let her! The only thing that matters is, we, The Elite... have our colossus at last!

BRILLIANCE: Yeah, we do! And you know what that means?

VORTEX: Tonight we're gonna be rubbing the fucking Rejects' noses in it!

BRILLIANCE: Yes, we bloody well will!

VORTEX: And we owe it all to *me*!!!

SHADOW: No, we fucking... I'm not biting!

(He exhaled.)

SHADOW: This is great. Things are finally going our way. Brilliance has uncovered a three hundred year old secret and...

VORTEX: I killed a colossus!

MIGHTY: We, Velvet, we!!!

VORTEX: Sure. I mean the history books will say that, but...

THUNDER: Velvet, no! Not today. Today isn't about you.

VORTEX: Well, you say that...

THUNDER: Today is about camaraderie. And celebrating what we've achieved as a team.

(He smirked menacingly.)

THUNDER: And doing it loudly. And obnoxiously. On the table right next to the fucking Axnay Rejects!

(His four teammates all cheered.)

VORTEX: I love it!

BRILLIANCE: Sofia will sit there whimpering like a moron again, like she used to back when she was afraid of her own shadow.

THUNDER: Max and Rico won't even know where to look.

MIGHTY: And that's fine. They don't need to look. They just need to listen while we remind them who's boss at the tops of our voices.

VORTEX: Perfect! I'm gonna rub Leila's nose in it so hard, she'll probably hit me and end up going to jail.

(She giggled.)

VORTEX: I feel all tingly now.

THUNDER: As well you might, Velvet.

(He then stepped forwards and placed his hands on his hips, proudly.)

THUNDER: For today... is the day that The Axnay Elite truly arrived. And damned be all those who mocked or doubted us.

SHADOW: Which is literally just The Rejects.

THUNDER: Well... yes.

(He smiled.)

THUNDER: Come. There are thousands of beasts over there, let's wipe out as many as we can, and really rub their fucking noses in it.

MIGHTY: Love it!

(They then hurried away to set about some Oxhores. Having watched the colossus killing go down, Chi smiled.)

CHI: That's great.

KIKI: Yup.

CHI: I was being sarcastic.

KIKI: Oh?

CHI: Don't get me wrong, love, I'm delighted that they killed the colossus, but...

(She grimaced.)

CHI: They fought for *us*, so we have to let them into the guild to collect their bounty this evening. They're going to be unbearably smug.

KIKI: Hmm... and Leila has a short fuse.

CHI: And a sharp wit. A sharp wit that triggers Vortex's short fuse.

KIKI: Yeah...

CHI: I'm not gonna lie to you, love. We're gonna have to watch that! And I mean closely!

The atmosphere at the warrior's guild that evening was lively to say the least. Every single registered team, with the exception of The Axnay Elite, was present. The Elite had decided to nip home to get changed first. The rest of the warriors, however, were all present and accounted for. They'd all been involved in the battle and they'd all killed a large number of beasts. Naturally, therefore, they all wanted to hang around and get paid. Money wasn't their *only* motivation for staying, however. The Elite had killed a colossus beast. This meant that as soon as Chi registered the kill, the bar would be free for the rest of the night. With a hefty pay cheque coming and the prospect of free alcohol looming over the horizon, nobody was likely to go anywhere for quite some time. Needless to say, the atmosphere in the guild that evening was one of joy, laughter and excitement. There were three people in attendance that evening, however, who weren't enjoying themselves one bit.

Chi and Kiki had never been so busy. And the minister of defence had never been in so much agony. How he regretted saddling up his favourite horse then accidentally setting out on a different one. Red raw between the thighs, he was sitting awkwardly on a cushion at Chi's desk, trying desperately to mask his pain, whilst simultaneously trying to

garner sympathy for it. Chi, however, had no time for his histrionics. She had warriors to read. A lot of them. Standing next to the black marble, with Kiki at her side, her expression was one of fiery determination.

CHI: Okay. You have the team list, right?

KIKI: Yup.

CHI: Excellent. We'll do this alphabetically then.

(She sighed.)

CHI: And I'm going to have to read all five team members individually.

KIKI: Oh?

CHI: You saw them! Killing was so easy this afternoon, they didn't bother doing it as teams. They just ran off and did whatever they felt like. I mean, it made sense at the time, so I won't chastise anyone for that, but... unfortunately for us, it means they have no idea what their teammates did and didn't do. So, yeah... we need to read literally everybody.

KIKI: Make sense.

(She nodded.)

KIKI: Alphabetical order then.

CHI: Yeah.

(She afforded herself a stifled laugh.)

CHI: That team who named themselves Zeitgeist because they thought it sounded cool are going to be here for quite some time.

KIKI: We'll be having a free bar later, Chi. They're going to be here for quite some time anyway.

CHI: An excellent point.

(She nodded.)

CHI: Okay, let's get cracking then. Which team is first?

KIKI: Black Ice!

CHI: Not The Axnay Annihilators?

KIKI: No. B comes before T.

CHI: T?

KIKI: T for The!

CHI: Right. Yes. You make a good point.

(She then turned and called over to the warriors.)

CHI: Okay, guys, we're going to do this alphabetically, so I need all five members of Black Ice to get their arses over here now, please!

(A massive groan then echoed through the rafters, accompanied by Leila's shriek and Sofia's cry of horror. They were both utterly devastated. As were Tommy and Rico; they just hadn't reacted as loudly.)

TOMMY: Alphabetically? Fuck! I was hoping she'd start with the teams that annoy her the most, just to get it over with. We'd have been first then.

RICO: I know, right?

(He sighed.)

RICO: This sucks. I want to fuck off home and pack for the honeymoon!

LEILA: And I want to get home so Tommy can cast me onto the sofa and do exciting things to me while I pretend to mind! So unfair.

MAX: So is you saying that loud enough for us to hear it.

LEILA: Why *wouldn't* I say it out loud? It's not like it's a secret, is it? We've aired our dirty linen all afternoon, so there's no point in suddenly pretending you don't know the plan.

(She rolled her eyes.)

LEILA: Idiot.

SOFIA: Um... so... she started with Black Ice. Not The Axnay Annihilators. So the word 'The' is counting as a T. That means, we're *way* down the list.

RICO: Maybe not. Three quarters of the teams are called The Axnay something.

MAX: Yes, but we're called The Rejects. Accidentally, but still. Meaning we're behind The Axnay Annihilators, The Axnay Elite, The Axnay Fireflies, The Axnay Killers and a myriad of other cunts.

(He sighed.)

MAX: We're gonna be here all night.

(He beamed.)

MAX: Drinking free beer.

(He then deflated like a ten day old balloon.)

MAX: And listening to The Elite gloat.

LEILA: Actually, that's a you thing. Once we've been paid, I'm going home.

RICO: Same!

SOFIA: Yup.

TOMMY: I'll gonna be running home. With you on my back!

MAX: Oh, like you could lift me!

TOMMY: I was referring to Leila!

(He rolled his eyes.)

TOMMY: Not everything's about you, Max.

MAX: I never said it was!

(Just then, the doors burst open and The Elite glided into the room, dressed in expensive formal wear. They immediately caught the attention of everyone in attendance.)

ALVIN: What the fuck have you come as?

THUNDER: Winners, fuck nut!

MIGHTY: Winners in sharp suits!

BRILLIANCE: And glamorous dresses!

THUNDER: Now, if you don't mind, we'd like to begin our evening.

(With that, they headed among all the seated warriors then stopped at the table Red Diamonds were sitting at.)

SHADOW: Well, what have we here?

VORTEX: They appear to have strayed from their natural habitat.

MIGHTY: And sat themselves at our table.

THUNDER: Then perhaps they ought to move.

(The Red Diamonds' healer pouted at them.)

MIMI: It's a free country, we can sit where we like.

THUNDER: Wrong!

(He slapped some banknotes on the table then smirked.)

THUNDER: It's an expensive country and sometimes buggering off can be lucrative.

(Mimi grabbed the money then stood up.)

MIMI: Well, *I'm* convinced! Let's go, guys.

(She then upped and raced to the bar with the rest of her team in tow. Being low levels, they weren't used to making big amounts of money, so Thunder's bribe was very much welcome. Delighted by how easily they'd been bought off, Thunder chuckled then joined the rest of his teammates in making themselves comfortable at the table.)

VORTEX: Well, isn't this nice?

SHADOW: Very comfy.

(Vortex then took a glance to one side and smiled at the five unimpressed faces on the people at the table next to her.)

VORTEX: Oh, hello, Rejects.

THUNDER: Rejects? Oh, wow. Look, chaps... we've ended up right next to our old chums.

(He smirked knowingly.)

THUNDER: What a delightful coincidence.

MAX: Coincidence, my arse.

THUNDER: Oh, but it was. Why? You didn't think we chose sit here just to be close to *you*, did you?

RICO: That's exactly why you sat there!

BRILLIANCE: That's ridiculous. Why would we ever do such a thing?

LEILA: Because you're a bunch of...

TOMMY: Ignore them, Leila. Hopefully, if we treat them with the contempt they deserve, they'll go away again.

LEILA: I *was* treating them with the contempt they deserve.

(She smiled at Vortex.)

LEILA: Starting with calling them a bunch of wankers, then reminding them that the aristocracy are almost entirely inbred!

VORTEX: Inbred? That's ridiculous! My parents were only second cousins!

LEILA: I rest my case.

VORTEX: You rest your face?

(She scoffed.)

VORTEX: If I looked like you I'd *retire* it!

LEILA: I said case!!!

VORTEX: We both know that's a lie.

LEILA: Why, you...

(She glowered at Sofia.)

LEILA: She learned that insult from you, didn't she?

(Sofia blushed.)

SOFIA: I was very mean back in the day.

THUNDER: Ladies, ladies, please... why the hostility? Now we're here, seated side by side, completely by accident rather than by design, let's try to be civil and enjoy our evening.

MIGHTY: Good idea.

(He nodded.)

MIGHTY: And the best way to make that happen, is for us *not* to mention the colossus we killed this afternoon.

RICO: And there is it.

SHADOW: We should also fail to mention how ridiculously high our bounty for this evening is likely to be.

BRILLIANCE: Especially in relation to the paltry sum *they're* likely to get.

SHADOW: Good thinking.

THUNDER: And we definitely shouldn't mention the fact that we uncovered a three hundred year old secret that's likely to make the history books.

VORTEX: Well, no, there's no *need* to mention that.

(She smirked at Leila.)

VORTEX: They can read about it on the town bulletin board tomorrow.

THUNDER: Now, now, Velvet! Don't be like that!

(He chuckled.)

THUNDER: You know damned well they can't read.

(As the five Elites sat and chuckled together, Rico shook his head.)

RICO: You came here to gloat about killing a colossus? Seriously? To a team who've killed two!

MAX: Literally twice as many!

RICO: Don't you think that's a bit... what's the word?

MAX: Bunch of bell ends!

RICO: That's not a word, but yes.

THUNDER: Why, we haven't come to gloat about the colossus at all. We were just discussing the fact that we're not even going to mention it.

MIGHTY: Nor will we mention the discovery that will see our team go down in history.

VORTEX: And become folklore.

MIGHTY: Exactly.

SHADOW: See? No gloating here.

BRILLIANCE: He's right. We'd never do that. And we'd certainly never do it by just sitting here and *saying* things. That'd be lame.

SHADOW: She's right, you know? If we were going to gloat, we'd have done it in style. For example, we might have gone home to collect some props or something. Like this one.

(He then slammed a wooden carving down onto the table top. It was a plaque with the words, "The Axnay Elite – Best Warrior Team Ever" carved into it.)

THUNDER: Or this one!

(He then opened his shirt to reveal a vest beneath. Upon the vest were the words "The Rejects Suck!")

VORTEX: We may even have done this!

(She then pulled out a small lute and proceed to strum upon it and sing at the same time.)

VORTEX: Leila has a face like a dragon, a leather-faced grandma who fell off the wagon.

LEILA: Why, you...

VORTEX: And Rico's wife is...

RICO: Fuck off, you!

VORTEX: Happy to.

(She let her lute dangle loosely at the side.)

VORTEX: But only if you admit something.

TOMMY: Fine. We admit it! Now piss off!

VORTEX: I meant something specific!

MAX: Just fucking go away, will you?

VORTEX: Nope! Not until you admit that we should have been the team of the year, not you!

(Her face then turned extremely serious and her four teammates leant forwards, demanding that they admit it.)

VORTEX: Well?

SOFIA: Um...

RICO: Nope. Don't do it, Sofia!

SOFIA: But I kind of said at the time...

MAX: You did yes, but that's entirely irrelevant. What matters is, the black marble said we were the team of the year. And the black marble is infallible. So...

LEILA: You lot can fuck off!

VORTEX: Fine. Have it your way!

(She then lifted her lute and resumed playing.)

VORTEX: And Rico's wife is a whimpering piss-flap, very much in need of a good hard bitch slap. She's scared of things that are limp and silly, and only finds joy in Rico's tiny willy.

SOFIA: It's not that tiny!

RICO: Excuse me???

SOFIA: It's not tiny *at all*!

RICO: Thank you!

VORTEX: Max turned up dressed like a bag of flour, but was dating Rico within the hour. He's so gay...

MAX: You can stop that now!!!

VORTEX: Nope. Not until you admit it!

MAX: Never!!!

VORTEX: I see. Then cue the music...

(She then resumed singing with a devious expression on her face. As she did so, Thunder opened and closed his shirt in time with the music and Shadow tapped the plaque on the table-top to create a beat. Infuriated, all The Rejects could do was turn away from them and scowl angrily.)

MAX: I hate them!

Having endured quite the evening of misery, The Rejects couldn't have been more delighted when The Axnay Elite were finally called over by Chi. Vortex's song seemed to have about three hundred verses and none of them were pleasant. How they'd avoided getting up and smashing her lute over her head, they didn't know. The temptation was very real. In the end all they could do was try to tune it out and focus on what they had planned for afterwards. Leila and Tommy wouldn't get their evening of fun if they'd attacked her. They'd have gone to jail. Rico and Sofia shared the same motivation for keeping calm. They didn't want to spend their wedding night in separate jail cells. How Max had remained calm, however, nobody knew. Thankfully, he had.

Upon arriving at Chi's side, Vortex carefully placed her lute down on the side and Thunder made sure his shirt was well and truly buttoned, so she couldn't see his vest. They then stood there grinning at her like butter wouldn't melt in their mouths.

CHI: I see.

BRILLIANCE: What do you see?

CHI: Innocent faces!

THUNDER: On innocent people.

CHI: No. Innocent people never have to try to *look* innocent.

(She sighed.)

CHI: I'm not even going to ask, just... behave yourselves, okay?

MIGHTY: Of course, we will.

(He beamed.)

MIGHTY: We're The Elite.

CHI: Yes...

(She rolled her eyes.)

CHI: Hand on the black marble please, Velvet.

VORTEX: What? Why me?

CHI: I need to read all of you!

VORTEX: Oh...

(She smiled.)

VORTEX: Just read my kills then; nothing else.

CHI: Put your fucking hand on the marble!!!

(Vortex whimpered then obliged.)

CHI: Thank you.

(Chi then proceeded to read her. As she did so, she also wrote down her kills on a piece of paper.)

CHI: Nice. Very good. Excellent.

(Roughly ninety seconds later, she then withdrew her hand and clouted her around the head.)

CHI: I'm confiscating your lute!

VORTEX: Aw.

(She pouted.)

VORTEX: But I didn't even *sing* the bit I wrote about you!

(Chi then clouted her again.)

CHI: And who are you calling a pink-haired trout?

VORTEX: I didn't call you anything!

(She blushed.)

VORTEX: I... wrote it.

CHI: Even so!

(She furrowed her brow at the entire team.)

CHI: No more taunting The Rejects!

VORTEX: See? This is why I asked you to only read my kills.

CHI: Velvet, if you come to me looking as guilty as fuck, like you all did, the marble is going to tell me why!

THUNDER: Hey! We looked completely innocent!

MIGHTY: We made sure of that!

CHI: Exactly! That's why you looked so guilty! No more! Behave! You're guests in this guild now, remember?

THUNDER: Right. Sorry, Chi!

CHI: Don't be sorry, be better! Now give me a hand.

(Thunder started to applaud.)

CHI: So that I can read one of you!!!

THUNDER: Oh! Right...

(A few minutes later, once The Elite had all been read, Chi stepped back and nodded to them respectfully.)

CHI: Well... as much as you've annoyed me tonight with your antagonistic behaviour towards The Rejects, I have to say well done, guys. Credit where credit's due; you set out to get the highest total and it looks like you've done that in some considerable style. Thirty million for the colossus, obviously, and another nine hundred thousand in ordinary beast kills. That's a staggering amount.

MIGHTY: Worthy of being reconsidered for the team of the year award, some would say.

CHI: And they'd be wrong! And get a punch in the face.

MIGHTY: Steady on.

CHI: It will go on your Ackfield total though, so I'd be surprised if you didn't win team of the year there next year.

SHADOW: We *should* have won...

CHI: Don't push it.

SHADOW: Right...

CHI: Now... you have a secret to share with me, I see.

BRILLIANCE: We do, yes. We were waiting until now to tell you, actually. We discovered...

CHI: I know. I found out when I read you.

(Brilliance pouted.)

BRILLIANCE: Aw. But I really wanted to sound cool, telling you about it.

CHI: Yeah, but what are you gonna do?

(She smiled.)

CHI: So... Alenzi's ancestors cast a spell 300 years ago to make the beasts on this island smarter and stronger, I see.

BRILLIANCE: According to the spell book, yes. Page one.

CHI: So I gather. Mystery solved! Nice work, guys! Really nice work!

(The Elite's all preened themselves smugly. They very much agreed that it was indeed excellent work.)

CHI: You'll be turning the book over to the guild, I assume.

BRILLIANCE: Of course. In return for full credit for making the discovery.

CHI: Naturally. I'd be a fool to claim it was me, after all. You've already told the news bulletin service it was you lot.

BRILLIANCE: We just wanted to make sure the credit went where it was warranted.

CHI: I see.

(She sighed.)

CHI: I should kick you right in the cunt for that, Countess. Where's the trust?

(Brilliance stepped back and shielded her groin.)

BRILLIANCE: Um...

CHI: It's a bit of a sickener though, isn't it? Being so long ago, the spell is in their DNA now. That means it can never be reversed.

(She shrugged.)

CHI: Still... let's not cry over what can't be changed.

(She smiled.)

CHI: And celebrate the good times instead. Kiki!!!

(Kiki glanced over to her from where she was updating the ledgers with the grand totals Chi had read via the black marble.)

KIKI: Yes?

CHI: It's confirmed! Be a love and...

KIKI: Say no more.

(She then upped and paced to the bell, before ringing it heartily.)

KIKI: The Elite have killed a colossus!!!

(At once an almighty cheer rose up and over half the guild members sprinted to the bar. From this point on, all the drinks would be free until daybreak.)

CHI: Thanks, Kiki.

(She then looked to Duke Thunder.)

CHI: Well done, guys. Now go and sit down. And no teasing The Rejects! We *will* have a civilised evening, even if I have to kill every single of you to achieve it!

(She then glowered at Vortex.)

CHI: I still have your probation agreement, remember?

VORTEX: I'll be good!!!

THUNDER: As will we. We'll do no more than smile at them, like good friends should. (The Elite then headed away, beaming with joy and delight. They were being showered with praise by their fellow warriors and many a cheer was coming their way. They'd secured a free bar and their peers were extremely grateful. Drinking in the adulation, Thunder couldn't help but exhale gleefully.)

THUNDER: Vindicated at last.

MIGHTY: Indeed. We truly are the greatest.

THUNDER: That we are. Kiki can claim what she likes. We're not just the team of the year. We're the team of the century!

(They then returned to their table and sat there grinning smugly at The Rejects. They didn't say another word. They just smiled at them like they promised Chi they would. It was extremely annoying.)

RICO: Wankers!

After what had felt like an eternity, trapped with the hell of five grinning Elites, The Axnay Rejects were finally called up to see Chi. They'd never moved so fast in their entire lives. Anxious to get from The Elite, as well as being desperate to go home, their legs went like the clappers. They arrived at Chi's side in a matter of seconds.

CHI: Blimey! You're keen!

LEILA: Read me!!! Then read Tommy!!!

TOMMY: Yeah, I've got things to do! To Leila!

LEILA: So get on with it!

CHI: Calm down, will you?

(She rolled her eyes.)

CHI: You want to get paid before you leave, right?

LEILA: Obviously.

CHI: Then it doesn't matter who I read first, does it? Your total as a team will be added up then split five ways; so you can't get paid until I've read all of you and know how much to give you.

LEILA: Shit. Good point.

CHI: But seeing as you asked, you can go first.

LEILA: Fair enough.

(Leila then plonked her palm on the black marble.)

LEILA: Brace yourself.

CHI: What for?

LEILA: You'll see.

CHI: Right...

(She then placed her hand on the black marble and focussed.)

CHI: Leila?

LEILA: Yes?

CHI: You're a filthy woman.

LEILA: Told you.

CHI: Are you really planning on letting him...

LEILA: Focus on my kills, Chi.

CHI: Right. Yes.

(Chi then proceeded to scribe on the pad next to the marble.)

CHI: That's a lot of kills for you, Leila.

LEILA: We were attacked by a lot of things.

CHI: So I see.

(She then lowered her hand and nodded.)

CHI: Thanks, Leila. You're very disgusting. I mean, all done.

LEILA: Right.

(Chi then glanced to Sofia.)

CHI: Let's get the ladies out of the way first, shall we?

SOFIA: Um... okay.

CHI: Come on then.

(Sofia nodded then approached the marble.)

SOFIA: You won't find any kills. All I did was heal people.

CHI: Well, let's see, shall we?

(The two of them then placed their hands on the marble. Much to Sofia's bewilderment, however, Chi gasped then sharply withdrew her hand again after only a second.)

SOFIA: What? What's wrong?

(Chi just stared at her in astonishment.)

SOFIA: Um... you're making me nervous!

CHI: Yeah? Well, you're making *me* nervous!

SOFIA: I am? How?

CHI: You...

(She shook her head then placed her hand back on the marble again.)

CHI: Let's just write down your achievements, shall we?

(With that, she flicked over to a clean page and started to write.)

SOFIA: Um... what are you doing? I didn't kill anything.

CHI: Sofia?

SOFIA: Yes?

CHI: You cast Adversarial Guard!

SOFIA: No, I didn't. I don't even know what that is.

CHI: Just be quiet for a minute.

(Sofia then stood there looking baffled while Chi continued to write. I was look of bewilderment that soon doubled when Chi flipped over her pad and continued on a second sheet.)

SOFIA: Um... Chi? What are you doing?

CHI: Just a sec.

(Having finally stopped writing, she then smiled at Sofia warmly.)

CHI: Sorry about that. I was just writing what I saw.

SOFIA: You wrote two pages.

CHI: I saw a lot of things.

(Sofia instantly turned red.)

SOFIA: You didn't write about my orgasm, did you? That's not fair! It was entirely spontaneous!

CHI: Actually, Sofia, it came with the spell you cast. Adversarial Guard.

SOFIA: But, I don't even have a spell called...

(Chi placed her hands on Sofia's upper arms.)

CHI: You do. You just haven't realised it yet.

SOFIA: Um...

CHI: Remember when you told me that you felt like the beasts fighting each other was your doing?

SOFIA: Um... yes?

CHI: You were right.

(She bit her lip.)

CHI: When I first read you, back when you joined the guild, I saw you had a hidden power inside you. I tried to read it but I couldn't because it was hidden within you, and you didn't even know you had it. Well, I can read it now because it manifested itself today. It was Adversarial Guard!

SOFIA: And what's that?

CHI: The ultimate protection spell. It makes all your enemies forget about you and attack each other instead!

SOFIA: Oh.

(She smiled.)

SOFIA: You were making a note of it, were you?

CHI: In a way. I was actually totalling up your kills.

SOFIA: My kills? I didn't kill anything!

CHI: Sofia, the black marble says you did! Those beasts who killed each other did so because of you. They're your kills, love!

SOFIA: Oh...

(Sofia lips curled up at the edges.)

SOFIA: That was a lot of kills, wasn't it?

CHI: A lot of kills?

(She glanced at her notes then back at Sofia again.)

CHI: Sofia?

SOFIA: Yes?

CHI: Sofia?

SOFIA: Um...

CHI: I'm going to have to sit down and calculate the figures properly, of course, but I *think* you've amassed somewhere in the region of a quarter of a billion coronas!

(Sofia said nothing. Her mouth simply fell open as if her bottom jaw was made of lead. Her teammates were nowhere near as stoic, however. Having overheard, they zoomed forth and accosted Chi like overenthusiastic journalists at a crime scene.)

MAX: Did you say a quarter of a billion?

LEILA: That's split five ways, right?

RICO: How much is that each?

TOMMY: What they said!

(He shrugged.)

TOMMY: I haven't got my own question. I just charged in because I got carried away!

(Chi eased them away from her with her palms.)

CHI: Calm down, guys. Yes, I did say that. And yes, it's split five ways. About fifty million each. And, more importantly, if I catch you gloating, I'll fine you fifty percent of it.

MAX: What?

CHI: It's in the bylaws. If you're guilty of unprofessional behaviour I can fine you half of your daily take! So don't go back to your table and rub The Elite's noses in it!

RICO: As if we would.

LEILA: We absolutely would.

CHI: I know. Well don't. I told The Elite not to gloat and I'm saying the same thing to you. We *will* have a civilised evening, even if I have to kill every single of you to achieve it!

SOFIA: Um...

CHI: Yes?

SOFIA: Can you say that figure again? I think I passed out standing up.

CHI: It was exactly what you *thought* I said, love.

SOFIA: I see.

(Rico turned to offer her a loving smile then grimaced. Sofia was staring dead ahead, agape and with glazed eyes.)

RICO: She has. She's literally passed out on her feet again.

CHI: Take her back to your table, Leila.

LEILA: Why me?

CHI: Because I still have to read the others!

LEILA: Oh, yeah.

CHI: But no gloating! I mean it!

LEILA: Don't worry, Chi. I won't say a word.

(She smirked.)

LEILA: The figures speak for themselves.

(Max afforded himself a devilishly even grin.)

MAX: She's right, you know? Sometimes silence is the perfect weapon.
(Leila, Max, Rico and Tommy then stood there smirking at one another fiendishly.)
CHI: You're all idiots. Even single one of you!

Some forty minutes later, once Chi had finished reading the last of the teams, she handed the figures to Kiki then climbed onto her desk to address her warriors. Well aware that most of them had been throwing back free alcohol all evening, she knew she'd have to make a special effort to get their attention. Having been in this position before, however, she also knew exactly how to get the job done. As such, she placed her hands on her hips then called out.)

CHI: Anal sex!!!

(At once, everyone in the guild fell silent and stared up at her.)

CHI: Hello, everyone!

GARRETT: Did you say...

CHI: Nope! Now pay attention!

(She nodded.)

CHI: Okay. I've finished reading you all at last, and Kiki is just updating the ledger.

Once that's done, we'll set about handing you your pay slips.

(Everyone cheered.)

CHI: Thank you for your patience, guys. And I apologise for the long delay. But in our defence, it's not often we have to process everybody at the same time. It's been horrifying.

(She smiled.)

CHI: Anyway, before we go any further, I'd just like to thank you all for partaking in what could have been a horrifying battle today. Some of you needed prompting in order to get going, but in the end, you all took part and you all made a difference. You did the guild proud!

(Everyone cheered then spontaneously offered their peers a polite round of applause. It was a polite round of applause that The Elite took no part in. They just continued to sit there, quietly grinning at The Rejects. The Rejects, however, had turned their back on them quite some time ago.)

VORTEX: Why are they doing that?

THUNDER: Just to be annoying obviously!

SHADOW: And they look ridiculous. Sitting there facing sideways; it's bloody irritating.

(The round of applause then died down to allow Chi to continue.)

SHADOW: Wankers!

CHI: Excuse me?

SHADOW: Um... beasts! Beasts, Chi!

CHI: Right...

(She rolled her eyes.)

CHI: Anyway, you've all been magnificent. But... I'd like to pay tribute to two teams in particular. Starting with The Axnay Elite.

(Thunder, Shadow, Mighty, Brilliance and Vortex all glanced her way.)

CHI: Or would you prefer to be called the Ackfield Elite?

MIGHTY: No! We would not!

CHI: I see. Fair enough.

(She smiled.)

CHI: Earlier today, I commandeered The Elite here. I made them come and join us in battle, just for the day. And they did us proud.

(Everyone cheered.)

KEVIN: Yup! Free bar!!!

ALVIN: Nice one, Elite!!!

JADE: Hear, hear!!!

(Everyone cheered once again.)

CHI: That's good to see. You deserve the plaudits, chaps. Not only did you kill a colossus, but you also discovered the secret as to why beasts suddenly evolved so quickly on this island. An outstanding day's work.

(They were then blessed with a deafening round of applause.)

HELEN: Way to go, guys!

THUNDER: Thank you! Thank you!

(Max smirked knowingly then mumbled to himself.)

MAX: Yup. Has to be done.

(He then yelled at the top of his voice.)

MAX: Speech!!!

(At once, everyone else in the guild latched on.)

KEVIN: Speech!!!

BENNY: Speech!!!

JADE: Speech, speech, speech...

ALL: Speech, speech, speech...

(Unable to resist, Duke Thunder slowly climbed to his feet.)

THUNDER: Very well. If Chi will indulge me...

CHI: Fair enough.

(Everyone cheered briefly then quietened down to hear what he had to say.)

THUNDER: Thank you, everybody. Your acknowledgement means a lot. It proves what we've been saying all along, actually. We, The Elite, truly are something special. A cut above. The best! Better than the rest of you combined.

(Everyone furrowed their brows at him.)

THUNDER: We're like hunting dogs among a throng of puny, miniature terriers in a way. Sure, you chaps might catch the odd mouse, but if you need someone to take down the foxes, that's where we come in. The big boys. The top dogs. The Elite!

(He chuckled.)

THUNDER: We didn't call ourselves that for poops and giggles, you know?

(Only his four teammates smiled.)

THUNDER: As we've proven today with our almighty thirty one million corona bounty, we're in a class of our own.

(He nodded.)

THUNDER: And that's why I'd like to take this opportunity to offer Kiki the chance to amend her error of a few months ago and admit that we, The Elite, should without any doubt, have been the team of the year.

(He held out his palms.)

THUNDER: We're dressed for the occasion, you just need to hand us the trophy.
(All eyes turned to where Kiki was standing. Her eyes were twitching and her fists were clenched furiously.)

CHI: Um... calm down, Kiki.

KIKI: I'm gonna wallop him! The black marble clearly stated...

THUNDER: We know!

(He nodded to her respectfully.)

THUNDER: We just wanted to make our feelings clear, that's all. We were robbed!

(He then sat down and received a tumultuous round of applause from his teammates. Everyone else was glaring at them hatefully.)

KIKI: Kick them out, Chi. Have them beaten up by security then kick them out!

CHI: Actually, Kiki, I can do better than that.

(She then addressed the warriors again.)

CHI: Warriors! The other team I'd like to give a specific mention to is The Axnay Rejects.

(At this point, Max, Rico, Tommy, Leila and Sofia all turned around in their seats and sat there grinning at The Elite.)

CHI: Today, out there in the wilderness, we witnessed a phenomenon. You all saw it. The beasts turned on each other.

ALVIN: So did Rico's Girls!

(Everyone chuckled, except the girls in question, who rapidly sank in their seats.)

CHI: Shut up, Alvin!

ALVIN: Right...

(Chi rolled her eyes.)

CHI: All that beast on beast violence was no mere fluke, my friends. It was the result of a spell. A spell cast by Sofia Nice.

SOFIA: Stanway!

CHI: Sofia Stanway, yes.

(She nodded.)

CHI: A spell called Adversarial Guard. A spell designed to turn all her enemies against each other.

(Vortex scoffed.)

VORTEX: A mildly commendable achievement, I suppose. Nothing on the scale of killing a colossus and uncovering an ancient secret though.

THUNDER: Indeed.

CHI: On the contrary, *she's* the one who manipulated the beasts; *she* made them fight each other; so each of those kills is hers!

(Thunder's eyes bulged.)

THUNDER: What???

CHI: You heard me!

(She held out Sofia's results in front of her.)

CHI: Twenty-three thousand Empies! Nine thousand Calibras! Seven and a half thousand Ronikas! Three thousand Oxhores! The list goes on! Culminating in six... yes six colossus beasts!

(By now, everyone's jaw was on the floor.)

CHI: A grand bounty total of just over two hundred and fifty million!

THUNDER: What???

QUIMBY: What???

CHI: You heard me! The Empies alone have netted her nearly one and a half million!

QUIMBY: How's that even possible?

CHI: Because her spell didn't just work locally. It triggered every beast on Paprika Island.

QUIMBY: That's insane!

CHI: I know! She bagged over seventy five million from non-colossus beasts alone! It was a massacre!

QUIMBY: I'll say it was! She's almost wiped out the guild's budget for the rest of the year!

CHI: Sure, that's one way of looking at it.

QUIMBY: And the other?

CHI: Because of her, the beast population has now been reduced from an infestation to a mere nuisance. Their numbers are *way* down! And with Alenzi now dead, the next generation won't be anywhere near as ferocious!

QUIMBY: I like that! It makes *me* look like a hero!

(He nodded.)

QUIMBY: I'll just pop over to the government building and tell them that.

(He then upped and fled for the door, excitedly.)

QUIMBY: We can end emergency measures and save a fortune! I'm going to get a peerage!!!

(He then vanished into the night. Left behind, Chi just smiled.)

CHI: So, yes. Well done to The Axnay Rejects!

(She glowered at the whimpering Duke Thunder.)

CHI: Our absolutely irrefutable... team of the year!

(At once, a deafening cheer rose up and a chant of "Rejects, Rejects, Rejects" ensued.

Rather than rising to acknowledge it, however, The Rejects just sat there, grinning at The Elite.)

THUNDER: How? How is... how can... every time we... it's not fair!!!

(He then sprinted for the door, crying his eyes out. Having watched him go, Sir Mighty winced.)

MIGHTY: It's fair to say that he could have handled that better.

SHADOW: Wasn't very manly, was it?

MIGHTY: No.

(They then sprinted for the doors, eager to get outside before they also burst into tears.

Countess Brilliance simply followed on with her gaze fixed upon the floor.)

BRILLIANCE: I've never been so fucking embarrassed.

(Only Velvet Vortex remained. Her jaw was still fixed to the floor and she was staring at Chi in catatonic horror.)

LEILA: Chin up, Velvet. It's not like you didn't *know* you were inferior.

(Vortex slowly craned her neck towards her.)

VORTEX: Why, you...

(She then pounced on her like a rabid dog.)

VORTEX: I'm gonna kill you!!!

(Having seen red, she set about Leila with unbridled violence and rage. Leila, however, had Sofia's healing on hand. Not feeling a thing, she just shrugged at Chi innocently.)

LEILA: I'd just like to state for the record that I'm not reciprocating!

(She held up her arms.)

LEILA: See?

(Chi rolled her eyes then glanced to Kiki.)

CHI: Fetch me Velvet's probation agreement, if you would? It's time we tore that thing in two.

(Vortex instantly stopped trying to batter Leila and shrieked.)

VORTEX: No!!! Anything but that!!! The people in there want to kill me!!!

CHI: Which just makes us kindred spirits!

VORTEX: But that's murder! You know I'll die if I go back there!!! Please forgive me just this once!!! Everyone deserves an eighteenth chance!!!

CHI: Hmm... I know... I'll let the victim decide. Leila? Jail or no jail?

VORTEX: Too mean!!!

(Leila just smiled.)

LEILA: No jail. On the condition that she sits here all night while I take the piss out of her!

VORTEX: Jail, please!

LEILA: Don't be like that, it'll be fun!

TOMMY: No, it won't! I want to go home and do filthy things to you.

LEILA: Hmm... an interesting point.

(She nodded.)

LEILA: Just stay and let me be mean to you until after we've collected our wages.

VORTEX: Um... I suppose your terms are acceptable.

(Her shoulders slumped.)

LEILA: Don't be like that. It'll be fun. We can discuss how Sofia turned all her enemies against each other today, but *you* weren't even affected.

(She laughed out loud.)

LEILA: You saw yourself as our nemesis, our big arch rival, yet even the ever-trembling Sofia didn't see you as a threat!

(She chuckled some more then suddenly stopped.)

LEILA: Wait a god damned minute.

(She turned and glowered at Sofia.)

LEILA: When I started fighting with Rico's Girls for no reason...

SOFIA: Um... I didn't mean it!

LEILA: You see me as the enemy???

SOFIA: Well...

(Rico's Girls then hurried over.)

SAKI: Does that mean you see *us* as your enemies too?

CHI: You named yourselves after her man, of course she fucking does.

(Sofia glanced away nervously.)

SOFIA: I suppose there was an *element* of that, yes.

ALYSSA: But we're no threat to you. We've moved on from Rico.

(Sofia glowered at her.)

SOFIA: Then why did one of you yell, "Good luck, Rico; never forget I love you"???

(She sneered.)

SOFIA: On my fucking wedding day, no less.

TIKA: Um... whoops.

AMIE: Yeah, that's pretty damning.

TIKA: Right?

(She gestured towards the bar.)

TIKA: We'll be over there.

(They then hastened away, leaving Sofia grimacing at a scowling Leila.)

LEILA: Enemy? Fucking enemy???

SOFIA: Um... well... you are mean to me all the time.

LEILA: Oh, I'll be mean to you in a minute, woman! Come here!!!

(She then proceeded to chase her all around the room.)

LEILA: I'm gonna throttle you!

SOFIA: And you wonder why I see you as an enemy!

(Watching as Leila and Sofia raced around the guild, Rico could only sigh.)

RICO: They just can't get along, can they?

TOMMY: Nope. Never have; never will.

MAX: Not that it matters anymore. If what the minister of defence said about ending emergency measures is true, we won't have to fight as a five anymore. If at all! And you know for a fact those two will go their separate ways.

RICO: Do you think that might happen?

TOMMY: I do fucking hope so. I never wanted this warrior life in the first place. Being a warrior sucks!

MAX: Not always. I mean, *some* good has come out of it.

TOMMY: Oh, yeah?

MAX: Yeah! I mean... I got to meet you guys for a start!

(He then looked Rico up and down and sneered.)

MAX: Actually, you're right. Being a warrior sucks!

THREE MONTHS LATER

To the absolute shock, horror and surprise of literally nobody at the warrior's guild, Sofia's single-handed beast cull did indeed bring forth change. The new laws, put in place just over a year earlier, were relaxed. Warriors were no longer required to fight in teams of five. In fact, they were no longer required to fight at all if they didn't want to. Taking full advantage of this change, The Axnay Elite promptly retired, so they wouldn't have to go back to Ackfield ever again. Tommy also retired. That was never in doubt. The minute the change was announced, he stood up and left the guild before Chi had even finished her announcement. At least half the guild followed him out, including Rico's Girls.

And so, Tommy had embarked on a new career. Furniture supplier to the rich and famous. The idea of buying products from an old adversary, however, didn't sit well some of Axnay's wealthier citizens. As Tommy found out when Duke Thunder visited his premises, there was still a fair amount of bitterness in the air.

THUNDER: You? *You* own this shop?
TOMMY: That's right!
THUNDER: This new emporium that everyone is banging on about is *yours*?
TOMMY: Correct!
THUNDER: Disappointing. I'm not buying from you!
TOMMY: Then why did you come in here?
THUNDER: Because I'm in the market for a new desk and I've heard good things. But now I know *you're* the owner...
TOMMY: A new desk? I've got two lovely ones right there.
(He gestured towards a pair of oak desks.)
THUNDER: I don't care if you've got... oh, my... they're perfect.
TOMMY: Yes. Yes, they are!
THUNDER: But it matters not! I won't buy from *you*! You're just... you're just...
TOMMY: Would you like them delivered?
THUNDER: Well, I'm not going to carry them home, am I?
TOMMY: Thought so.
THUNDER: Shit.
(He sighed.)
THUNDER: Tell no-one!
TOMMY: Don't worry. Like I told Countess Brilliance when she bought a table and chairs last week. Your secret is safe with me.
(It was fair to say that Tommy was loving life right now. His products were a hit. His life now was one of woodwork and high profits. And not a beast in sight.)
THUNDER: So... still dating that Leila?
TOMMY: I am, yes.
THUNDER: I see.
(He smiled.)
THUNDER: That makes me feel a little better about things actually. At least I'm not the *only* one suffering.

Tommy wasn't the only member of The Axnay Rejects to walk out of that guild that day and never return. Max walked out of the guild, went home to pack then moved back to Saffron Island. He'd always dreamt of owning a farm one day, and thanks to Sofia's massive cull, he could now afford to start one. He could also afford to get a long-awaited revenge on his former employers.

On his second day back on Saffron Island, he entered his home village's civic hall during a public meeting. All fifty villagers were present. His entry from the rear of the hall, caused quite the stir.

PRIOR: Well, well... look what the cat dragged in!
MRS CARTER: Max?
MAX: Mum!
MINNIE: Max?
MAX: Alright, sis?
MRS CARTER: Are you back for good, or...

PRIOR: Of course, he's back for good. He failed as a warrior and now he's come crawling back, hoping to get his old job back.
(One of the other farmers scoffed.)
BROWN: Some hopes.
PRIOR: Indeed! We have this lad now.
(He gestured to a muscular lad in the front row of the meeting.)
BROWN: He accepted the new employment terms that we offered *you*.
(The lad pouted.)
ROGERS: I can barely afford to eat.
PRIOR: Pipe down, you!
ROGER: Sorry.
BROWN: Now sit down and be quiet, would you, Max? We're waiting for the town's new investor to show his face.
(Max smiled.)
MAX: Oh, that fella. Yeah. That's me.
(The farmer's faces dropped.)
MAX: I bought all the land around here, you see? You know, the land that you currently rent.
PRIOR: Very witty!
BROWN: Just sit down and be quiet.
MAX: I'm not kidding.
(He held up the deeds.)
MAX: I did rather well out of beast hunting, lads. So now I'm going to start my own farm.
(He beamed.)
MAX: I'll drop your eviction notices off in the morning.
PRIOR: This is an outrage!
MAX: This is a coup!
(His mum raced up to him excitedly.)
MRS CARTER: So you made a success of yourself over there, did you?
MAX: I did, yes! Paprika Island was good to me, mum.
(His face then flattened out.)
MAX: Even if Rico *was* a cunt!

Caring very little about the fact that he'd parted with Max on bad terms, Rico was extremely happy with his life right now. Two weeks after Chi had announced the changes in the law, he'd moved to the countryside with Sofia and joined a much smaller, rural guild. The two of them couldn't have been happier with their lot. Their new home was on an island in the middle of a lake. The local population was only ninety three. Every night, they'd sit outside their house and watch the moon reflecting upon on the water as they enjoyed a drink together. By day, they'd travel to the mainland, taking their sweet time killing whatever beasts they found, before returning home later. Every day, they took a picnic with them. It truly was their idea of the good life.

Six weeks after moving to their new home, Rico and Sofia stumbled upon their first mild inconvenience. The local guild was a tiny clubhouse and they were the only two warriors. It suited them perfectly. Unfortunately, the shaman, a man they got on extremely well with had been transferred to a bigger town. A new shag was due to start that morning. And so, they headed to the tiny guild to wait. Some ten minutes later, the door opened and they got the shock of their lives.

SOFIA: Apple crumble!

RICO: It's...

(He gave her a sideways glance.)

RICO: What?

SOFIA: I say odd things when I'm surprised.

RICO: Oh, yeah.

(They then smiled to where the new shag was staring back at them in astonishment.)

KIKI: Sofia? Rico?

(She then shrieked in terror.)

KIKI: No!!! Leila's not here too, is she? I quit!!!

SOFIA: No. Leila's back in Axnay. You *know* that.

KIKI: Right... good point.

RICO: She doesn't even come here to visit.

SOFIA: Mostly because we didn't tell her where we'd moved to.

(Kiki drew a sigh of relief.)

KIKI: Thank fuck.

(She smiled.)

KIKI: So... how have you been?

SOFIA: Awesome. We're having so much fun.

KIKI: I see. And may I say, whatever medication you're on seems to be working, Sofia. You don't look nervous at all.

(Sofia pouted.)

SOFIA: I'm not *on* medication!

RICO: She's just confident.

SOFIA: Being nowhere near Leila will do that a girl.

KIKI: I can imagine.

RICO: So... how come you're here? Doesn't Chi need you?

KIKI: Nope. Fewer beasts means less work. And besides, I've graduated from being an assistant now. Now, I'm now a junior shag.

(She furrowed the brow.)

KIKI: And no it's not an arrestable offence! I've only been one for four days and I've heard that joke ten times already!

RICO: We didn't say a word, Kiki.

SOFIA: Nor did we even think it.

RICO: Well...

(He then placed his arms around Sofia's shoulders and swiftly changed the subject.)

RICO: You're gonna love it here, Kiki. It's a little slice of heaven.

SOFIA: With fresh air, a beautiful lake and more importantly...

(They then spoke at the same time.)

RICO & SOFIA: No fucking Leila!

A life without Leila in it was something Kiki would indeed go on to thoroughly enjoy. Chi, however, had failed to dodge that bullet. Half the guild members had quit when the rules changed. Leila had not been one of them. A few weeks *after* the rule change, a total of four out of five Axnay Rejects had left. Leila was not one of them. Leila had remained. Leila was still working at her guild and worst of all, Leila was still Leila. Having decided to seek out new teammates, she'd bullied Martin and Mimi from Red Diamonds into being her subordinates. She'd then dubbed them Leila's All Stars. It was a name that nobody else would ever use. No matter how much Leila insisted.

LEILA: Chi, this isn't fair! The Axnay Annihilators decided to stay on and work as a team, and you're more than happy to use *their* team name. So why not mine?

CHI: Well, Leila, apart from the name being bloody ridiculous, it's the look in Martin and Mimi's eyes. They die a little inside, every time you say it!

LEILA: Yes, but that's just them being ungrateful.

CHI: Ungrateful?

LEILA: Yes! As their senior I've helped them thrive!

CHI: They're levelling up slower than ever, Leila!

LEILA: Yeah, but that's because there are fewer beasts now!

CHI: Or is it because you kill everything all in one go, so they never get to use their skills?

LEILA: I can't help it if Empies only attack in their dozens these days, can I? Boom, done.

CHI: Yes, which also makes me wonder why you don't just go solo. You'd make three times as much money doing that!

(Sitting behind them, Mimi and Martin's eyes lit up.)

LEILA: Abandon my team? Are you serious right now? What sort of monster do you think I am? I couldn't do that!

MARTIN: Aw.

MIMI: Bugger.

LEILA: They need me, Chi. And they're delighted to have me!

(Martin and Mimi shared a miffed glance.)

LEILA: And I'm delighted to have them! Why? Because Leila's All Stars are going places! Watch this space!

(She then exhaled with much in the way of self-satisfied joy. Her life was pretty excellent right now. She was enjoying her work, even if nobody else was. And when it was over, she got to go home of an evening and cuddle up to Tommy at forty four Whitley Street; her home. Like the rest of her former teammates; she was more than happy with her lot.)

Over the coming months, Max, Rico, Leila, Tommy and Sofia would often look back on their time as The Axnay Rejects and raise a smile. Max remembered Axnay Volley fondly. He missed it. Tommy would remember avoiding a beating in Nixville because he shared a love of woodwork with his assailants. It'd always make him chuckle. Leila would remember chasing Sofia around the living room with a bottle of pink hair dye, and

allow herself a warm smile. She'd somehow convinced herself that they'd bonded that day. Rico would think back to his first conversation with Max and laugh out loud. Everything he'd said was a double entendre that day. And Sofia would often dream that Leila had moved in with them. She'd wake up screaming. Mostly however, she remembered when Rico had listened to her spelling out her affliction and had instantly accepted her for who she was. It had been the greatest moment of her life so far.

It was fair to say that their short year and a bit together had left a lasting impression on them all. They may have gone their separate ways, but they'd always retain some deeply fond memories of their brief time together as The Axnay Rejects.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. THE STORYLINE AND CHARACTERS ARE A CREATION OF THE ARTIST. THE ARTIST RESERVES THE RIGHT TO EVERYTHING WITHIN.

AXNAY REJECTS IS PURELY FICTIONAL. ANY SIMILARITY BETWEEN CHARACTERS AND INCIDENTS IN REAL LIFE ARE PURELY CO-INCIDENTAL

©2026 FUTILE FANTASY CREATIONS.